

OPENING OUR HEARTS

Lamentations 1:1-6

Luke 17:5-10

World Communion/Peacemaking Sunday, 2016

Sunrise Presbyterian Church

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"How lonely sits the city that once was full of people," the poet of Lamentations cries, and I cannot help but see a picture in my mind's eye. It's of Omran Daqneesh, a five year old sitting in an oversized orange chair in a hospital in Aleppo. Omran's covered with dirt and blood. He's sitting far too still for a five year old. His eyes are blank and dazed. Every now and then he vainly attempts to wipe the blood from his hands. News reports tell us that Omran was one of 12 children under the age of 15 who were rescued in this bombing strike - one of his brothers was killed in the attack. Such attacks occur all too frequently.

In fact, they occur so often, we usually don't notice them. So many children - doctors, nurses - and last week a whole convoy of aid workers were killed with airstrikes in Syria. We simply don't know how to take in the overwhelming evidence of Aleppo falling apart. We cannot look at it all . . . yet that photo of Omran is seared in our hearts.

Meanwhile, a world apart in New York, a six year old named Alex did more than look away from the pain. He wrote the president: "Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to [my house?] Park in the driveway or on the street and we'll be waiting for you guys with flags and flowers and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school, I have a friend, Omar, from Syria, and I will introduce him and we can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties, and he can teach us another language. Please tell him that his brother will be, Alex, a very kind boy just like him. Since he won't be bringing toys and doesn't have toys, Catherine will share her big, blue stripy white bunny, and I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I can't wait for you to come."
Signed, Alex, 6 years old.

Alex's heartfelt words remind us on this World Communion Sunday that we are brothers and sisters to the children and adults of the world. Omran is not only Alex's brother - he is our brother, also. And brothers and sisters share one with another - as Alex has reminded us. They teach one another - they give love to one another. They share the beauty of butterflies and mathematics. We are brothers

and sisters to all God's children - and God call us - yes, *us* to offer them love and care. To cherish them as we have been cherished.

I already know the string of "but . . . but . . . but" forming in our minds. The conflict in Syria is amazingly complex. No one knows how to stop the inhumane bombing - but it took a six year old to remind us that people who matter are being killed. That little boys and little girls are losing their families. Alex reminds us that we have moral responsibility to love other people.

Another story of moral courage played on PBS this week. To quote the *Washington Post* "They were a busy couple in their 30s, a Unitarian minister and a social worker, with a 2 year old daughter, a 7 year old son and plenty of duties in their congregation. In January 1939, the Rev. Waitsill Sharp and his wife, Martha, could have turned down the request from a senior leader of their faith to leave their children and home and head to Prague to aid persecuted people in a country on the brink of Nazi take over.

Seventeen others had declined the mission. But the Sharps said yes.

Their willingness to confront the Nazis, first in Czechoslovakia and a year later on a second mission to France, set an example of humanitarian outreach for an isolationist America not yet at war and reluctant to open its doors to refugees. Working with various aid networks, the Sharps rescued an estimated 125 people - Jews, political dissidents and others under threat as fascist armies spread across Europe. They also helped get food and other assistance to hundreds more in urgent need.

Their exploits were brave and daring. One person Waitstill Sharp helped escape asked him why he did what he did.

'I'm not a saint,' Sharp replied, 'I'm capable of any of the many sins of human nature. But I believe the will of God is to be interpreted by the liberty of the human spirit.'

'You get enough reward out of that?' the man queried.

'Yes, I do,' Sharp said.

'They had moral imagination, said Sara Bloomfield, the Holocaust Museum's director. "They could imagine the human capacity for evil, and they could imagine the possibilities for action."ⁱⁱ

Imagining possibilities for action is what Jesus is talking about in our morning reading from Luke. "Do something," he says. "Stop saying you don't have enough faith." "Get busy, use the faith you have - it will be enough."

The faith we have leads us to love - all the children of the world. The faith we have leads us to call them brothers and sisters - even in those times the world

teaches us to hate them - our faith calls us to love. And loves leads us to imagine what we can do -

Perhaps, like Alex, our plans, can't be realized. But perhaps, like the Sharps, we may have more chutzpah and moral imagination than we ever knew. It may be that we are led to help middle school youth in Salina learn to figure out their complex world without resorting to violence - it may be that we join the groups at Ellsworth prison to help inmates learn to reflect on their lives - it may be that we simply stop being afraid of people from the Middle East and begin to learn from them. It may be that we begin to examine our own racist attitudes and judgments. Moral imagination can lead us to many possibilities.

Moral imagination leads us to God's table and the many who gather around it. There's Omran and his family - there's the people the Sharps rescued and ones they could not save - there are refugees - and schoolkids - there are farmers and miners - there are people with dark skin and light skin - there are all God's peoples sitting down to eat dinner with us -- Everyone is gathered at the feast God invites us to join.

Can we imagine dinner conversation with the world today? Can we think of pleasant things to ask of those we might have been taught to hate and fear? Can we imagine interesting questions to pose of others we might have ignored? Can we fathom a way to open our hearts to listen to the pain of the many of the world who are hurting? Can we listen to the lament of the lonely city that once was full of people? We have been invited. Shall we take our seats? We already know that we have enough faith to join the conversation. Alleluia. Amen.

ⁱ Nick Anderson, "They risked their lives to rescue scores of people from the Nazis. Few knew their story until now." *Washington Post*, Sept. 19, 2016.