



Like the Israelites in today's reading from Amos, we are in exile. Not as literally as the people of Israel but at least figuratively. This is a time of sorrow as our lives are turned upside down by events that are beyond the comprehension of most of us. The world as we knew it is unraveling. We do not have answers on how to return to a world that is mostly familiar and safe. We largely do not know exactly what has brought us to this point where our hopes and plans seem to have increasingly and more often gone incredibly off course. We largely do not understand the causes and the responses to the incredible anger that seems to be driving so many.

We cannot escape these changes and tragedies. There is little else on our local and national news but the events of this last week involving shootings, deaths, injuries and outrage. In a land that has been a beacon of hope and promise to many outside our borders for so long, it is a slap in the face for the Bahamas, Canada and other countries to warn their citizens about the dangers of visiting the United States. This is not to say the warnings

are not merited in the face of last week and too many other similar situations over the last several years. Still, it is a shock to read another country warning its citizens to be alert, to be cautious, and to avoid crowds, for fear of becoming embroiled in violence and possibly being killed or injured when visiting the United States. This is not the image of America that many of us carry in our heads. It is not the American dream.

What do the events of this last week – and of similar events over the last several years- say to us as Christians? How do we respond when Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek? To walk a mile in the other person's shoes. To give our cloak to the person who has none. We already engage in many outreach efforts including through programs like Reindeer that give clothing and other items to those less fortunate than we are. We send food to the Food Pantry each month so that those who are food insecure will be a bit less so. We are getting ready to make and distribute summer lunches. These programs, while good and helpful, are clearly not enough. They help the symptoms but they do not heal the underlying, systemic causes.

We are in a land that is far, far from what God has called us to be and to do. We are in exile when we do not see every person we meet as a child of God, worthy of respect. Yes, it is true that some people break the law. Yes, it is true that not everyone has a job or a job that pays a living wage. Yes, it is true that we have an increasing number of people that have not come to be here through the legal process. Yes, it is true that we have many – perhaps too many - governmental benefits that can assist with basic human needs such as shelter, food and clothing and even jobs.

What governmental efforts cannot do is to give each person a sense that he or she matters and is loved by God, regardless of skin color, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other indicator of difference. Only you and I can do that. Only we – on the ground – can get to know our

neighbors. Only we – on the ground – can see the needs and strive to find ways to help each person become a self-sustaining person who understands that he or she has worth and who can be a valued member of society. Only we – on the ground – can help each other see each other as human beings and not as enemies or hated others.

Many of us feel helpless. What can I do to help ratchet down the violence that springs from fear and hatred? We can, like God's response to Amos, remember the plumb line. A plumb line is a string with a weight on the bottom of it that you hold and then snap against a wall. You chalk the string so when you snap it, it leaves a mark on the wall. It helps when painting, wallpapering or making other repairs so that you can be sure you have a straight vertical line.

The metaphor of a plumb line is used throughout the Bible to remind us that a life following God is true. It is the standard against which God judges us and also the measure against which God helps us to rebuild our lives when we have strayed. The definition of sin is often stated as "missing the mark." Straying from the straight line.

Paul echoes this theme when writing to the Colossians when he prays that we may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to God as we bear fruit in every good work and as we grow in the knowledge of God.

Jesus uses the parable of the Samaritan to remind us that every person is our neighbor and perhaps most especially those persons with whom we are at odds – those we even label as enemies. We are called to offer mercy to all with whom we come into contact. It does not matter what our position in life is- be it Priest, Levite or passerby. Each one of us is called to offer aid to the stranger. To care for the widow and orphan. To help when we see a need regardless of our own "to do" list for the day. We may wish for judgment but we are called upon by God to offer mercy – to forgo justice when justice is really a desire for revenge, getting even or responding to the hate or disdain sent our way. Mercy offers compassion and a desire to set things right in the eyes of the Lord.

The prophet Micah offers the people of Israel and us today a standard by which we can live through these challenging times:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

This is not an easy walk. It is a pretty normal human reaction to respond to hate with hate. To respond to fear with fear. To separate into "us" and "them" categories. These kinds of responses can make us feel vulnerable. Our efforts to help may go unknown or unappreciated. It is easy to turn our backs on those who do not share our values. God does not accept this approach. God has created each of us in love and for love. God calls us to set aside our fears, our vulnerabilities and to do what we can to help ensure that every living creature knows that he or she is a child of God and worth respect.

In our Prayer Book we have a prayer called the Great Litany – at St. John's we often say this on the First Sunday of Lent. The Great Litany was the first rite written by Thomas Cranmer, the

author of the first Book of Common Prayer in 1544. I invite you to hear once again parts of this remembrance and Prayer. The responses are: *Good Lord, deliver us* which I will indicate to you.

Remember not, Lord Christ, our offenses, nor the offenses of our forefathers; neither reward us according to our sins. Spare us, good Lord, spare thy people, whom thou hast redeemed with thy most precious blood, and by thy mercy preserve us, forever.  
*Good Lord, deliver us.*

From all evil and wickedness; from sin; from the crafts and assaults of the devil; and from everlasting damnation,  
*Good Lord, deliver us.*

From all blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice; and from all want of charity,  
*Good Lord, deliver us.*

From all oppression, conspiracy, and rebellion; from violence, battle, and murder; and from dying suddenly and unprepared,  
*Good Lord, deliver us.*

In light of the events of the last week and similar events over the last several years, what can you and I do to help us return to a life that values the wellbeing of every human being? To help us create a community with less violence, less crime, less poverty and where everyone who is able to and wishes to be a contributing member of society has that opportunity.

First, we can pray. We can pray for peace, justice and mercy. We can pray for those who have such anger in their hearts that they respond in violence. We can pray for those hurt by such anger and violence.

Second, we can examine our own hearts. Where might we hold prejudices and biases that privilege one group over another? Where might we be blind to the needs of others? Where might we not even see the other?

Third, what skills and talents do we have, individually and collectively, that we might put to use to help those in need? Yes, we do many things to help our communities. Are there other things we might do that might help restore dignity and a sense of self-worth to those who have less than we do?

None of our efforts are likely to have immediate demonstrable results. But, I believe the Holy Spirit hears our prayers and sees our efforts and knows our hearts. If we believe that change is possible – that a community that values all its citizens is possible without violence, then who knows that the Holy Spirit can do. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from

8 Pentecost (Proper 10)

July 10, 2016

Amos 7: 7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1: 1-14; Luke 10: 25-37

generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus  
for ever and ever. *Amen. Ephesians 3:20,21*