

Seventh Sunday of Easter  
May 16, 2010

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Well, it's very good to be here in your neighborhood for the first time. I have lived in five countries and if I talk long enough you would know the country from where I was born. For I would say to you, "eh?" -- just north of here in Canada I found my roots. And we discover when we look at the word of God this morning, I was struck from the phrase that came to us in the reading from Acts is that the jailer wanted to turn the lights on. It is our prayer, isn't it that when we come and gather in the Body of Christ, the neighborhood of God's church, that the lights would come on for us. There are two things that all of us cannot control; where we are born and who our family is. Our beginnings strike for us an essential first steps of our journey. I'm interested to see in Genesis One -- "In the beginning God created neighborhoods. He called one "heaven" and he called the other "earth". Now he chose to give a description to the one neighborhood. You could drive up and see earth population, one and a half million if it was Portland I believe. But this is how he describes the neighborhood of earth. He says it's formless; he says it's empty and it's full of darkness. If I was living where I hang my hat as a home when I am not traveling around the world I would be worshiping in a community called Harlem in New York City this morning. And when we think about the neighborhood, for the Salvation Army it is a very large edifice of a complex with a gym, with a feeding program with a little bit smaller congregation that meet in Monday through Friday crowd in the neighborhood that come in, but one of the things that struck us was the words that were given to us that in a radius of four blocks of our neighborhood in three months there were seventeen murders. Feeding a community with food, does that take away the potential of darkness with seventeen murders? You would not say that Harlem is empty of churches. There are more churches in Harlem than any square block of any community in the United States. You might say it's formless in that more young men in Harlem go to prison than go to college and it's certainly dark when you think of seventeen murders in three months.

So how does God this morning address empty, formless and dark places? Places of injustice you might say. Well, we see God thinking about it in Genesis 1 and 2 where it says "and God and the Spirit of God was hovering over the earth just over the surface and I don't how many of you are bird watchers but humming birds are the best description that I can give to the scripture illustration and imagery. There's God, not moving, stationary, but active in his thinking -- alive, ready to jump into this formless, empty, dark place. This morning I believe we've all come in worship with our emptiness with the parts of our lives that are formless. With the darkness of a week that perhaps nobody knows about. I tell you I share with you this morning that in the Salvation Army in Portland there's a little bit of darkness in our hearts today, a sadness, for our youth pastor of one of our Salvation Army churches was playing in basketball one afternoon and didn't wake up the next morning this week—twenty-three years old -- hard to understand those entry points of life. And so as we think about the way in which God wants to break in, I believe in God's hovering. He was contemplating before entry; he was

considering before his entry point; he was in constructive thought. And as God hovers over our neighborhoods this morning in Portland, what is he saying to us? What are the insights that he's providing for us? Well, the humming bird wings are about to take flight and to move in for it says that God said "Let there be light and there was light" And God's spirit still created after the lights were turned on. It says that God separated the darkness from the light. And as the Director for Social Justice globally for the Salvation Army, I ask myself where do I position myself? Do I find myself in the darkness, in the depression in the sadness of injustice and remain there, or do I find myself wholly in the light and say, oh there's a better day. Life isn't as bad as you think, almost with a naivety and I find myself in that place of separation, that place that touches both darkness and both light and identifies an inner reality: God's message of transformation touches both and understands both. That is the message of the cross to us today. And so as we think about neighborhoods – neighborhoods with well manicured gardens, neighborhoods without neighborhoods, without neighbors. In the beginning for us is a daily waking up to darkness and to light. There's a wonderful verse in Ephesians 1 that suggests that maybe I haven't really been telling you about the beginning of God's intention for neighborhoods. For it says long ago even before he made the world, God loved us. He chose us in Christ, to be Holy and without fault in his eyes. And as I walked in downtown Portland last night and I saw what is called "feral homelessness", did I look without fault in my eyes? Did I look with a hope that the church of God in this community would bring invitation to those young people, would bring choice, would bring love, would bring truth of their situation, but an understanding that reconciliation, they embrace the love of God is so needed. In my travels I have been in South Africa very recently and have had a wonderful wonderful opportunity to engage with those who know Mandela very very well. I've been to the Constitutional Court which sits in the very place where victims of Apartheid were brought on Constitutional Hill and imprisoned; I've stood in Mandela's cell and I've stood in his cell with both a glimpse of darkness and light. For Mandela would base all of his leadership on what he learned in the church as the principle of forgiveness without fault in his eyes. And long ago before Mandela became the president of South Africa, he understood that if God ever gave him the opportunity, it would be with forgiveness. And so he established what was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that many of you have heard about. He appointed a good Episcopalian Clergyman, by the name of Desmond Tutu and when you read about that Commission you understand that people are to come to tell their stories without fault in their eyes, to hear the truth of darkness, the facts of darkness, but with the hope of the light of reconciliation. There was a call that come into one community in particular because that community had been devastated by power that abused people who had no voice. And in that particular community when Desmond Tutu came and opened up the hall he went next day on the radio and he said "I'd like all those who served in the police force to come and tell their story, all would be a dark story. O, I'm sure they began to shake, the police force, in that community who were now retired. There was one man who was reading his scriptures and he felt a humming bird over him. He heard the flutter of the humming bird's wings; the spirit was moving. It was convicting him, but he was afraid. The humming bird entered into his feet, into his mind, into his heart and he found himself the next day going to the hall of Truth and Reconciliation; he stood up as a man of God with sin on his hands and said I must tell you the

truth of my acts. His story was told. He sat down. But if we think about justice today, justice is social; justice is just not about facts or human rights; justice is the embrace of God when love was God's idea of a neighborhood long ago. And so as he left his place he saw in the corner six older women, mothers who had lost their sons in the horror of Apartheid. And he went over to them and he had a question for them, a most unusual question you might say. He turned to them and he said "Can I wash your feet?" There was silence. He asked the question "Can I wash your feet?". And one woman bent over as she put her hand up and unlatched her shoes and the policeman who now was becoming a heart-filled man of reconciliation got a bucket of water, he knelt down at the feet of those whose color he did not like and he began to wash. Five other women unlatched their shoes as well and in the circle of that moment God came and neighborhood was formed that never could have been imagined. Tears flowed; the bucket of water was no longer needed, for forgiveness came in that moment and I say to you this morning as I say to myself "whose feet does God want me to wash in this community, in my family, in my congregation?" God moves into the neighborhood and as we share the Lord's Prayer so often it becomes not a heaven, not an earth, but a heaven on earth.