

HOW DOES LOVE WIN?

John 15: 1-8; 1 John 4: 7-21

1) It's happened in so many places of the world, and now it's happened here – a massive attack intended to kill anyone and everyone, innocent people caught unawares, going about their day to day lives... It's the first time for Toronto and hopefully the last... But sadly, we cannot know that... In other places of the world, it happens all too frequently. Take France, for example. Innocent people out having a good time, innocent people shopping, innocent people on city trams, buses and metros... and suddenly, there's an explosion, or suddenly shots are fired, or suddenly, a vehicle ploughs into people...

The most recent attack happened a month ago, in Trebes, France. A gunman started firing randomly in a supermarket. Two people were shot dead and others were injured before police arrived. The gunman grabbed hostages and locked himself inside. Lt.-Col. Arnaud Beltrame of the French Gendarmerie Nationale was there. He took stock of the situation. He then made a quick decision. He called out to the gunman: "I'm more valuable a hostage than the hostages you have. I'm second in command of the police force. Release a hostage and take me instead." The gunman agreed. Beltrame was able to get inside and assess the situation. He also left his cell phone on, so the police could track his movements and listen to what was happening inside.

Finally, an opportunity emerged, and the timing was right. Police stormed the supermarket and rescued those inside. In the scuffle, however, Beltrame was stabbed and shot. He was taken to hospital. Sadly, he didn't make it. He died the next day. His family were heartbroken. At the funeral, though, Beltrame's wife has this to say: even though what happened to my husband is evil and tragic, what he did was no accident. To understand my husband's sacrifice, you must understand the spiritual roots of the man.

What are these roots, you may ask? Our gospel reading this morning is all about roots. Among the many creative metaphors Jesus uses to describe himself and his relationship to those who give themselves to him in faith, in our reading, he describes himself as a tree, a vine tree. A vine tree grows grapes, and we know what grapes are for: eating and drinking. But unless the tree is cared for, it will die, and the branches will not bear fruit. Jesus is saying that if he is the tree, God is the arborist and grower who makes sure the tree is healthy and strong. How does God do this? God removes dead branches and other branches God prunes

so that they grow stronger and healthier. If Jesus is the nutrition, God is the arborist and grower, and the branches are all of us. We feed on Jesus' words, we grow in community with others and in our personal connection with God. We develop habits and practices. We learn the stories. We imbibe the values with renewed inspiration, commitment and resolve. But we can only grow strong to the degree that we invest and go deep. Living on the surface, casually and sporadically is better than nothing, but the fruit in us and from us can be lacking in flavour and juiciness. We must develop stronger and deeper roots through regular immersion, connection and attention to practice...

Now, back to our story. Beltrame's wife had this to say: My husband died the day before Palm Sunday when holy week begins. His sacrifice cannot be understood apart from his Christian faith. Beltrame's faith was nourished in the community of the monks of Abbey Lagrasse. It is one of those monks who attended to Beltrame in hospital, administering the last rites before he died. Beltrame was following the way of Christ, but his inspiration and determination came from long years of immersion in spiritual community, developing the holy habits and patterns of worship and prayer, learning the stories told, retold and reflected upon, developing strong branches ready to bear rich fruit at the critical hour.

What about you and me? Are we attentive to developing strong roots in the tree of life who is Christ? Are we connected deeply to the grower and arborist who is God? Are we enjoying the fruit in us and are others enjoying the fruit we have to offer for their benefit, enjoyment and growth? Amen.

2) Izzeldin Abuelaish and his four children live in a quiet pocket of Forest Hill here in Toronto. Izzeldin is a professor of Medicine at U of T. All four children are doing well in school and in life. And yet, something happened in their lives as a family that has forever changed them. Eight years ago, the family were living in the Palestinian territory of Gaza where Izzeldin was a doctor. Izzeldin's wife, the children's mother, had just died of leukemia. On this particular day, most everyone was at home except Izzeldin and one daughter. An Israeli military tank bombed the house, killing three daughters and a niece, and destroying the house completely. Two daughters survived but with injuries. The one daughter lost sight completely in one eye.

The Israeli military claimed that the people who lived in this home were harbouring Hamas terrorists. They were totally wrong. But they refused to admit it and take responsibility. Izzeldin launched a wrongful death lawsuit against the state of Israel. Eight years later and now residents in Toronto, Izzeldin and his daughters went back to Israel to offer testimony

at the trial. The verdict is still uncertain. How do the family cope? What do they do with all the feelings of anger and grief?...

2000 years ago, a small, embattled Christian community in Ephesus (in part of what is now Turkey), are listening to their pastor John teach them about how to live in the world when Christ is their spiritual foundation. They are facing hate and religious racism. And when stress is high from the outside, it's easy to have conflict with each other over any number of issues. So what inspiration and counsel from Christ does their pastor offer them?

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us... Those who say, ‘I love God’, but hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

In order to be rooted in God, these Christians must find inspiration to purge hate and fear from their hearts and their relationships. Fear is entangled with feelings of judgement. Judgement of myself means I am afraid of being punished. Judgement of others means I want them to be punished. Punishment and judgement also lead to hate. I want others to pay or I must pay because what I have done and who I am is inadequate, unforgiveable. It's a toxic mix of feelings which not only diminishes us as persons but poisons all our relationships. John is challenging these early Christians to open themselves to God as love, not judge, not moral condemner, not executioner of revenge and retaliation... no. God as love requires that we find our roots in love also. How do we do that? Where do we find role models to inspire us? Back to our story...

“We are not taking the state of Israel to court to punish,” says Abuelaish. “We want to learn lessons.” All of us need to learn lessons. In fact, Abuelaish wrote a book after the bombing entitled: “I Shall not Hate.” Why should I hate or fear Israelies? he asks. They're my colleagues and friends. I have delivered many of their babies as a doctor in their hospitals. The lawsuit is about having faith in the Israeli justice system and holding it to the highest standard of justice. Abuelaish also believes this action is his form of accountability to all those who died in the bombing. We cannot forget them and just move on. We must fight for something better, for love to win over hate and fear.

But Abuelaish's struggle is not just with Israel and the courts. He and his daughters have co-founded Daughters for life, a charitable foundation that provides scholarships for women in

the middle east to go to university abroad. According to Abuelaish, our world can never build an enduring peace without the full partnership and education of women. Father and daughters still make their way to Gaza, providing support as conditions continue to deteriorate. The region has only a quarter of the electricity it needs for daily functioning and according to a recent UN study, clean water sources will be irreversibly depleted by 2020. Money and scholarships are essential, but so is being present on the ground. That's how you fight fear and hate, through concrete acts of love.

Now, Abuelaish and his family are devoutly Muslim. They get their inspiration from the spiritual foundation that is their faith. The Christians of Ephesus 2000 years ago found their inspiration through practicing their faith and nurturing their spiritual foundation in Christ. What about you and me here today as part of this community of faith? What about you and me in a time and a place where insane acts of hate, violence, ignorance and contempt can happen and do happen all the time? Are we drawing the inspiration we need so that love wins in our lives over hate and fear and other destructive currents in and around us? Are we cultivating sufficiently Christ as our foundation and our roots? Are we experiencing God doing some pruning in us so that our branches grow stronger and our fruit is tastier, juicier and more plentiful? Amen.