

## **2009 Global Mission Lenten Series**

### **Maundy Thursday Worship Resources**

Phil and Lou-Marie Knutson, South Africa

*Exodus 12:1-14*

*1 Corinthians 11:23-26 v. 29*

*John 13:1-17, 31b-35*

*116:1-2, 12-19*

#### **No Longer Aliens**

Earlier this year, the various news media in South Africa and around the world reported on a wave of xenophobic (xenophobia = fear of foreigners) attacks across the country. Over 40 foreign nationals including a few local South Africans were killed and tens of thousands displaced. Men, women and children fled for refuge and relief assistance to police stations, community halls and churches. Newspaper articles, editorials. T.V. news programs and radio talk shows reflected the many emotions, views and analyses of perpetrators, victims, government, civil society and religious organizations.

While a few explained this violent phenomena as the work of criminals or a third-force most viewed the attacks on foreign nationals as the result of growing frustration and anger on the part of poor and unemployed South Africans who have yet to benefit economically after the end of Apartheid in 1994. In fact, the gap between rich and poor has increased over the past decade with unemployment running at 40% or more in many areas. There is also a deeper explanation that links this unrest to the experiences and effects of colonialism, migrant labor, apartheid and global economic policies that have enormously benefited a few at the expense of the majority of people.

During this time, many of us heard about the raid by U.S. Federal agents on a meat processing plant in Postville, Iowa resulting in the arrest of almost 400 immigrant workers. We read the response by the NE Iowa Synod Bishop on the ELCA News Service that, “American businesses need workers and immigrants need jobs,” and his bold call for “immigration reform so that businesses can prosper legally and immigrants may know the freedom and opportunity of America legally.”

In South Africa some are asking what has gone wrong with the “rainbow nation” while others point to the obvious fact that for millions little has changed before or after apartheid. As one political researcher put it, “[The] weakest in our midst now bear the brunt of our failure to improve the lives of the poor... If one scratches the surface of this society we are all complicit...”

Pastor Philip Knutson, (who serves as ELCA Global Mission regional representative in Southern Africa), wrote: “As an American it is not my role to judge what is happening or not happening in South Africa but rather to hold it up as a mirror for us in the United States where immigration is also a critical issue. As a privileged descendent of Scandinavian Lutheran economic immigrants to the United States, I feel deeply embarrassed and angry when other more recent economic immigrants are discriminated against. As I move between continents and countries I have

become more convinced that our materialistic and consumerist life style comes in many ways at the expense of others and that current global trade is not fair, just or sustainable for people or the environment.”

Countries like South Africa and the U.S.A. have always needed and attracted economic migrants, to do skilled and unskilled work. Migrants bring an array of knowledge, languages, skills, a strong desire for something more and a refusal to accept things the way they are. In both countries, it is heartening to see the response of many organizations and individuals to condemn the attacks on immigrants and refugees and to help communities and families affected by violence and discrimination. The Dean of the Western Cape Circuit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, Rev. M.D. Dinale, in a pastoral letter on Africa Day (May 25), called for the church to take a prophetic stand against xenophobia and to be visibly involved in providing assistance to refugees based on Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:42-43.

On Maundy Thursday the church solemnly commemorates the institution of the Lord’s Supper and Jesus’ new commandment of love. The words of institution are few but powerful, It happened on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. It happened in the midst of great treachery, fear and danger. He shared a meal of fellowship with his disciples and washed their feet, demonstrating in the face of contrary forces and perceptions, God’s new covenant of unconditional love: forgiveness of the unforgivable, acceptance of the unacceptable, inclusion of the sinners and outcasts. And he commanded them to do likewise, to create a new and inclusive reconciled and reconciling community.

Then and now Christians struggle to understand and live in this way. Paul made a passionate appeal for unity in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth. Paul pointed out that their many problems stemmed from a lack of love. The Corinthians, who believed themselves to be very spiritual, were actually very worldly. The evidence of their immaturity in the faith was the presence of destructive factions. Paul made it clear that there could be no competition or discrimination among God’s people. For Paul, each person has unique gifts from God and role to play in the building of the church and witnessing to the world. Unity and love were paramount for Paul.

How do we as Christians understand Paul’s admonition to “recognize the body”? In Greek διακρίνων σωμα is translated as “discerning, recognizing, and judging correctly the body.” For centuries theologians and churches have argued about explanations of what transpires inside the cup or in the loaf when the elements are consecrated. Concepts such as “transubstantiation” or “consubstantiation” have been used to explain different understandings of what is happening. But, what if the body we need to correctly discern or clearly recognize each time we gather and kneel to receive the bread and wine is the body of Christ around us and including us that is being created anew – the gathering of sinners, erstwhile enemies – who are forgiven, reconciled, equipped and sent by God’s grace as one body with diverse gifts to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation in the world?

In other words, the question of discernment challenges us to ask who is being welcomed at the Lord’s table? As we go forward and kneel with open hands to receive the gifts of bread and wine and hear the words spoken to each one of us individually: “The body of Christ given for you.

The blood of Christ shed for you.” We need to look around and ask the question, “Who is being included and who is excluded and why?” Not only at this Eucharistic table, but in this church and in this community, in this country and world which we are reminded does not belong to us but to God.

Significantly, Jesus does not give us only a part or piece of God’s love. He does not give more to some and less to others based on good or bad performance. We all receive, by God’s grace, all of God’s love and forgiveness for all of our sins. We all partake equally of the one bread and drink from the one cup of blessing.

How welcome then are refugees, migrants and people living with HIV & AIDS in our church and in our community at the Lord’s table? Are they included? Do they stay away or come but feel unwelcome because of guilt, shame, fear, feelings of unworthiness? Is it because of overt or covert discrimination? Who is worthy? No one is good enough, old enough, knowledgeable enough or faithful enough to earn or deserve admission to the Lord’s table. Jesus served Peter who denied him, even Judas who betrayed him and the rest of the disciples who ran away. Jesus did not measure, ration or discriminate in sharing the bread and wine. What the disciples were doing and would do afterwards did not stop Jesus welcoming and serving them. Jesus returned to the disciples after the resurrection and challenged them as they sat behind locked doors paralysed by fear and shame. Jesus told them to stop being afraid, assured them again of his unconditional love and ongoing presence, and sent them out as real live witnesses of God’s love in the world.

Former Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town Desmond Tutu, who headed up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission following the end of Apartheid in South Africa in 1994, recently said that the more he thought about it, the title of a book he wrote a forward to entitled *Aliens in the Household of God* (edited by Steve De Gruchy, 1997) should be changed to read, “No longer Aliens in the Household of God.”

The Eucharist is the unique place where, by God’s grace, we are called, gathered into a new community, taught through the work of the Holy Spirit, through others and all our senses, to equally receive and share God’s gifts and then sent to participate in God’s mission. It becomes the pattern for all of Christian life every day,

Come, all is prepared. See and taste, then go and share the Good News that the Lord is good to all. Amen.