

John 15:9-17

[Jesus said] As [God] has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept [God's] commandments and abide in [God's] love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from [God]. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that [God] will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Intersection of Hope

A sermon preached by
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[Adapted from a sermon first preached October 22, 2006]

Texts:

Job 23: 1-17 ~ John 15: 9-17

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6th Sunday of Pascha



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Job 23: 1-17

Job answered [his friend, Eliphaz the Temanite]: ²“Today also my complaint is bitter; [God's] hand is heavy despite my groaning. ³Oh, that I knew where I might find [God], that I might come even to his dwelling! ⁴I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. ⁵I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. ⁶Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. ⁷There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

⁸ “If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; ⁹ on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. ¹⁰ But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. ¹¹My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned

aside. ¹²I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.

¹³But he stands alone and who can dissuade him? What he desires, that he does. ¹⁴For he will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind. ¹⁵Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him. ¹⁶God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; ¹⁷If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!



I've spent a lot of time and energy and prayer recently reflecting on my trial which is scheduled for May 26 resulting from a direct action that 12 of us engaged in as we protested outside Colosimo's Gun Center at 9th & Spring Garden Streets in Philadelphia. Why did I do what I did? What is the motivation behind a decision to sit on the cold sidewalk on a January afternoon knowing that the result would probably be arrest?

The motivation comes out of Jesus' command to us, that we love one another. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." I didn't put my life on the line, but I did sit on a cold sidewalk and risk arrest for people who I don't even know. It is what God calls us to do. No greater love.

The following is adapted from a sermon I preached in October 2006. It helps explain when this began for me and what's behind my actions leading to the trial of May 26.



The trauma bay door opened electronically when the nurse pressed the button. Past the blue sleeves and badges and handguns of the police officers, I saw the teenager, covered in white hospital

sheets, stretched out on the gurney. Dad was slumped in a chair next to his son, his right hand patting the young man's shoulder, his right cheek resting on his own forearm. Mom was at the head of the bed, staring in disbelief, slowly shaking her head. Blood stained gauze and discarded emergency medical paraphernalia was strewn on the floor around the bed.

I approached.

I was called to the emergency department of the hospital on a Tuesday night. "We need you in the ED for a family whose son has just died," the social worker said as I responded by phone to the page. It's not an unusual request.

"How old? What's his name?" I needed the basic information so I could assess what my response would be.

"He was a teen and his name was Kenny."

I arrived about 20 minutes later at a scene filled with doctors and nurses, family, and police. I caught up with the social worker who had paged me and she gave me a few more details. Kenny had been shot in South Philadelphia and the trauma team had worked on him for as long as they could. His extended family had gathered for the vigil and we now needed to pray them into the next stage of grief – pray them a little closer to the reality of what was next, leaving the embrace of the hospital to go home and deal with the tragedy.

Just moments before I entered the trauma bay, I was introduced to the Dad who was headed out to gather the family for our prayer time. He slumped against the wall.

"This is my second son in 5 months to die this way."

I was stunned. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

When next I saw him, he was at the bedside, patting his son's shoulder. I entered the room and we gathered in a circle around the bed. One young woman stood there rocking back and forth, "When is it gonna end? When is it gonna stop? When is it gonna end?" She had her two young daughters with her – they were maybe 10 and 8 – so they could see for themselves what had happened. One sobbed, the other stared in confusion at the dead boy. "When is it gonna stop?," the little girls' mom was crying.

We held hands encircling the bed and I invited everyone into prayer. As I glanced down, I realized there were blood splatters all over the railings of the gurney, evidence of the violent attempt to end Kenny's life, residue of the desperate attempt to save it.

We prayed. How do you pray for a family who has lost a second child to handgun violence? What do you pray in the valley of anger and grief? Where do you go when all seems useless and despair reigns? Do you pray for revenge? Do you pray for justice? Do you pray "thy will be done"? Do you pray out of anger or fear or complacency because all at that moment seems lost?

Job prayed. Job who had everything caving in around him, Job who has lost his property and all he owns, Job whose children had died. Job was stricken with a horrible disease and his grief was sending him toward madness. One by one, Job's friends – his "pathetically unhelpful friends", my friend Linda names them – come by and tell him that he must, somehow, deserve everything that has happened to him. How else could his suffering be explained? Job takes his pain and anger to the only one who can answer. He takes it directly to God.

"Today also my complaint is bitter; [God's] hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.

I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge." (Job 23: 2-7)

Job is angry. He is bitter and he is groaning. He is indignant and ready to lay his case out before the Judge. His only hope is that God is reasonable, yet he can't seem to find God. He's been faithful, he says, he's followed God's commandments, he has treasured God's words. But where is God? "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. (vv. 8-9)

I prayed with that family in the trauma room that night. I prayed for calm in the midst of the storm, I prayed for hope in the face of despair, I prayed for blessing in the face of hurt.

I prayed ...

Are we allowed to get angry with God? Job says yes. Job isn't all that patient, you know. The old saying, "She has the patience of Job," just doesn't really jibe with the story. He's bitter, he's groaning, he's pleading, he's questioning, he's hurting. He wants this over with. He wants an audience with God. He's angry with God. And it's okay.

Maybe I should have opened up that night and shouted at God with the anger welling up in my soul. "Why, God, do we kill each other? Why, God, do we continue to make guns, sell guns, allow guns on our streets? Why, God, is this young man lying here in front of me, cold and stiff and bloody? He should be at home playing video games with his brother. Oh right, God, his brother's already in the grave. Why, God? Why, God? Why, God?"

Maybe my prayer should have just echoed the young family member who stood with her children. “When will this end? When’s it gonna stop?” Maybe I should have prayed with the minister from the family’s church who made her way into the room while we were all bowed in prayer – her prayer was in her simple statement after we said “Amen.” “This was one of our church babies,” she said as she patted his head in final benediction.

But the anger didn’t come out of my mouth. All I had at that moment was my presence and God’s embrace to offer this once-again devastated family. A hand to hold. A shoulder to touch. A tear to shed.

“*Habari za watoto.*” It’s a common greeting in some African communities which I learned from my friend David. It’s Swahili – “*Habari za watoto.*” “How are the children?”

Not “Hey, what’s up?” or “How are *you* today?” or even “Good morning.” The question which defines the wellness of the community is focused on the children – *habari za watoto*. How are the children?

Imagine how our society would be different if that were the first thing we asked each other every day, “How are the children?” Not “How are *your* children?” but “How are *the* children?” Our children, the community’s children, the world’s children. Instead of hello, everyday people express their concern for all the children of society as their first words to each other.

How are our children? They’re not doing so well when it comes down to it.

When I arrived back home from the hospital that night, I slumped down into the sofa in my office and switched on the television, my heart still heavy and my mind numb. The news was on – the newscaster announced the newest total – 301 homicides in

Philadelphia that year, since January 1 – a woman in West Philadelphia. “No,” I said aloud to no one in particular, “I just came from number 302. Kenny is 302.”

At the end of September that year, said the Philadelphia Inquirer, when there were “only” 296 homicides, 123 were between 18 and 25 years old, another 26 were between 0 and 17 years old. That’s fully 149 under 25 – more than 50%. (See *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 15, 2006. Those same horrific statistics continue today – 3 years later.

Habari za watoto. How are the children? Not so well. Not so well.

I stood on the steps of the state capitol in the bright Harrisburg sun just a week before Kenny was murdered. Hundreds were there protesting our legislature’s inability to pass appropriate legislation which would keep more of our children alive. We heard pastors and rabbis and imams praying, we heard mothers and fathers crying, we heard children telling us of their fears, we heard sensible politicians pleading with their brothers and sisters to make a change. We prayed and sang and lobbied.

One handgun a month. It’s all we ask. Did you know right now you can walk into a gun shop and buy as many handguns as you want so long as you have ID, no criminal record, and no history of mental illness? Did you know that you could take those guns that you just bought and sell them on the street to anyone who can’t get them legally? Did you know that scenario happens over and over again? Not only here but crime statistics track those Pennsylvania guns in Delaware and New Jersey and New York crimes?

Did you know that if you Google “retail firearms” and Havertown’s Zip Code the result within 15 miles is about 500 references? Not all of those hits are gun stores, but enough of them are that I could leave here today and buy 50 handguns at say

5 different stores and not leave a 10 mile radius of Hope church. That's 250 guns which I could sell on the streets of Havertown or Upper Darby or Philadelphia. And then I could do the same tomorrow.

What are we doing? Why can't we love our children enough to restrict ourselves to simply one handgun a month? Why in the name of Kenny and the more than 300 others murdered in Philadelphia can't we live with 12 handguns per person a year? Do I really need more than that?

God, please stop our madness. God, please stop us from killing each other. God, let me stand beside Job and argue my case before you!

How are the children? Marian, 13; Anna Marie, 12; Mary, 8; Edna, 7; Naomi, 7. Do you know those names? Of the 10 women and girls that Carl Roberts choose to aim his legally purchased guns at, those are the 5 who died at West Nickel Mines Amish School on October 2, 2006.

Why God? Why did they die? Why did he do it? Why couldn't you stop it? Some even want to ask the non-Christian question, "Why did God allow such a thing?"

And the "why" questions are important questions. It's Job who gives us the example for asking why, its Job who allows us to get angry and question God's presence.

"If I go forward, [God] is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured in my bosom the

words of his mouth. But he stands alone and who can dissuade him?" (vv 8-13)

Where are you God? Where are you? Anger is permitted; giving up is not. The Book of Job encourages our questions and even our anger so that we might remain in full relationship with God. But somewhere in it all there is hope.

October 3, Tuesday night at the hospital – the night after the Nickel Mines tragedy.

We all left the trauma bay. Tears and sadness filled the hallways outside the room. I spoke with the ministers that had come to the family's call and then I followed out the doors as the small crowd made its way back into the confusion of the world in which we live. I pushed the door opener on the wall and the doors out of the emergency department swung open – one out, one in. I followed closely behind the moms and sisters and aunts from the family I had been with – and I glanced to the right.

There they were. Walking down the hallway toward us. Young, sad, hurting. An Amish couple. It was the day after those 5 Amish children had been taken from their community by gun violence. It was that day that 3 more of the children lay upstairs at the same hospital in intensive care. My heart sank. I decided not to approach them, knowing their need for privacy and the need for their spirit to grieve in their own way. I saw them approach and I exhaled a silent prayer for them.

But ahead of me, one of the women from Kenny's family turned to the right, looked through her own tear-filled eyes, and with a compassionate tone that I can't even pretend to mimic, said to the Amish couple, "Oh, how are your girls?"

There was the intersection of hope. There at the crux of hallways outside the hospital emergency department was hope –

the intersection of cultures as the violent toll of guns drew us together that night – the intersection of Amish and African American, the intersection of urban and rural, the intersection of moms and dads, the intersection of children. There was the intersection of God and us. “How are your girls?”

“How are the children?” I didn’t stay to hear the answer. I prayed my way to the left and cried myself toward the chaplain’s office. I left the hope to God’s presence with those families and the confidence I have in healing in relationship. How are the children? We need to ask – we need to know – we need to hope in their behalf – in the name of this hope-providing God we need to work for them.

How do Job’s tumultuous trials end? “The Lord restored the fortunes of Job,” says the narrator, “when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. ... The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning ... [and] Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.” (Job 42: 10-17).

Despite the anger. Despite the suffering. Despite the hand-wringing and the fist-shaking. Job not only survives, he grows, he learns, he trusts, he prays, he hopes in God’s goodness and love. Is it not what we all need do? Is it not what the Amish family from Lancaster and the African American family from South Philadelphia shared for that brief moment at the cross in the hospital hallways?

Hear a true story with no moral lesson but simply a point.

Elie Wiesel grew up in the mountains of what is now Romania. In 1944, when Wiesel was fifteen years old, his family was captured as part of the Nazi effort to deport and imprison Jews. His family was sent to the camp at Auschwitz, and Wiesel and his

father were separated from his sisters and mother. Wiesel also spent time at the camp at Buchenwald, where his father died in 1945 just shortly before liberation.

One night, when he was fifteen and in the concentration camp, Elie Wiesel witnessed an astonishing event. Three great Jewish scholars, imprisoned alongside Wiesel and his father, and cramped in the same quarters, “created a rabbinic court of law to indict the Almighty.” They put God on trial. “The trial lasted several nights. Witnesses were heard, evidence was gathered, conclusions were drawn, all of which issued finally in a unanimous verdict: the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth, was found guilty of crimes against creation and humankind. And then, after what Wiesel describes as an ‘infinity of silence,’ the Talmudic scholar looked at the sky and said ‘It’s time for evening prayers.’” (Robert McAfee Brown, in the Introduction to Elie Wiesel’s *The Trial of God*.)

Beyond it all, above it all, through it all, into it all, God is God. “Habari za watoto.” How are the children? Not just today, but in God’s eternity. How are the children?

Why did I sit down in front of Colosimo’s Gun Center on January 16, 2009? It all started for me in October 2006. Next Tuesday I am on trial for trying to bring an end to the madness.

We must work to end the violence. We must bring an end to this criminal sale of handguns. We must remind the legislators of God’s presence. We must remind gun sellers like Mr. Colosimo that he has a responsibility to work toward justice as well – and signing a voluntary commitment to do his best to end straw purchases is a start.

We all have to work to bring hope, work to end the injustice and the intolerance, work to bring hope to its intersection with our lives.

Amen.