

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

5.3.26 - Easter 5

Of all the troubling news we have heard lately -- our government attacking the Southern Poverty Law Center, the shredding of the Voting Rights Act in the ruling on the Louisiana case -- one piece of news felt especially devastating this week. On Thursday, the state of Texas executed James Broadnax, for the killing of two people during a robbery. James was 20 at the time of the killing, with no prior criminal record. His older cousin has since confessed to being the one who pulled the trigger. Only the cousin's DNA was found on the gun. Somehow these facts were not enough for Texas or the Supreme Court to reconsider the execution.

We could try to blame the Supreme Court, or Texas, but really, James' execution suggests something is disturbingly wrong with our entire justice system, that somehow, the machine, the gears turning toward killing this young Black man could not be stopped even though it seemed plain to many that the facts were very off.

What kind of depraved people are we, that we value correct procedure over truth? What kind of violent people are we, that we prize revenge over mercy? How hard-hearted are we, that we judge others by their one worst act, and how stiff-necked are we, that we cannot change our mind when new facts emerge? How can we think that violence can ever be ended by responding with more violence?

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places, says Jesus in today's Gospel. He says, I go to prepare a place for you. Now, this Gospel text is a favorite text used at funerals, and it's easy to see why. It is comforting to think of our loved ones going to a special place in heaven, a special home in their resurrected life, a place that Jesus has prepared just for them. It is comforting to think that someday we will go to such a place, that we will see our loved ones there.

In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places. James Broadnax is in that special place today. He developed a strong faith in his years on death row, and now he is with Jesus, he is seeing God face to face. And this is a small comfort, but it is not the whole story.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. It is comforting to think of heaven as that other place, that place for those who are gone, that place for us for someday a lot later, but it is not the whole story. Because Jesus is not just talking about some "other" or "future" place in this Gospel. Jesus is talking about here, he is talking about right here and now.

Jesus says many times in his ministry that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, has come, is here. Our life as Christians, our vocation, is to help God build that kingdom, to help this world become more and more like God's dream for it. To help God build a world where we love our neighbors, where we see Christ in each other, where we strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being. To help God build a world where there is a dwelling place for everyone, where no one is left out.

I cannot imagine that Jesus would prepare a place like death row for any of God's children. We are a long way from getting to God's dream, a long way from realizing God's kingdom here on earth.

And so the work, our work to follow Jesus, to live into our baptismal vows, our work is ongoing. And so, when we see someone doing that work, doing it over a lifetime, we need to recognize those efforts, we need to recognize that ministry.

Today we give the Polly Randall Award, an award named for a St Martin's person who gave a lifetime of service to others and to this church. We give the award to Polly's daughter, Susan MacBride, who grew up in St Martin's, and who was taught to serve by her mom and other church folk. Her early involvement included helping set up church dinners, girls' choir, and Girls' Friendly Society. And it basically never stopped.

As an adult, Susan has continued to live into her ministry, whether that has been working with school children in West Philly, walking alongside a family from Syria, or joining with other faith leaders through POWER Interfaith. Through her work in church, and now her work at Cathedral Village, Susan is embodying God's justice and love, she is doing her part to build God's kingdom.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. We honor and thank Susan MacBride today, and we wish her many more years of productive ministry.

We can feel motivated and energized by Susan's work and witness, to continue in our own call, to continue our own work of building the kingdom.

The work is not easy, especially right now. There will be times when we feel like what we are doing won't make a difference. There will be times we will see our efforts fall short. The many people who were working to get an appeal for James Broadnax, who had spoken with him and gotten to know his

story, these folks are grieving today. Whenever we walk closely with people, there is a chance it will hurt. And, there is a chance it will transform us in wonderful ways we could not have imagined.

And it is because the work is hard, and life-giving, that we recognize Susan, and that we do this work in community. Church is a project of building a community that looks like God's kingdom. A community where we can pray and sing and laugh and cry and learn together, all of us with different backgrounds and histories and beliefs and struggles, all of us on our own personal journey of seeking God, all of us doing it together. We work and struggle together to listen to each other, to see and know each other, to love each other. We do our best to make this place a place where there is room for everyone, where everyone belongs.

In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places. We welcome and embrace each other here, in this community, so that we can envision God's dream for the world. We welcome and embrace and love each other here, in community, to strengthen ourselves for the work. St Martin's, we welcome and embrace and love each other here, in community, so that we can go out, to work for a world where there is a dwelling place for everyone. Amen.