

Rachel's Day

A WELCA/Congregation observance of the plight of gun violence against our children and action to alleviate this evil from society.

This weekend we join our Women of the ELCA in their observance of Rachel's Day.

The original focus of Rachel's Day was and still is shining a light on gun violence against children.

In 1994, one woman urged her congregation, Bethel Lutheran Church on the west side of Chicago, to support children facing violence.

They began by clearing a vacant lot and turning it into a garden—Rachel's Garden. It became a place where folks—mostly mothers—could come to mourn children killed by gun violence in the past year.

At the Third Triennial Convention (1996) of Women of the ELCA there was a broadening of the awareness of the violence children face and actions to address it. The convention passed the memorial, resolving “That ELCA women encourage their congregations to recognize the first Sunday in May each year as Rachel's Day, based on Jeremiah 31:15–17 wherein Rachel grieved for her children, to mourn the loss of our children and to renounce the forces of evil and fear that plague our nation.”

I will share more with you about all this later.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

¹ Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around [Jesus], ² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³ (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴ and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶ He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ ⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Jeremiah 31:15-17, 2015

¹⁵ Thus says the LORD:

A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; ¹⁷ there is hope for your future, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their own country.

Jeremiah 31:15-17, 2015

Jeremiah 31:15-17 is the passage around which the Women of the ELCA have focused their observance of Rachel's day.

Earlier I described this observance as a time to mourn the loss of children in our country to violence, particularly gun violence, and to work to alleviate this evil force from our society.

I want to go back and take a look at the passage that has been selected and explore what God's response to Rachel's mourning is, and see if there is any hope God can provide in this observance.

We need to recognize that Jeremiah is not really the starting point for this biblical reference.

It is actually in Matthew 2:16–18, where we see that children have been objects of violence for thousands of years.

Listen,

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.

This passage, its context, its message, its impact is very different from the passage from Jeremiah.

Yes, it can draw our attention to the plight of children in our society who are subjected to violence of all types,

the list of which I probably don't have to review here today because you are well aware of what children suffer if you are paying even a little attention to what goes on in the world.

In fact I know this observance is difficult for many in our own congregation who have lost a child to violence,

or have children who have been victims of violence,

and for members who have been victims of childhood violence themselves,

and yes, there may be children here now who have or are experiencing violence in their lives now.

Within each one of you who are older there is a child in you.

That child carries the memories of your lifetime; the good and the bad, and there may be need of healing.

I really struggle with our participation in this observance because I know that pain and I don't want to put anyone through that in this very public place.

I don't want anyone to relive or experience those pains in this place where you come to hear God's word of grace and love, forgiveness and healing.

But maybe this is exactly the place where we need to do this because this is the place where the healing can happen,

because this is the place where you hear the word of God that heals.

The Lord says in Jeremiah;

A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.

Rachel, you know is one of the matriarchs of the Old Testament, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph her first son and Benjamin her youngest.

Rachel was the ancestral mother of the tribes of her four sons who were taken into captivity during the exile,

and so, Jeremiah captures her voice in mourning over the loss of her children.

The loss of her children—perhaps on this day, in our context, within this observance we could say the loss of childhood, the loss of innocence.

There is pain in the experience of violence no doubt, but there are also these other losses.

But that isn't all this passage says.

The Lord also says:

Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come

back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country.

The children of Israel will return.

In fact this entire chapter of Jeremiah is known as *The Little Book of Consolation*.

Throughout this chapter Jeremiah reveals the nature and character of God with reminders of what God has done, is doing and promises to do and says:

“...they shall be my people, Through God they survived the sword, found grace in the wilderness, and were loved with an everlasting love because God is faithful.”

The most powerful passage for me in this chapter is the promise of the new covenant taken from verses 31-34:

The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

I will be their God, and they shall be my people, says the Lord.

In the midst of the pain of violence there is the promise for children lost, for children suffering, for you who suffer and mourn.

I shall be your God and you shall be my people, says the Lord.

Violence is a part of the world we live in and it takes many forms. But we don't have to be the victims,

we can be the survivors and we can be the ones who work to prevent violence in the lives of children.

In fact our baptismal calling is to do exactly that.

You may remember hearing the call in our reception of new members service last week, or in the words of a baptism;

Called by the Holy Spirit, trusting in the grace and love of God, and by receiving the gift of Holy Baptism you are entrusted with responsibilities:

To care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace in all the world.

That is what we are doing in our support of Cudas Unhooked as a part of our observance of Rachel's day.

Cudas Unhooked provides homeless high school students with an escape from the violence they might otherwise experience in life.

Through Bridge House they are provided a safe place to live and focus on accomplishing the goal of graduating from high school and having a successful life beyond that.

They also learn the importance of giving back through community service as they become productive young adults, growing in both knowledge and integrity.

Their mentoring program provides tutoring, training in life skills and counseling to deal with the violence they have already experienced,

and to teach them to face their problems and the value of sharing with others.

They get tools for dealing with the stresses in life in healthy ways rather than by adding to the violence in the world.

The students get help with their personal development by focusing on budgeting, job skills and networking. They address the question, “How are you going to get to college?”

Senior life is an opportunity to build a collection of great memories by participating in traditional school activities like home coming, prom and other celebrations.

These memories will give strength, reassurance and joy along the way and in future years.

Imagine having these memories rather than those of violence and hardship to carry with you through life.

These are the ways in which you are alleviating the pain of violence in our community, in this world today

This is the practice of justice and this is peace-making in your baptismal calling.

As you leave here today I want you to take with you the experience of hearing these words and knowing they are not only meant for the people of Israel during their time of suffering and pain,

but meant for each one of you.

I will write it on your heart...I will be your God and you will be my child says the Lord.