

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit.
Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the Lord rescues them from them all. *Psalm 34:18-19*

Near to the Brokenhearted

Folks still ask me how I'm doing, and I say that I'm doing OK, but not 100%. In fact, I should be starting four weeks of daily radiation this Wednesday, so I am glad that the Summer Fest/Presbytery meeting/Day of Service/Day of Discernment extravaganza happened so well, and is behind us. Though I am very excited about the upcoming Day of Celebration at La Casa on August 2nd, I am hoping that the next few weeks will be quiet.

Since I have been feeling a little stronger, I have been preaching again, and I am becoming aware of the deep sadness, almost despair, pervading our churches. There is a sense of horror about the cruel actions of the government against US residents and citizens, and now the horror is growing as we wait for the next steps in the escalating conflict between Israel, Iran, and now the United States.

Folks have expressed a desire to fight, to organize, to leave the country—but perhaps the most common feeling is being at a loss to know how to respond. We North Americans like to fix things fast, and there's too much going wrong at a deep level to know where to start. Even when folks show up to help, like with the responses to the Eaton fire, the complexity of the challenge ahead, and the number of folks responding in different, uncoordinated ways, is overwhelming. Don't get me wrong—I'm so thankful and proud of the number of people banding together, but it just gets to be a lot to track.

I'm also struck by the response of the Presbytery, as expressed in the results of the discernment session last June 14th. The number one response to the question "What have we done well?" was "Accompanying immigrants." And the response to "Who is God calling us to be?" is to be "Defenders of the oppressed," and to celebrate and learn from churches with thriving kids/youth ministry. (One piece of good news is that Veronica Ota is staying in Southern California this summer, and has already made an impact at First Presbyterian Altadena—the long-discussed community garden is taking shape on Lincoln Avenue, and Peace Camp is returning, July 21-25. They are looking for volunteers, so if you want to see a great kids/youth ministry in action, contact her at firstpreskids@gmail.com!)

It seems that we are vacillating between despair and action. We like to take action, so we don't feel helpless. And if we slowed down a bit, we would have to admit that the number of attacks to our well-being, community, and dreams that "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" is breaking our hearts.

But maybe that's not such a bad thing. When we acknowledge our hearts are broken, we learn that God does indeed love those who are struggling—and our relationship with people in need evolves from detached charity to felt solidarity. And when we feel overwhelmed with problems too big for us to solve on our own, we become more humble—and that actually empowers us, because when we truly rely on God, we gain personal experience of how capable and trustworthy God really is!

Of course, we don't always trust God, because even if we believe what the Psalmist says, that the Lord rescues us from all afflictions, we don't know when, or how. I am so thankful that the Presbytery voted to return the La Casa property to the Tongva tribe, but I don't think we did very much education as to why this is important, and how long our native neighbors have had to wait, and the pain they had to endure.

The return of La Casa is an act of faith on our part, an attempt to live into God's mission to provide some small restitution to a people whose land and freedom were stolen from them centuries ago, in the most brutal and spiritually abusive manner. And when victims are offered restitution, their property is returned not based on their virtue, or their promise to use the property the way we approve of—if we required that, we would simply be imposing again the wishes of the oppressors. Now, as it happens, the people who are receiving the La Casa property are faithful Christians, committed to the well-being of the native and settler community and all of Creation, and who have partnered with us for decades in service and reconciliation, so we can be reassured that they will steward the property with diligence and care. So even though it is not ours to ask what they will do with the property, we trust that they will use it well.

In the light of history, the recent attacks on immigrants and the most vulnerable are regrettable, but similar crises have happened in the past, and sadly they might happen in the future. While we can thank God for coming near to us in our distress, we must also hear God speaking through Jesus Christ, calling us to love those who are suffering the most, and trusting that when God uses us to bring hope and restoration to a hurting world, God blesses us as well. We may even be so bold to go one step further, and heed Christ's call for grace and forgiveness, even for those who have hurt us and others. If we can heed that call, perhaps the sorrows of today will not be repeated in the future. One can only hope—and trust in God's long view of salvation. May we have the patience and perseverance of our Gabrieleno/Tongva siblings, and may we know the loving, saving nearness of God.

In prayer,

Wendy