

A LESSON FROM THE FESTIVAL OF
BOOTHES
October 5, 2008

MEDITATION:

from **The Rev. Jane Rzepka's book
A Small heaven, titled**

Shaky Skaters

Roller World is a typical roller rink that rents foul-smelling skates with fragile laces, and then pounds your ears senseless with hard-driving rock music. Roller World caters to people with no standards, no taste, and no class.

I love Roller World. No one was born to skate, but there we all are, a roomful of unlikely skaters, doing our best. A few of course are hot shots, whizzing around on one foot, backwards half the time, breezy as you please. And another bunch, sad to say, is hopeless-their eight little wheels completely ignoring mission control. But round and round the rest of us go, steady and solid, one foot and then the next, in careful time to the Beastie Boys or Twisted Sister.

Folks look pretty darn good out there. I suppose I do too. No one knows that if even one word is spoken in my direction, I will lose my concentration and hit the floor hard. No one realizes that if they come up behind me too fast I will panic and crumble into the wall. No one can see that this steady skater is so precarious that the act of skating, just skating, takes everything.

As we roll around the rink, uncertain of our stride and rhythm, may we yet see the instability of those who surround us. May we help when we are steady, holding those who falter; may we calm the reckless and urge the timid forward; may we keep gentle company with the skaters at our side. Let us move with the spirit of love, and may some quiet presence help us with our laces at the end.

In silence may we find the strength to move forward...

.. For the wisdom of our inner voice and the faith that guides us...we
Give grateful thanks.. amen

SERMON:

Of all the Jewish Holidays, Sukkot, The Festival of Booths, next to - Hanukkah is one of my favorites, because the meaning of this holiday, presents a concept, an idea that has challenged me for years and has a resounding echo pertinent to the practice of all faiths everywhere.

First, let me back up a bit to the origin of this booth building practice among our

Jewish neighbors. Sukkot falls two weeks after Rosh Hashanah and the preparations begin immediately following Yom Kippur, the day of atonement and the spiritual cleansing of the soul. Sukkot, which begins this year on October 15th, is a colorful and joyous celebration commemorating the journey of the children of Israel through the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. In order to keep moving, "booths" or sukkas were constructed as temporary shelters. Today the Jews celebrate Sukkot for seven days residing in the sukka, eating sleeping and praying, with some exceptions for women and children, which is changing as a friend of mine, who is a female reformed Rabbi spends the entire seven days in her sukka with no restrictions. Special dispensations are made for those whose health or circumstances make it impossible.

With due respect for nature, using the only materials available at that time, the roof must be constructed of natural materials which can be cut down such as branches, corn stalks, bushes reeds. It must provide more shade than sunlight and be weather proof, but open enough for the stars to shine through, with no opening larger than 11 inches in width or length. The walls are decorated with citron, palm branches, myrtle twigs, willow and spices specifically designated in the third book of the Torah, Leviticus Chapter 23: 40. The spices symbolize the final harvest, and the fertility of the land, the sustaining, nurturing forces of nature which were so crucial to their survival in the desert.

Even today our Jewish friends and neighbors come together on Sukkot, " to worship and to rejoice before God. One purpose for gathering is to acknowledge that "the failings of one person are compensated for by the virtues of the others." That is the very thought which sticks in my mind, which both enlightens and troubles me. Now, as with all circumstances when many are required to live together in close quarters, there are always some who present a problem, who do not co-operate or are troublesome to the mission or well being of the whole. On a larger scale, outside of our faith community, as a nation, our practice has been to ostracize those whose behaviors are criminal or shocking or totally unacceptable; the solution has always been to find a way to remove them from our presence, sometimes permanently.

Lately our media has been peppered with unthinkable criminal acts, most recently the widely publicized rape and murder of 11 year old Erin Maxwell, which has horrified all of us; that anyone could justify any child in this country being allowed to live in the deplorable conditions that constituted her miserable home life. Others like her have also reached the media. The two children found in the freezer in Maryland; the 12 year old drugged , assaulted and killed by her uncle in Vermont.

It was enough to promote a number of conversations of what to do with these people who violate so repulsively the basic human rights of a defenseless child. I hear mention of re-instating the death penalty for such offenses, some quoting the bible, an "eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth" and others saying no matter what the offense, taking a life for a life is never justified.

And there are others like myself who are stunned and speechless by the

brutal killing of a child and struggling with just how justice can be served. Feeling so far away at times from such gross violations of human rights, I imagined these very folks gathered in my sukka and wondered what I would do? What would I say to them? This is one time when I felt that the failings of one are far too great to be atoned for by anyone.

However, I realize that the threat of Capital Punishment has never deterred a single murder, as one whose conscience would consider the consequences would never have performed such an act in the first place.

Be it something gone awry in the psychological make-up of a random killer or a momentary act of self protection, a death sentence does not stop one from killing another and a death penalty is not a deterrent, that is a known fact.

As I have wrestled with the senseless death of Erin Maxwell, I still cannot find a solution with-in me other than the immediate purely emotional response of execute them, (meaning someone else gets to do it, surely not I) and remove their brains for study, to glean some understanding for the reasons for such inconceivable behavior,"

If we were instead to broaden the scope of our options, from an eye for an eye, to seriously asking ourselves, in most cases, " how can the virtues of the majority actively compensate for the failings of a few," we are presented with another realm of possibilities for dealing with unacceptable or criminal behaviors in a completely different way.

As I was thinking about all of this and traveling into town, I came up behind a old Toyota lumbering along well below the speed limit, laden down with boxes strapped on the roof and the interior bulging with what appeared to be the contents of an entire apartment. The driver was totally obliterated from view by the mere volume of the contents and the rear bumper, nearly dragging on the ground sported two very faded bumper stickers. The first said, " WHAT'S THE RUSH" the second, I immediately wrote down. It said, " If you love Jesus, do JUSTICE, any idiot can honk!"

Somehow the rituals and meaning of the Festival of the Booths and the faded words of wisdom plastered across the listing back of that overburdened, lopsided Toyota began to come together and make sense.

Have we become a society of HONKERS rather than seekers of true justice? Honking, shouting, casting stones and unloading our anger is so often the way we express our selves and our distaste for the gross injustices that others inflict upon us and society. The out of sight and out of mind, practices have created the present prison system we support today.

Thousands and thousands of incarcerated offenders are hidden away behind locked doors. It costs the taxpayers an average of \$50,000.00 a year to feed and support each prisoner, to pay the guards and maintain the prisons, just to get them out of our sight and away from our own consciences.

There are so many behind bars and hundreds more each day added to those already exploding numbers.

They are costing us a fortune not only in dollars but in our reluctance to consider

alternatives; how can our virtues, those of the majority compensate for their failings in a way that is productive and redemptive? Killing even the most grotesque of offenders does not answer that question.

So what are we supposed to do ? Will the alternative, execution, ever lead to a real solution or only hollow revenge? Are there times when that is justified?

Can we ever compensate for the reality that there are those among us who have serious failings and offenses for which we have not chosen to include in our rites of absolution- ever?

The idea that we might consider a different approach presents more than a passing interest in my life. Thirty years ago a high school Junior named Paul aged 16 knocked on the door of his girlfriends home in Southern Florida. He was picking her up for a date, a pizza and a movie, they had been going together for two years. He was an eagle scout, class president, a varsity letterman and worked after school, the model of an ideal son, an exceptional student and a conscientious worker. Something happened that neither he nor anyone else understands. Two hours later he was arrested for the brutal murder of his girlfriend. He is presently residing on Death Row in the Florida State Penitentiary. During that time he has earned a high school diploma, a masters degree and a Ph.D. in theology.

Paul claims to have no memory of what happened that night. His behavior has been exemplary in prison, the psychologists can find nothing wrong, but he is slated to die for what he did. And I can imagine how the family of his girlfriend must feel. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth makes his impending execution a valid choice.

But when I ask myself how the virtues of the majority of us could put his offense to good use while he is alive, I might consider an alternative.

For 30 years after many stays of execution, Paul has been Isolated from the rest of world, a ward of the state, producing nothing taking only what his constitutional rights have given him at our expense. Yes he killed another human being and his life has been miserable as many say it should be. Death is probably a welcome option for him at this time, but were we to truly impose upon him the strength of the virtues of the majority, would it not stand to reason that his time could have been be used in a way that would benefit others, would lessen the burden of living for someone else.

I have always thought that the workers of Habitat for Humanity should be made up of murders and thieves, that the very values we cherish and teach are sometimes those values which were lacking from the life of the criminal offender. Can we consider, re-introducing virtue instead of revenge? Is it possible?

Doing Justice takes time and thought, but I cannot believe that it is better to warehouse most offenders, or to execute them than it is to get them up off their butts and put them to work doing something good for someone else.

No one knows why my cousin Paul did what he did, Some will find a route for living productive lives, others will not, but while they are residents on this earth in our communities and prisons not one day should go by where there is any inactivity that does not relate to an expression of contributing to the common

good.

For us to invest in considering the futures of those who are far from virtuous, merely wishing them out of our lives or dead, does not teach us a thing about managing unacceptable social behavior. It only eliminates from our immediate view an offensive person and a painful memory.

The festival of the Booths gave me a great deal to think about this year, in a way that I had never considered. I really don't have a perfect answer, nor do I have a solution what will work for all people.

I do have a view of what it means to compensate for the failings of another, even in small ways, as I hope others will do for me when my failings are obvious. I have learned that we cannot just judge the acts of another in moments of anger or in sadness, those are the two emotions upon which we should never base any decision, rather take the time to ask how can we band together to compensate for the failings of others by virtue of the greater good. Merely dwelling on what is wrong or eliminating it from view does not correct the problem. What would we say or do should those whose acts of violence or injustice find themselves sharing our sukka?

Justice takes time to consider all the alternatives. Honk if you will and sometimes with good reason but in the end virtue must prevail. How to do that is probably the greatest challenge humankind will ever face.

So be it
Amen

Rev. Holly Baylies©2008