Congregational Church of Pinehurst

United Church of Christ

June 28, 2015

Pentecost5B

Job 38:1-11, 16-18; 42:1-6

Mark 4:35-41

***When Everything is Not All Right***

Greg and I returned home late Thursday afternoon around 5pm.

We had an absolutely fabulous trip to Europe, by the way.

And I hope that in sermons to come I will be able

to unpack some of our experiences with you

as I am able to connect them

to the life of our communal spirit.

But I am not there yet.

I am not yet at the point of being able to understand

much of the impact of what I have just experienced.

Since Thursday night,

I have been much more in touch

with the common traveling phenomenon known as “jet lag”.

Not surprisingly, it takes time

for our bodies and minds and spirits

to recalibrate after being in a different time zone,

as well as in a different culture.

Friday, around 2pm,

Greg and I both found ourselves in the kitchen

making a very large snack.

Now, mind you, we had both just eaten

a substantial lunch around noon.

And so as we were standing at the kitchen counter,

loading up our plates,

we looked at each other and laughed,

as we asked aloud,

“What the heck are we doing?”

Why are we feeling so hungry already?

And then it dawned on us.

It’s dinner time in France.

For the last 2 weeks, we had been eating a meal about that time.

And our biological rhythms don’t yet know

that we’re back on Southern Standard time.

So we laughed some more,

and then ate some more,

and then we felt the weariness

of a beautiful summer Paris evening sinking in.

But despite our biological rhythms,

the world around us did not give us time

to stay in a dreamy world of weariness for long.

The moment we returned to America,

it was obvious that we had returned to a vital moment

in our history as a people---

a moment that woke us up to the importance of the day.

First, we watched scenes of a funeral procession,

as a vast stream of humanity bore witness to the suffering

of the families of 9 beautiful and gifted Americans

struck down in an instant by a gunman

in their own church---

a stranger whom they had received into their midst

with the open arms of love.

But this processional bore witness

not only to the suffering of their families and church family,

but to the suffering of every African American

whose lives continue to be diminished

by an often inhospitable culture

that has still not completed the work

of owning it’s racism.

The lone gunman may yet prove to be mentally ill---

that remains to be seen, I suppose.

But that does not change the fact that

he committed this act of violence and hate,

in a larger context that too often condones both.

As Confederate Flags still fly over public buildings

and are woven into the fabric of a state flag,

and gun ownership is becoming something

that no longer even requires a background check

in more and more municipalities,

we must know that we have not done the work

that the elimination of unnecessary suffering requires.

And as if that weren’t enough to take in,

in the same day we received the news

that there was no longer any such thing

as gay marriage in America.

With the simple words, “It is so ordered”,

the Supreme Court of the United States

returned our nation to a single institution of marriage---

no longer marriage and gay marriage----

but just marriage.

An institution in which all our citizens

can now rightfully participate without distinction.

And so we paused to celebrate this act of great justice,

even as we know that as with racism,

there is still a great ways yet to go.

As Chad Griffin, the CEO

of the Human Rights Campaign poignantly noted,

even as we celebrate this righting of a wrong,

we still live in a world where LGBT citizens

can get legally married at 10am,

and then legally fired from their jobs at noon,

and legally expelled from their housing at 2pm,

simply because they are LGBT.

And so we must know

that we have not yet fully done the work

that the elimination of unnecessary suffering requires.

There is apparently a parallel phenomenon to biological “jet lag”.

It is a “spiritual jet lag” that allows us to live

in the ignorance and sin of a bygone day,

without the awareness that that day has passed,

and our own current ignorance and sin---

both unconscious and willful—

causes unnecessary suffering to our fellow human beings

as well as to ourselves.

It is not a new phenomenon, unfortunately---

this spiritual jet lag.

The book of Job is a testament to the wrestling

of our ancient ancestors with the age-old question

of why there is suffering in the world.

And, interestingly, the same old patterns of response

seem to predominate.

Humans tend to either blame God or blame the victim

for the existence of suffering.

People suffer because they are at fault.

In a portion of Job’s story we did not read,

after being visited by tragedy upon tragedy,

Job’s “so-called” friends come to “comfort” him.

And they suggest that he just admit

whatever it is that he has done to offend God

so that his punishment will end.

That’s not so far from the heinous rhetoric that slavery

was established for the good of a people

who were otherwise incapable

of determining their own future.

Or that AIDS was a punishment from God

for the permiscuous lives of homosexuals.

Blaming the victim is a game as old as time.

And so is blaming God.

We have and in some circles continue to

justify the oppression of those of other races

and those who are LGBT,

and of women for that matter,

using the words and stories of Scripture.

The structures of oppression are as they are

because God has decreed in holy writ

a hierarchy of human and relational worthiness,

that places our group at the top.

I can only imagine the suffering of God,

caused by the arrogance of such human rhetoric---

that we would cling to such understandings of life

and call them holy.

The truth of the matter it seems to me

Is that some suffering is just that----suffering.

Apart from the natural decay of the human body,

I do not know why some diseases exist

or fall upon the people that they strike.

We are limited creatures, with limited understanding,

in a large world with much that we cannot comprehend.

And in those instances,

I do not always know the origin of the suffering,

but I am grateful that there are

intelligent and gifted human beings,

who channel the presence of God’s spirit,

in ways that sometimes can diminish,

or even alleviate physical suffering

through medicine or through other energetic and healing arts.

I am also grateful that when physical suffering

cannot seem to be diminished,

there are courageous and compassionate human beings---

family and friends and strangers alike---

who channel the compassionate presence of God

into my life and the life of those I love

by their own compassionate presence

to and through the end.

But the oppression of social suffering

caused by prejudice and egotism and fear,

and the oppression of environmental suffering

caused by pollution and materialism

and the willful ignoring of science

for profit and political gain---

that is suffering that we can do something about,

and that is suffering that causes even God to suffer,

as we mistreat and abuse the creation

that the Divine Life gave way to, holds, and so dearly loves.

As I tried to relieve some of my flight anxiety

on the return trip home from Europe,

I watched *The Second Exotic Marigold Hotel,*

which reminded me of the prior movie on which it is based,

*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*.

For those of you unfamiliar with this movie,

seven English senior citizens

end up in a dilapidated “resort” hotel in India---

each one searching for meaning in some way

at the end of their lives.

Upon arrival, one of them comes to the concierge desk

to complain about the conditions of her accommodations

which were nothing like she’d been led to expect

by the hotel’s slick brochures.

The young, naively enthusiastic hotel manager

trying his best to hold things together

as they fell apart around him

offers her interesting comfort.

*Madam*, he says with his thick, beautiful, lilting Indian accent,

*I’m very sorry that you do not find everything*

*to your satisfaction.*

*But everything will be all right in the end.*

*And if everything is not all right---then it is not yet the end.*

And that is the hope for me today as we stand on the precipice

of what is certainly a painful and momentous moment

in our life as a nation.

Everything is not all right---

but thank God it is not yet the end.

As gay citizens marry,

and the challenges to fair housing

and expanding health insurance have failed,

and at least some confederate flags come down,

we have the opportunity

to make this more than window dressing.

We have the opportunity to participate with God

in the ongoing alleviation of suffering

in deep and meaningful ways

as we search our souls

***and*** our social policies together.

Some suffering we do not understand.

But much of it we do,

because we have participated in creating it.

But we also have been given yet another opportunity

to become more aware of the suffering we have caused,

and with the joy brought about by sincere repentance,

to work together to lessen and alleviate it.

Maybe even to transform it

into the very life of God among us.

So may it be!

Amen.

Rev. Brent A. Bissette