

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Ps. 119:1-8; 1 Cor. 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Let us pray: O God, steadfast in the midst of persecution, by your providence the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church: As the martyrs of the Sudan refused to abandon Christ even in the face of torture and death, and so by their sacrifice brought forth a plentiful harvest, may we, too, be steadfast in our faith in Jesus Christ; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*¹



Are you my cousin? A. J. Jacobs in a recent *New York Times* article (January 31, 2014) asks the question: “*Are you my cousin?*”

In his case, he is exploring genealogy. Through crowd-sourcing software applications, he has been connected to people he had no idea that he might be related to. Jacobs says that “One site, Geni, has what it calls the World Family Tree, with about 75 million relatives in more than 160 countries and all seven continents,

including Antarctica.” So it may be true that we are all connected by 6 degrees of separation or less. “We’re all related”, he says “we just have to figure out how.”

Would it matter to us if we accepted that we really were related by blood? Would we behave differently if we accepted that we are all relatives? Is a blood tie stronger than knowing that we are children of God, all created and all loved by that Creator? Possibly. We humans like to have tangible things to hang our hats on, so to speak. I might defend my cousin against you, because we’re blood relations, even though you and I, no blood relations, are normally best friends. Research shows that knowing we are related to one another may, in fact, lead to more tolerance and random acts of kindness. Maybe learning we really are cousins will help us find ways to resolve our differences peacefully rather than through bloodshed and violence. Maybe we really can become peacemakers. That day appears to be distant right now but it is something we can pray for and work towards.

The Presiding Bishop and our Diocesan Bishop have asked that we specifically and intentionally hold the situation in South Sudan in our hearts today. We should always be remembering and praying for conflicts around the world. Today we are asked to focus especially on South Sudan. For those of us in the Diocese of Indianapolis, this is particularly poignant as we have a companion relationship with the Diocese of Bor in South Sudan. Many members of this Diocese have traveled to South Sudan, and for those who have seen life on the ground in better times, it is particularly distressing to read about the human tragedy. Some of those who have gone to Sudan knew the Episcopal clergywomen who were raped and killed last month after taking refuge in St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church.

Even though Crawfordsville is approximately 7,500 miles from Juba, the capital of South Sudan, the people living there are our brothers and sisters. Perhaps actually through genetics but most certainly as children created by the same God and loved by the same God as we are.

¹ Lesser Feasts and Fasts for May 16.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Ps. 119:1-8; 1 Cor. 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Paul writes to the church at Corinth that we are servants who plant but it is God who gives growth. We who believe have – or rather should have- a common purpose. We are God’s servants and we need to be working together and not ripped apart by jealousy and quarreling. Unfortunately, as the events unfolding in South Sudan evidence, we are far too often still ripped apart by jealousy and quarreling.

While not all in South Sudan are Christians, the “Golden Rule” has correlates in other religious traditions. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and many others have something very analogous to the Golden Rule. Jesus echoes the Golden Rule when he tells us that if we have something against a brother or sister that we should go and be reconciled before returning to the altar. We should seek other means beside the courtroom to work out our differences. And we should certainly choose life over death. Choose peaceful means of resolving conflicts over rape and murder.

The reasons for the current conflict in South Sudan are political more than they are tribal. One side wants what the other side has. One side wants the power that others have. Saying that the causes are political does not lessen the horror and the tragedy that is occurring as each side seeks to best the other and to gain control. As too many of us have found media reports are not always completely correct. There are many causes for this, not the least of which is a 24 hour news cycle that always needs something new to entice viewers to listen in. Current media reports focusing on ethnic and tribal differences as the cause of the perpetual cycles of violence in Sudan don’t tell the whole story. Life is more complicated than that. Telling us that violence is perpetual and its tribal-based can cause us, 7,500 miles away, to think that the situation is not resolvable. We can’t do anything to change it. We don’t need to worry about it. We don’t need to do anything about it.

We don’t even need to pray about it.

As Christians, we stand for peace. We stand for life. God has set before us life and prosperity or death and adversity.

We read in Deuteronomy that if we love God and walk in God’s ways and observe God’s commandments, then God will bless us. If our hearts turn away and we follow other gods we shall perish. God pleads with us to choose life and blessings. God pleads with us to understand that we are cousins to each other, somewhere on that vast family tree.

In the first part of chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew, we have the Beatitudes. “Blessed are the peacemakers”, Jesus tells us. While we are not physically going to South Sudan to join in the relief efforts, our prayers for peace and our monetary donations may help bring about cessation of hostilities and the possibility of new life for those living in that country. Prayer matters even if we do not see tangible results. Prayer focuses our hearts and our minds on God and on a God that is involved in everyday life and everyday challenges. Pray without ceasing. Pray even when you are sick at heart over events that you have no way to stop except by your prayers.

In 2001, about 3,800 “Lost Boys” came to the United States after extraordinarily difficult wanderings throughout Africa due to the violence and bloodshed in Sudan’s Civil War. Many are still here. Some of you may have seen the Lost Boys when they were in Bloomington several years ago. You may have heard their story and heard their music. Young men who

escaped and survived. They now tell their story to remind us that not all is easy life around the world.

One of the Lost Boys, Peter Ter, was sent to Jacksonville FL. Through God's mysterious ways, Peter found a "family" that supported him in ways that led to his rebirth in a new place and with untold numbers of persons helping him choose life over death.² Peter says "I am talking with you today because people I didn't know helped me survive." At Peter's high school graduation, the principal asked for Peter's family to stand, and as the article in *The Christian Science Monitor* put it: "There for all to see on the Jumbotron, stood Mr. Ter's 'family': a motley crew of unrelated white Southerners – a dentist, a schoolteacher, a professor and others- waving eagerly at the young man below." "*Are we cousins*" – yes, we are, despite differences in age, gender or color of skin. We are each children of God, loved by God and called to love one another.

Our challenge today with respect to conflicts throughout the world and especially in South Sudan is to pray that those involved will have a change of heart. That those involved will see that we are all cousins. That those involved will find ways to choose life over death. That those involved will come to understand that through peace we have a better chance to resolve our differences and to live a healthy and productive life where there is enough for us all.

Pray for all conflicts in the world regardless of their location. Pray for peace. Pray that those who are engaged in violence may come to a place where they can embrace life and not death.

In the words of some Sudanese children, pray with me:

Look upon us, O Creator who has made us.
God of all people, we are yearning for our land.
Hear the prayer of our souls in the wilderness.
Hear the prayer of our bones in the wilderness.
Hear our prayer as we call out to you.³ *Amen.*

² See "A Lost Boy Saved by the Kindness of Strangers" in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 25, 2013, p. 27-32.

³ Lesser Feasts and Fasts for May 16.