

November 26, 1978
Last Sunday of Pentecost
Exodus 20:1-6
Matthew 25:31-46

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Reno, Nevada

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A Witness to Tragedy and Resurrection b7c

Barbara and I were on a retreat last Sunday when I was called out of a meeting. I returned my sister's phone call and was told of the assassination of Congressman Ryan and the others. Mike and Foofie Faulstich brought us home. On the way Mike said: "John, this is your calling." I knew what he was talking about.

We have been called to bear witness to the word God speaks to us now. I say "We," because you are as much a part of this as I am. There is no witness to the Word apart from the hearing of it.

Barbara and I are here by the love and strength of God which we have received through your caring and your prayers. I never imagined such a personal blow, but neither could I have imagined the strength that has come to us. We are being given strength now to be faithful to our calling.

I am a sponge. If my voice breaks or there is a long pause, I want you to know that it's all right. I am preaching this morning, because we alone can make our unique witness, and today is the day to make it.

Following the sermon we shall join in prayers of intercession for all of the people involved in this tragedy, from those first shot down to all who died, and all who grieve.

During these past days we have been asked frequently: "How did your children become involved in Peoples Temple?"

There is no simple answer. We are given our genetic ancestry. We are given our families. We are all on our personal journeys. All of these, along with the history of the race, converge upon the present wherein we make choices. Through all of this providence is working silently and unceasingly to bring creation to wholeness.

I will talk only of our children's personal histories. The only way you can understand our children is to know something of our family. In our family you can see the relationship between the events of the sixties and this tragedy, just as there is a relationship between the self-imolation of some Americans during those years and the mass murder-suicide of last week.

Our children learned that mothering is caring for more than kin. Dad talked about it from the pulpit. Mother acted it out. More than fifteen teenagers and young adults shared our home with our children. Some were normal, but others had problems. One did not say a word for three months. At least two others were suicidal. One young man had come from a home where his father had refused to speak to him for more than a year. From childhood our girls saw their mother respond to people in need from unwed mothers to psychotic adults and the poor.

Carolyn loved to play, but as president of the MYF she pushed the group to deal with serious issues. She had a world vision. She traveled to Mexico with her high school Spanish class. Four years later she spent a year studying in France. At UCD she majored in international relations. As a member of Peoples Temple she stood with the poor as they prepared for and stood in court. She expressed her caring both in one-to-one relationships and as a political activist.

From 1963 until 1972 when Annie left home, Annie and Becky walked with us in civil rights and anti-Vietnam War marches. We were together in supporting the farm workers struggle to organize. They stood in silent peace vigils. In high school they bore witness to peace with justice in our world. Their youth group provided a camping experience for foster children. When Annie was sixteen,

she worked as a volunteer in Children's Hospital in Washington, D.C. She worked directly with the children, playing with them, playing her guitar and singing. The children loved her. She decided that she wanted to work in a burn unit, which she did at San Francisco General Hospital before going to Guyana.

Our children took seriously what we believed about commitment, caring about a better, more humane and just society. They saw in Peoples Temple the same kind of caring for people and commitment to social justice that they had lived with. They have paid our dues for our commitments and involvement.

The second question we have been asked is: "What went wrong?" What happened to turn the dream into a nightmare? I shall mention two things that were wrong from the beginning. These are idolatry and paranoia. I speak first of idolatry.

The adulation and worship Jim Jones' followers gave him was idolatrous. We expressed our concern from the first. The First Commandment is the first of two texts for my sermon. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Our children and members of Peoples Temple placed in Jim Jones the trust, and gave to him the loyalty that we were created to give God alone.

It's not that they were so different from other mortals, for idolatry has always been easy and popular. The more common forms of idolatry are to be seen when people give unto the state or church or institution their ultimate devotion. The First Commandment says "No!" and warns of disastrous consequences for disobedience. The truth is that the Source of our lives, the One in whom we trust and unto whom we commit our lives is the Unseen and Eternal One.

To believe the First Commandment, on the other hand, affirms that every ideal and principle, every leader and institution, all morals and values, all means and ends are subordinate to God. This means that they are all subject to criticism. There was no place for this criticism in Peoples Temple.

The second thing that was wrong was paranoia. This was present through the years that we knew Peoples Temple. There's a thin line separating sensitivity to realities from fantasies of persecution. Jim Jones was as sensitive to social injustice as anyone I have ever known. On the other hand, he saw conspiracies in the opposition. I remember painfully the conversation around the table the last night we were in Jonestown. Jim and other leaders were there. The air was heavy with fears of conspiracy. The entire conversation on Jim's part dealt with the conspiracy. They fed each other's fears. There was no voice to question the reality of those fears.

As their fears increased, they increased their control over the members. Finally their fears overwhelmed them.

The death of hundreds and the pain and suffering of hundreds of others is tragedy. The tragedy will be compounded if we fail to discern our relation to that tragedy. Those deaths and all that led up to them are infinitely important to us. To see Jonestown as an isolated event unrelated to our society portends greater tragedy.

Jonestown people were human beings. Except for your caring relationships with us, Jonestown would be names, "cultists," "fanatics," "kooks." Our children are real to you, because you know and love us. Barbara and I could describe for you many of the dead. You would think that we were describing people whom you know, members of our church. If you can feel this, you can begin to relate to the tragedy.

If my judgment is true that idolatry destroyed Peoples Temple, it is equally true that few movements in our time have been more expressive of Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment of feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, giving shelter to the homeless and visiting those in prison than Peoples Temple. A friend said to me Friday, "They found people no one else ever cared about." That's

true. They cared for the least and last of the human family.

The forces of life and death, building and destroying were present in Peoples Temple. Death reigned when there was no one free enough, nor strong enough, nor filled with rage enough to run and throw his body against a vat of cyanide spilling it on the ground. Are there people free enough and strong enough who will throw themselves against the vats of nuclear stockpiles for the sake of the world? Without such people, hundreds of millions of human beings will consume the nuclear cyanide, and it will be murder. Our acquiescence in our own death will make it suicide.

The forces of death are powerful in our society. The arms race, government distant from the governed, inflation, cybernation-unemployment are signs of death. Nowhere is death more visible than in the decay of our cities. There is no survival for cities apart from the creation and sustenance of communities within. Cities governed by law, but without a network of communities which support members and hold them accountable, these cities will crumble, and will bring down nations.

This is what made the Jonestown experiment so important for us. It was an effort to build this kind of common life. Its failure is our loss as we struggle against the forces of death in our cities.

I have talked of history and our personal histories, of our journeys and our choices. Providence is God's working with and through all of these. God has dealt with tragedy before, and God is dealing with tragedy now. We are witnesses to the resurrection, for even now God is raising us from death. God whom we worship is making all things new.

Our Lord identified with the least of humans. Christ is present in the hungry and lonely, the sick and imprisoned. Christ, the love and power of God, is with us now. In Christ we are dying and are being raised to new life.

My last words are of our children. We have shared the same vision, the vision of justice rolling down like a mighty stream, and swords forged into plows. We have shared the same hope. We have shared the same commitment. Carolyn and Annie and Kimo served on a different field. We have wished that they had chosen ours, but they didn't. And they have fallen. We will carry on in the same struggle until we fall upon our fields.

No passage of scripture speaks to me so forcefully as Paul's words from Romans: "Nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God we have known in Christ Jesus our Lord." This week I have learned in a new way the meaning of these words of Paul: "...love never ends."

Now may the Word which calls forth shoots from dead stumps, a people from dry bones, sons and daughters from the stones at our feet, babies from barren wombs and life from the tomb, call you forth into the new creation.