

For the people of St. Philip's
Year C, Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 6, 2007
John 13: 31-35
Maria Hoecker, preacher

I'm going to repeat what we just heard Jesus say three times in the Gospel reading this morning. It bears repeating... "...I give you a new commandment...love one another." Three times Jesus says this to us, his disciples. "love one another."

Love, such a loaded word. Each of us have a different definition of the word running through our heads at this very moment. It's based on our experience of love, our impressions of love as we attempt to give and receive love from one another. It ain't easy, this love stuff.

God loved us so much that God gave us Jesus. Jesus loved us so much he gave himself for us, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. And we're commanded by Jesus to do the same to one another., love one another.

That sort of love is a self-emptying love, Kenosis is the Greek word for it. Kenosis. That's a "send your egos out the door with Judas" sort of love. It's an "it's sooooo not about me," sort of love.

It's a love that perseveres. What crosses do we bear for those we love? We all carry them. It's not an easy come, easy go sort of love. Kenosis, self-emptying love, that's the sort of love that Jesus has for us, a love that perseveres. We fall short, yet we know that there's always hope for a new beginning.. So we get back up bearing our crosses with love, because Jesus showed us the way.

It's in that spirit of love that I want to share with you a free-verse poem that I wrote yesterday when I saw the aerial photos on the internet of Greensburg, KS. This is a little town out on the high plains of KS. Population 1500. I know this town well. A few days ago it was literally blown away by a massive tornado. A tornado unusual in its size and power. This is an epic poem that is all about self-emptying love and perseverance, something that Kansas people deeply know.

As do we all.

Greensburg, Kansas

I remember this town.
Like so many other small towns along Highway 54,
I used to count it off as a mile-marker
on the way to somewhere else.

Far west of Wichita
there's a repeating pattern that goes along a line,
a straight line.
Every twenty miles or so,
there's a spot of a town.

Not long after you leave one green burg
you can see the towering white
grain elevators of the next green burg standing as beacons.
Just as billowing towers of clouds blow toward you from the west,
these silos come at you,
giving assurance that another community of good souls
will always appear out of the seemingly empty horizon.

I had the towns memorized in order from west to east,
or east to west, depending on which direction we were going.
Kismet, Plains, Meade, Minneola, Greensburg, Pratt, Kingman, Goddard.
I spent a lot of time on Highway 54,
on my way to somewhere else.

You are not driving off of the edge of the world,
it just seems that way,
when you are sitting still, yet moving at seventy miles an hour
in a straight line,
two and half hours west of Wichita,
with two more hours to go.

Folks say these western prairie towns
are all around twenty miles apart
because the railroad companies platted it that way.
They named the regular grid of rectangular counties
after conquering generals of a recent war between our states.

Bleeding Kansas was indeed freed.
It had been a free-for-all before the war,
but now the land was free for all
who would plant crops,
raise cattle,
plant homes,
raise children,
and plainly persevere.

Rail lines followed the trails, built to carry
abundant grain off of the fields and
on to the tables of our nation.

Twenty miles is about the distance
that teams of oxen
-then horses,
-and then weather-beaten trucks
could haul harvested Turkey Red Wheat

from the fields to the windswept rail ports.

Twenty miles. That's how far the iron horses could go before they needed another tower of water.

Those towns were dry land ports that were built to provide life-giving water to those who teetered on the edge of the horizon, on their way to somewhere else.

Life-sustaining water was hidden deep under the ground, in vast dark seas that forever remain unseen. Cool, clear, naturally filtered water bubbled up from hand-dug wells.

Greensburg, KS had a sign along Highway 54, a claim to fame that often captured my imagination. "Home of the Largest Hand-dug Well."

I suppose that old well was not blown away yesterday. The old hand-painted sign probably was though, that sign that used to beckon travelers to slow down, and stop for a cool drink.

It's probably not there now.

For awhile in my childhood, in the seventies, I remember that Rainmakers convinced the farmers to pump too much of that hidden water out of the ground. They sprayed the water on their crops which were planted in gigantic green circles. The harvests were abundant. Corn grew on a semi-arid plain.

The patchwork quilt of circles spread out for hundreds of square miles. It was a sight to see from the window of my dad's small plane (we used that plane to get on our way to somewhere else, faster.)

Soon we could all see that such a dry, windy climate sucked the water out of the air before it hit the ground. That was center pivot irrigation, then came the drip irrigation, then, as the well water levels fell it was back to no-till farming to keep the dust down as water grows more precious than oil.

Slowly over God's time the unseen waters are replenished by blinding blizzards and fearsome, awesome storms.

After the War came the railroad builders,
sending out a siren call heard 'round the world
by those who had nothing to lose,
nowhere else to belong.
*"Come, harvest the land.
We're giving it away,"*
they sang.

(and we'll let *you* pay *us* to haul the harvest away to distant markets.)

Hungry people came in teeming droves.
They came from war-ravaged Europe,
the Russian Steppes.
They came from the battered South.

Hardy, hopeful souls followed the trails, then the rails,
toward a manifest destiny which led them onward,
westward.

There, on the prairie, restless settlers found that the sirens had changed their song.
They found rolling waves of grass, not oceans.
Their schooners were wooden wagons, not ships.
Their canvas sails covered wagons, their only shelter
from sudden storms.

Grasshoppers, buffalo, and antelope grazed on thick sod.
It was a short stem, dry, hardy buffalo grass that crunched underfoot
and burned in firestorms you could see for days before they arrived.
Every year in the late winter,
towering clouds of thick, fragrant smoke
rolled in with the wind.

Just ahead of the fire were the tumbleweeds
loosened from the land by an advancing gust front.
Always yielding, the tender green shoots of new beginnings
would emerge through the black ash.

Those on their way to somewhere else found
tree-less landscapes,
foreboding thunderheads
that towered above them at a height
beyond the range of any mountain.

A roaming people ran there first,
those who had lived and loved on that land for ever,
but they were shipped off too, as first fruits of the harvest.

All were bent by the wind,
trees-clouds-people-grass,
all are formed by the force of
eternal mighty winds.
All come and all go.

There was, and probably still is,
isolation, freedom, and fear there,
in Greensburg, KS,
but the fear is God-fearing,
-there's power in that.
There's no fear of oppression nor of invading armies.

People came and built those little towns along the way,
while they were, seemingly, on their way
to somewhere else.

Those hardy hungry souls survived
famine, storms, dust, depression, drought,
and towering terrible storms that still take your breath away.

Yet still, they paid dearly to haul out their abundant fruit of the harvest:
--fruits that we gobble up as fast as it's produced--
cattle, pork, wheat, soybeans,
alfalfa, milo, corn, oil,
and the children.

So many of the progeny of the prairie have shipped out,
seemingly, on their way to somewhere else.
I am one of those wandering children of the Great Plains.

The seasons come and go.

The storms roll in and out.

These people--my people--love this windswept land.
This land their people found, seemingly,
on their way to somewhere else.

They will persevere on the plains
as the seasons come and go,
and as the storms roll in and out.
These people- my people- love their land
because they love their people.

They will plainly persevere.

Jesus said:

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.
In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.
If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?
And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and
will take you to myself, so that
where I am, there you may be also.
And you know the way to the place where I am going.”*

John 14: 1-4