

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (A)

February 23, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18; 1 Corinthians 3: 10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5: 27-30, 38-48

“Love’s Revenge”

Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

In 1891, a twenty-four year old medical doctor offered his services to the Christian Missionary Society. His name was Theodore Leighton Pennell. The next year he was sent to the British India territory. The following year he opened a missionary hospital at Bannau, located in a part of the British colony that would later become Pakistan. Bannau was near the border shared by Afghans and Muslims. Pennell was very forthright about his Christian faith despite the danger to his life. He offered medical care regardless of the nationality or religion of the patient. Pennell was very clear that “a concrete case” ---- actions --- “will sometimes accomplish what a mere statement cannot effect.” This story I share is from Pennell’s book on his missionary experience.

In the autumn of 1907 a man in a was brought to the Bannau Mission Hospital in a pitiable state: both of his eyes had been slashed about and utterly blinded with a knife. He was an Afghan, a member of one of the warring tribes. Pennell wrote it was painful to have to tell him that he would never see again, and still more painful to hear him as he cried: “Oh, Sahib, if you can give me some sight only just long enough to go and shoot my enemy, then I shall be satisfied to be blind all the rest of my life.” It could not be. They kept him a few weeks more that he might benefit from the care and the kindness of the Christian care givers AND that he might hear the story of the Gospel of goodwill and forgiveness. But he would shake his head and sigh. “No, that teaching is not for us. What I want is revenge—revenge!” Then, one day, Pennell sat beside his bed and told him the story of the Conolly bed.

In 1841 the British government sent Captain Conolly as an envoy to Bukhara. The tribal Muslim ruler was suspicious of his intentions, accused him of espionage and threw him into prison. It was in vain to protest or to claim the consideration due to a representative of the British Government. His effects – even most of his clothing — were confiscate. Food was scarce and bad. He was exposed to both the mistreatment of guards

and the dangerous winter and summer temperatures. Weeks and months went by in terrible monotony and helplessness..

Somehow Captain Conolly managed to hide a small English Prayer-Book from his captors. It had been a farewell gift from his sister when he had left for India. The prayers and songs comforted him. He also found a way to begin to write in the margins of the book. He wrote of his experiences as a prisoner — the treatment, how he felt, how they affected his spirit. In effect, the prayer book became a diary of his prison life.

A whole year passed. One day Conolly and another British officer were taken outside of the prison into the street. Their hands tied, they were flogged as they watched their graves being dug. After watching the beheading of the other prisoner, Conolly was told his life would be spared if he renounced Christianity and profess Islam. He refused and he too was beheaded and buried. Except for the tribe who had executed him, no one knew what had happened to Conolly. In vain his family and friends, and the government of England waited for some news of him. It took years for the story of his death to be uncovered.

Some seven years later, a Russian officer was browsing in a shop in Bukhara and came across Conolly's little Prayer-Book. He thought it interesting. Though he couldn't translate the handwritten notes, he purchased it from the shopkeeper. For another fourteen years the little book was lying on his table at St. Petersburg, when a visitor who knew Captain Conolly's relations saw it and was permitted to send it to Conolly's relatives. Twenty-one years after her brother's death, Captain Conolly's sister received his prayer book with its account of his sufferings, written with his own hand.

She again grieved her brother's suffering and death. She wondered, 'What should I do?' How could she avenge her brother's murder?. She was not wealthy, but when the Bannau Mission Hospital was inaugurated, she wrote to the medical missionary, expressing her desire to support a bed in memory of her brother. Her instructions: "Please keep a bed free in your hospital at all times for a sick or wounded Afghan and care for him until he regains his strength. I am doing this in memory of my brother who suffered so much at the hands of Afghans and who died in their country."

Dr Pennell finished his story. He looked at the small framed card on the wall behind the blinded man's bed. It read: Conolly Bed. In Memory of Captain Conolly, beheaded at Bukhara "It was your countrymen who killed this officer because he would not forsake Christianity for Islam. It is his sister paying for you to be nursed and tended. It is her prayer that you may learn of the Saviour who bid us forgive our enemies, and do good to those who despitefully use us and persecute us." In the silence that followed, Dr. Pennell knew the story had at the least set his patient thinking.¹ Might there be something more powerful than hate and revenge?

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'.... You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be the children of your Father in heaven." It sounds crazy. It sounds impossible. But we can't simply dismiss these teachings of Jesus. After all, resurrection from the dead sounds pretty crazy and impossible, too. Jesus calls into question — and asks us to call into question --- the status quo, dog-eat-dog, might-beats-right powers at work in our lives and world. In the Kingdom of God, relationships are governed not by brutal or demeaning power but by vulnerability grounded in love. Conolly's sister avenged her brother's murder by refusing to let hatred, bitterness and violence win. Her revenge was love. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 2/21/13

1. Story adapted from the writing of T. L. Pennell, M.D., B.Sc., F.R.C.S., Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier: A Record of Sixteen Years' Close Intercourse with the Natives of the Indian Marches, London: Seeley & Co. Limited, **1909** (Second Edition)