

“Breach-standing”

Rev. Michelle Madsen-Bibeau

August 18, 2019

Ministries of Work: Service and Safety

First Congregational Church of Haddam

Higganum Congregational Church

Psalm 82:3-4

*“Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.*

*⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”*

Ezekiel 22:29-30a

²⁹ The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. ³⁰ And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land...

John 14:27

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Long hours on the road to make sure a multi-state investigation is done and documented properly. Intervening to see that a sexual assault victim is taken seriously and treated compassionately. Responding patiently to calls from a lonely individual whose “emergency” isn’t one, but whose fear is real. Conveying the most terrible news possible to a parent or spouse after an accident, suicide, or crime.

Talking this past week to a few current and former peace officers from our congregations, I felt it a real privilege to learn a bit about what it’s like to serve in plainclothes or a blue, black - or olive green- uniform. As we today briefly examine these three scriptures, the first two chosen by the officers who met to talk, and the third by me, it is my hope we will be inspired by the ideals and standards which motivate and guide the work of professional officers- inspired personally in our commitment to justice and peace, and inspired practically as we consider their and our own roles in building strong and safe community.

In its original context, Psalm 82’s instruction to *“Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. ⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked,”* likely was part of a prophetic critique of Israel’s leaders, though it also might reflect what is called the “henotheistic” stage in the development of Jewish monotheism, a time in which many gods were acknowledged to exist, but the superiority of Israel’s God was proclaimed. In any case, it’s clear in the passage who is in charge: Elohim, the Lord, and that He is on the side of those who need someone on their side.

The peace officers with whom I spoke understand this as their job, too. One talked about deciding to become a police officer after intervening in a bullying situation when he was a young man. He liked how it made him feel and thought he might like stopping bad guys and getting justice for victims.

In their conversation about the discipline and responsibility of making judgments in the course of their work, they stressed the importance of waiting until they get all available information, from all sides. As opposed to what the Psalmist complains of, which is the powerful having the only perspective that matters.

They spoke of training they and their colleagues have to be better prepared to help citizens struggling with symptoms of mental illness, and the challenge of wearing so many hats as officers: psychologist, social worker, counselor, and educator, as well as peace keeper, all while under the various pulls of public relations, safety, procedures, and time management. As people of faith, they agreed their faith is one thing that calls them again and again to remember to be compassionate.

The passage from Ezekiel describes a time in the history of Israel when the people and their leaders turned away from the guidance of the Torah, the Law, worshipping idols and failing to care for one another. It depicts the nation as a walled city, and these sins creating a gap in the wall through which an attack will come. In ancient cities, as one commentator put it, “defenders would have to swarm to that location and hold the breach. The gap would need to be repaired as soon as possible. If a breach was left unattended or unrepaired, the city would fall.”

“Standing in the breach” in this sense, for the officers with whom I spoke, would not always mean brandishing a weapon. One stood in the breach when he took the time to talk with a local kid spending a night in custody whose troubled family situation was familiar, telling him, “just because your old man’s a jerk, you don’t need to be.”

Another did his “breach standing” when he told a woman, as he had dozens of hundreds of times before, that she ‘didn’t have to live this way’ after she got beat up for burning dinner. Years later, she recognized him and let him know she had taken his advice, got away- and that he ‘changed her life.’

“Standing in the breach” is being willing to go where it’s unsafe in order to keep others safe. It’s committing to serve the needs of towns and cities even when the very people one protects may resent one’s presence. And then it’s treating people under arrest with respect and understanding, even when an officer has seen them there before, sabotaging themselves.

Jesus promised peace, but not a peace that is necessarily easily understood or quickly gained. Officers might not put it this way, but what I heard them describing is a spiritual journey.

They mentioned how they saw themselves and their colleagues change over time, from seeing things in black and white to understanding the gradations of grey as they got more experience. They talked, some, about the hard things they witness, and needing to “shelve” feelings, to

compartmentalize them, to be able to respond to the next call, and that they are grateful that more attention and resources are being given to post-trauma care for them and their colleagues.

They talked about gratitude, especially how often they find themselves saying “Thank God nobody got hurt.”

They shared a song we weren’t able to include in today’s service, “You are mine” recorded by David Haas that includes the words...

*I will come to you in the silence
I will lift you from all your fear
You will hear My voice
I claim you as My choice
Be still, and know I am near
I am hope for all who are hopeless
I am eyes for all who long to see
In the shadows of the night,
I will be your light
Come and rest in Me
Do not be afraid, I am with you
I have called you each by name*

*I am the Word that leads all to freedom
I am the peace the world cannot give
I will call your name, embracing all your pain
Stand up, now, walk, and live
Do not be afraid, I am with you
I have called you each by name
Come and follow Me
I will bring you home
I love you and you are mine*

This song may be special for them, but it speaks to the call each of us has to be compassionate and trusting, but also strong and faithful, and to walk as Peace Makers in the world.

I want to conclude with a story I read this week written by a police officer who is a person of faith. It doesn’t really matter where this officer is from, because the issues to which he alludes likely are fairly universal in our country, and, I’d like to think, so might be the potential for insight and connection.

I’m a police officer in a small, suburban town that borders a fairly-large city. The town I serve is predominately white. Our neighboring city is mostly black and Hispanic.

Contrary to popular belief, police officers are allowed to leave their towns to attend to matters in other jurisdictions. One matter I attend to on a weekly basis is getting take-out food from Krispy

Krunchy Chicken in the city. Their fried chicken is so good, that if my cruiser broke down halfway there, I'd leave it on the side of the road and walk the rest of the way.

A few months ago, I pulled in front of the restaurant and made my way to the door. There was a young black male standing outside by the door, looking down at the phone in his hand. He was probably in his early twenties. I looked at him, but he didn't look at me. As I walked by him, I said "How you doing?" In a quiet, somber voice, still not looking at me, he answered, "I'm just checking my phone."

"Guilty conscience" was my immediate thought. But while I was waiting for my order, a second thought occurred. Maybe he heard what he was used to hearing from police officers. Maybe he was tired of having to explain what he was doing when he wasn't doing anything at all. I considered that for a while. It bothered me.

When I walked out of the restaurant, he was still standing there. I stopped next to him. He looked up from his phone at me. And then I said something to him that has been said to me more than once in my career, and every one of those times by a black church lady. With a smile on my face, I said this: "Have a blessed day."

It took a moment to register, but when it did, our brief relationship changed. He said "Thanks... you too." When I got to my cruiser and opened the door, he called out "Hey officer." I turned and looked at him. With a sweet smile on his face and complete sincerity in his voice, he said "You be safe out there!"

Now I guess I could have approached the situation a different way: told him he must have misunderstood me, tried to convince him of the type of person I am. But that might have turned it into a whole big thing. Instead, when Christ became present, it all changed. The distrust and the animosity disappeared. And almost instantly at that.

Now, I know I said it doesn't matter where the officer who wrote about Christ at the Krispy Krunchy Chicken is from, but if you'd had a lie detector on me it might have jiggled a little because the officer is [church member], and the town he's from is this one.

In his honor, and, sadly for him, in his absence since he's working the day shift today, for coffee hour I have brought some New Britain Krispy Krunchy Chicken- instead of the donuts I was told would be inappropriate.

The lives officers, and all of us, go out to lead aren't easy or simple. There's bad luck as well as good will involved. May we be prepared to look for our opportunities to stand in the breach on behalf of friends and enemies, understanding that we all are children of God. Amen.