

Devotion for Sunday, March 15, 2020 – Rev. Jeff Stinehelfer

Friday morning, I attended the memorial service for Malachi Lukes, the teenager murdered one week ago today in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington DC. At the time of his death, Malachi was walking with friends to play basketball. Melissa Laws, Malachi's mother, is a Program Director of the Shaw Community Center, an urban ministry of the United Church of Christ. I served as a Board member of the Center for many years, so have enjoyed a dear friendship with Melissa and her colleagues on the Center's staff. Melissa and her older daughter were among 14 adults and youth who participated in a civil rights tour that I organized about 10 years ago, driving through North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama to visit sites associated with some of our nation's darkest days. Malachi was too young then to go along.

But since then, Malachi has not been too young to be influenced by the gang environment that still exists in the increasingly gentrified Shaw neighborhood. Newspaper accounts this week implied that authorities were investigating the possibility that Malachi was a target in an ongoing dispute between rival groups. Most unfortunately, that possibility seems to have been verified by an incident during the memorial in his honor on Friday.

The service was held at Lincoln Temple Congregational Church, where Shaw Community Center is based, and where I have preached on two occasions in the past. For much more than a century, iconic Lincoln Temple has been one of the leading Washington DC congregations in the civil rights movement. (Parenthetically, it is on the sidewalk outside this church, four years ago, that I first met our friend Kenya Mayes and her children, homeless at the time). The wake for Malachi preceded the service, and I watched as a few hundred people paid respects at the open casket at the front of the sanctuary. The mourners included dozens of young people, near whom I had taken a seat when I arrived. The young people had been restless during the wake, filing frequently in and out of the pews. Just before the service was to begin, it became clear that their restlessness was rooted in the neighborhood rivalry that was also in attendance. Quite suddenly, girls in my pew began fighting with girls in the pew immediately ahead. Quickly boys began fighting as well. A few mothers had apparently anticipated the disruption, and immediately tried to intervene. The fight escalated until, thankfully, police swarmed the building and eventually restored calm. Was this to define Malachi's legacy?

Melissa, who was already wailing in grief over the loss of her son, understandably became even more distraught. I found my way to where she was being comforted by friends, and offered a brief word of empathy and reassurance. Though quite delayed, Malachi's memorial service commenced under the prayerful leadership of the readers, speakers, and musicians whom Melissa had invited to participate. Family members, vocalists, instrumentalists, a school principal, and Sudi West, the executive of Shaw Community Center, all gave fitting tribute to Malachi. At the conclusion of the service, I intentionally stood across 11th street, which was blanketed with police cars, to watch the casket being carried down the church steps, by boys who had likely been fighting an hour before, and placed in a waiting hearse. I watched Melissa and family members being escorted to a waiting limousine. I watched beautiful flower arrangements placed in the vehicles. I watched numerous policemen and policewomen vigilantly ensuring that no further violence would accompany Malachi to his resting place.

I will soon find Melissa again, to embrace her with arms of love. That is how God is embracing Malachi.

And that is how, in a time of national and international crisis, we must embrace our fellow Americans, and all world citizens--in a spiritual sense, if not with a tap of elbows, or fists, or feet (that would be a challenge to my sense of balance!). There are lessons to be learned from the experience that the

coronavirus has thrust upon us universally, and one is that God has indeed created us as a single family. That truth is what has led me to share for your meditation the story of Malachi's memorial: In this Season of Lent, let us repent of the ways in which our sins of commission or omission might indirectly contribute to the very real struggles of young people trying to survive in volatile neighborhoods, and let us recommit to spreading the love of Christ, with the courage of Christ, unconditionally.

For this time in which we are all living, let me share with you a prayer that was sent by an interfaith clergy group of which I am a member. The prayer was composed by Rabbi Naomi Levy:

We are frightened, God,
Worried for our loved ones.
Worried for our world.
Helpless and confused,
We turn to You
Seeking comfort, faith and hope.

Teach us God, to turn our panic into patience,
And our fear into acts of kindness and support.
Our strong must watch out for our weak,
Our young must take care of our old.
Help each one of us to do our part to halt the spread of this virus.

Send strength and courage to the doctors and nurses
In the frontlines of this battle,
Fortify them with the full force of their healing powers.
Send wisdom and insight to the scientists
Working day and night across the world to discover healing treatments.
Bless their efforts, God.
Fill our leaders with the wisdom and the courage
To choose wisely and act quickly.
Help us, God, to see that we are one world,
One people
Who will rise above this pandemic together.

Send us health, God,
Watch over us,
Grace us with Your love,
Bless us with Your healing light.
Hear us God,
Heal us God,
Amen.