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Trinity Episcopal Church
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An Opportunity to Testify

Today's Gospel has two time lines running through it. First is the time line of the disciples walking into Jerusalem with Jesus. They walk the crowded streets full of vendors of cloth and figs and turtle doves. The streets are full of Roman soldiers keeping a watchful eye for trouble. Pilgrims hurry toward the beautifully adorned Temple after a long long journey to make their offerings, and say their prayers. There is energy, vitality and anxiety in the air. Jesus speaks to their anxious hearts: the day is coming when even this solid and beautiful place will be destroyed but do not be afraid.

The second time line running through today's Gospel is the real experience of the people of God in the days that the Lucan version of the Gospel was written down. Some 70 years after Jesus walked the streets of the Holy City the beautifully adorned Temple was rubble. The Roman Soldiers massacred Jewish rebels and destroyed the place that was their rallying cry. Jewish resistance now has no home base. The center of Jewish life is destroyed. And the Jewish people who have begun to follow Jesus are being arrested, beaten, tortured. The first century faithful ask the Spirit to remind them of the teachings of their master about how survive persecution. Jesus reminds them that things fall apart. It is the way of the world for empires, and their shrines to fall apart. Troubles will come in the form of war and typhoon and disease. In the middle of those troubles, we are to be steadfast, and loving, and not afraid.

Jesus says to the first disciples and to us:

But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

In the middle of the Troubles, we are given words and a wisdom to speak. We are given an opportunity to testify. We are given a place, even if its holding a sign in Broad Street Park, or writing to a Senator who sends back a dismissive and non responsive computer generated letter. We are given a place to speak, and an opportunity to speak the Truth about the power of Love to a world that mostly relies on the power of coercion, and violence.

Our bishop has asked us to reflect on the use of violence by the State of New Hampshire against the most savage and violent people who end up in our jails. Our bishop has designated next Sunday for a “Preach In” about the death penalty. It would be so easy to avoid this since I am an invited guest to talk about your mission and ministry at St Thomas Hanover next week. It would be so easy to write to the Bishop and say, not this year. But the Gospel today requires a faithful response.

You probably know about Michael Addison, a rampaging criminal who gunned down a Manchester police officer. Last week his appeal was decided by the NH Supreme court and the proceedings of the trial court were affirmed. He has one last issue to be decided by the New Hampshire Courts, and then possibly an appeal to the Federal Courts. For now he sits on Death Row in Concord, waiting for his time to run out. There is no doubt this man is dangerous and needs to be off the streets forever. But is killing him the answer?

You probably don't know about John Brooks, a very rich man, and a rampaging criminal who hired three men to kill a handyman with whom Brooks had a dispute. Brooks was tried and convicted of capital murder, about the same time as Michael Addison. Different Jury. Different New Hampshire Court room. Brooks the rich man arranged for the killing of a nobody. Different lawyers. Different level of press attention. Different outcome. Brooks was sentenced to life in prison. Extenuating circumstances? Perhaps. A shorter criminal career? Perhaps. But the fact that Brooks is Caucasian, is white, and Addison is African American, is black, cannot be ignored.ⁱ

I have been given a story to tell about another black man, the last man sentenced to death in New Hampshire. I wish I didn't have to tell you about Ruth, a young woman, daughter of a prominent New Jersey family who went missing in 1949 somewhere near the eastern side of Lake Winnepesaukee. Months later her body was found by hunters. The case made the national news, and her family bought its influence to bear. The hunt was on to find the man responsible and close the case.

A Rochester town employee told the police he had seen a young white woman get into a Chevy with an older black man. Ralph Jennings lived in the woods near Rochester, and he owned a Chevy. In the search of his house a watch, similar but not the same, as the victim's watch was found. During the hours he was stripped naked and interrogated in the Rochester police department Jennings said it was a gift for his wife. He never confessed to knowing the victim, or harming her.

In the most sensational case ever heard in Carroll County Ralph Jennings was convicted and sentenced to die. His appeal was pending. He was confident that his sentence would at least be reduced to life in prison because he had not been charged with any other act that would justify a death sentence. He had a good legal argument as he waited on Death Row. The prison authorities were required to observe him regularly but for some reason there was a 7 hour gap in the monitoring. When the observations resumed Ralph Jennings was found dead in his cell. Case closed. Was justice done? It was lawful, but not right.

Over the past sixty years, the Episcopal Church has publicly stood in opposition to capital punishment. The General Conventions of 1948, 1969, 1979, 1991 and 2000 all reaffirmed this official position against state sanctioned killingⁱⁱ Over the past 20 years public opinion has increasingly moved against the death penalty. New Hampshire Legislators have voted twice to repeal the death penalty. In 2000 Governor Jean Shaheen vetoed the bill passed by our House and Senate. In 2010 the House of Representatives passed a Bill to repeal the Death Penalty but it stalled in the Senate. In early 2014 a new effort will be taken up in the New Hampshire legislature.

I urge you to learn about this issue, and pray over it. It is no longer a theoretical possibility that human being could be deliberately killed by agents of the State of New Hampshire in your name, for your benefit.

Our system of justice approximates justice. Its pretty close to justice but in fact errors are made all the time. Mistaken convictions can sometimes be corrected when DNA evidence is available. Eye witnesses mostly tell the truth as they see it but no one here today will hear exactly the sermon. Our filters affect what we see, what we hear, what we remember. Until the power of God exorcises the prejudices of our hearts, our human justice system cannot be trusted to exclude prejudice from its use of discretion to decide who will live and who will die.

We have been baptized into the Body of Christ, in which there is no East or West, no male or female, no Asian, Semitic, Caucasian or African. We have been baptized into a community of love, a company of Prophets, a movement of the followers of an Executed Criminal. Jesus lived without fear, and spoke the words of liberation that the vulnerable remember to this day. Jesus loved without fear, even the thief who was hanging beside him. Jesus trusted his Abba to be with him even as he spoke unpopular truths. Like him, we are both compelled and empowered to turn over the tables of injustice. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ www.nodeathpenalty.org Cited in Concord Monitor Editorial of November 10 2013

ⁱⁱ Episcopal Peace Fellowship Oct 16 2013