

Our Bodies...Our Souls
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United Church of Broomfield
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Philippians 4:1-9 (NRSVue)

1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my coworkers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

How many of you have heard of the Laramie Project?

The Laramie Project is a 2000 play by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project about the reaction to the 1998 murder of gay University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. The play draws on hundreds of interviews conducted by the theatre company with inhabitants of the town, company members' own journal entries, and published news reports.

Adam and I saw the production on Friday night. Arriving at the theater, I knew it would be an emotionally challenging production, but I didn't realize just how much. Within minutes of the curtains going up, my throat was closing up and I was taking deep breaths as I teared up, trying to choke back tears. I spent two hours trying to control myself – gently sobbing. Adam was moved also, but it didn't seem to be to the extent that I was. Why was I so moved?

It wasn't as if Shepard was the first gay man killed just for being gay; falling victim a pervasive hatred of LGBTQ people in this country. It wasn't as if the way that he was killed was any more brutal or horrific than other LGBTQ murders before his and since. While there are arguments that attitudes toward LGBTQ people have improved, and there have been improvements, there are still a disproportionately high number of LGBTQ deaths and hate crimes happening. To this date, one of Shepard's murders has expressed no remorse for the crime and takes pride in what he did – he “took care of that faggot.”

Why was I so moved?

- Thursday was the 25th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's death.

- Matthew was 21 when he was murdered. I was 25 at the time.
- Like Matthew, I was a young gay man just trying to be myself, but also be normal. A young twenty-something wanting to date, but naïve and cautious in a world “unkind” to homosexuals.
- The day that Matthew’s bloody body was found, I was driving through Laramie on I-80, only about 1.5 miles from the fence.

In the first act of the play, Dr. Cantway, the doctor at Iverson Memorial Hospital in Laramie who first treated Matthew and also treated Aaron McKinney, one of Matthew’s murderers, not knowing what McKinney had done what he’d done at the time said, “They were both my patients and they were two kids. I took care of both of them...of both their bodies. And... for a brief moment I wondered if this is how God feels when he looks down at us. How we are all his kids...Our bodies...Our souls...And I felt a great deal of compassion...for both of them...”

To be of the same mind of the Lord.
 To relate.
 To connect.
 To empathize.
 To feel.
 To desire love and peace...for all.

In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul addresses the community and Euodia & Syntyche, women leading house-churches, urging them to be of the same mind of the Lord. They had been working with Paul and Clement to lead the church in understanding and living the gospel of Jesus. From this urging from Paul, we can surmise that some sort of discord must have been occurring within the community, as well as likely threats from outside it. What exactly we don’t know, but somehow peace and harmony were out of sorts. It’s normal. It happens. It’s life. Getting “out of rhythm.” So, we bring ourselves back – we refocus.

Paul is an amazing cheerleader in this letter and it’s particularly impressive considering that many scholars believe Paul was imprisoned at the time he wrote this letter. He was in prison, yet he was writing encouraging words and joyful affirmations to members of a budding yet struggling community, “rejoice,” and “let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

He reminded them of **how** to be of the same mind of the Lord; he said, “think about truth, honor, justice, purity, Godly excellence and opportunities for praise.”

These declarations and these characteristics will move you – move you to feel, to connect, to empathize and to love. They will bring about the peace of God!

A week ago, Hamas attacked Israel. It was a surprise attack and reports still indicate that the specific reasons for the attack are unknown. It has been a complete shock to the entire world. Hamas is a recognized terrorist organization, but also a Palestinian political party that governs Gaza. Why did they do this? What are they trying to accomplish.... because it seems pointless.

In the attack, Hamas kidnapped several hundred women, children and elderly. So far, over 1300 Israelis have died and almost 2300 Palestinians; mostly civilians on both sides. The images coming out on social media are horrific and there are warnings to everyone, especially for those under 18 years old, to consider deleting apps because the pictures and videos are raw and unedited; we don't want children accidentally seeing things. Israel says they will "level" Gaza and has warned over 1 million Palestinians in Gaza (1/2 of its population) to retreat southward, less they experience the wrath of Israel military might. Nearly half of Gaza's population, 47% are children.

We are moved.

But why are we so moved? Conflicts in Israel have been going on for millennia. It's not like Israel and Palestinian were once in great harmony, had a minor skirmish and it is just a matter of having a few challenging conversations and negotiations to make all things better. It is extremely complicated. What isn't complicated however, is a constancy of disharmony, conflict and war. The number of deaths that has happened in Israeli-Palestinian conflicts even before this past week is innumerable. It is heartbreaking. With this latest conflict arising, many are talking about the reality of World War III. It's frightening. We are moved!

To say there is no like-mindedness in this conflict, is an understatement. But...peace is possible. Might it be as simple as refocusing on truth, justice and honor? We hope so. When considering the loss of life already and the potential losses with these actions and threats, it is our job to empathize, relate and refocus on feeling compassion toward humanity....God's children; their bodies and their souls.

In the 1860s, famous poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow found himself in deep despair. Tragically, his wife of 18 years had died as the result of a fire, and his son had been severely wounded in the Civil War. Yet in the midst of it all, on Christmas Day 1863, Longfellow crafted a poem he titled "Christmas Bells." It captured both the terrors taking place around him and the hope that stirred in his soul.

An excerpt of the poem goes like this:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet, the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men ...
And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."*

The poem brought us a timeless message that was later turned into the carol "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." Longfellow *had* heard the Christmas bells that day, as well as the singing of the words "peace on earth," but he saw also the world of injustice and violence that seemed to mock the truth of the Christmas message. Throughout the poem is woven the theme of listening — listening deeply beyond despair, horror and heartbreak; listening confidently to the hope that can exist even alongside bleak despair.

In the midst of the fear and uncertainty that we can experience sometimes in our daily lives, we can find comfort if we pause and listen to Paul's imprisoned exhortations to those who are "out of harmony" and struggling to be of the same mind of the Lord: Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord! ...The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Harmony isn't impossible.

We can get closer and closer to peace.

Think about truth, justice, all that is good and loving. Take your anxious feelings, scared feelings, angry feelings and feelings of desperation and pray. Be thankful. Rejoice. Relate, connect, empathize and feel. Be ok with weeping in a theater. Trust that the peace of God will not only come to you, but all of humanity.

AMEN