

The Rev. Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
12th Sunday after Pentecost/Year A/Proper 16
August 27, 2017
Text: Exodus 1:8-2:10

Back in the day I was an avid Jackson 5 fan. And even with his sometimes peculiar ways, I also loved Michael Jackson. There is one song in particular that he wrote that I thought was particularly powerful. The name of the song is "Heal the World." The lyrics of this song say in part:

There's a place in your heart
And I know that it is love
And this place could be much
Brighter than tomorrow.
And if you really try
You'll find there's no need to cry
In this place you'll feel
There's no hurt or sorrow.
There are ways to get there
If you care enough for the living
Make a little space, make a better place.

Chorus:
Heal the world
Make it a better place
For you and for me and the entire human race
There are people dying
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for
You and for me.

There are many of us who believe that each person has the ability to make a change for good not only for ourselves but for the world in which we live. Our actions do not have to be grandiose because even the smallest of gestures can sometimes move mountains and change the course of chaos and anguish, soften hearts that have hardened, and change attitudes corrupted by hate and ignorance. There are questions for us, the nation and for the world in fact that we must answer or at least give thought to. Why is it that cycles of hate and the struggle for power, and the quest for dominion over others repeat themselves time and again? Is it really possible that we can change the course in which we are headed? Is it possible to make a difference in our lives and subsequently, a difference in the lives of others? Do we care enough for the living? Enough that we can make this world a better place for you and for me and entire human race?

The story from Exodus that we heard this morning is enough to make the hairs on our necks stand on end. In it, a ruthless king sought to exterminate a people had it not been for strong and bodacious women, the first whose names were Shiphrah and Puah.

This king of Egypt had become threatened by the very presence of a people, the Israelites who also lived in the land. He did not know or conveniently forgot the story of how they came to be there; how once upon a time, it was a Hebrew named Joseph who helped save his people and how for years and years the Israelites lived as allies and honored guests in Egypt's land. All the king knew was that now there were too many of them and he sought ways to make their lives miserable. But the thing was, the more he oppressed them the more they multiplied and spread. Seeing that those Hebrews would not be going away, the king devised an even shrewder way to rid Egypt of these lowly and pesky people- he would keep their numbers down through genocide.

Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives, were summoned and ordered to end the life of each newborn male before the child had a chance to take its first breath. "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him: but if it is a girl, she shall live," he ordered them. Now, we can only imagine what Shiphrah and Puah must have thought. It must have been something like: 'Has the king lost his mind? We are not going to have any part of this genocide. We are not going to take the lives of our sons.' They may have feared the king but they feared God more and did not obey the king's command to kill those babies. So they lied to the king, telling him that the Hebrew women were quick to deliver.

But the king was relentless and he ordered every boy child to be thrown into the Nile River. Still the hand of God proved greater when a boy child was born to a certain Levite woman. The baby's mother did what all good mothers do-she cared for him and nursed him, protected him and loved him and vowed that her son would not die under the hand of a tyrant king. So she fashioned a basket and hid her son among the reeds of the Nile where he was found by the daughter of the Pharaoh.

The rest of the story we all know. The boy child grew into the man, Moses, who led God's people from the clutches of Pharaoh and through the desert and the Red Sea and into the Promised Land. All of this came to pass because God had once made a promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

And Michael's lyrics continue:

Chorus:
Heal the world
Make it a better place
For you and for me and the entire human race
There are people dying
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for
You and for me.

If you want to know why
There's a love that cannot lie
Love is strong
It only cares for joyful giving.
If we try we shall see
In this bliss we cannot feel
Fear or dread
We stop existing and start living
Then it feels that always
Love's enough for us growing
Make a better world, make a better world.

Chorus:
Heal the world
Make it a better place
For you and for me and the entire human race.
There are people dying
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for
You and for me.

God's people never really experienced a perfect life. The Jews would still be a people conquered by others and there would be divisions within themselves. But God always stood by the covenant he made with them, loving them and sending prophet after prophet to remind them of his love and the laws by which they could love each other more fully. And in time God sent Jesus to walk among them to show them and us what it means to truly love another human being. To show them and us what compassion, inclusion, service, unity, humility, forgiveness, and kingdom living looks like. "The Messiah, the Son of the living God" brought with him a new world order and his command was simple: "Love one another." Help me to heal the world. Make it a better place. Not just for you. Not just for me. But for the entire human race.

It is some two thousand years later and we have yet to get it right. There is still some group, people, and individual who doesn't know or has conveniently forgotten what Godly living is all about. What it means to treat others as brother

and sister, friend, and neighbor. What it means to treat another as a Child of God. What it means to love one another. Instead, it seems especially of late, we have resorted to doing the unholy dance of taking one step forward and two steps backward in our relationships.

Jesus asked his disciples, “*But who do you say that I am?*” Church, as followers of Christ, we must ask ourselves “Who do we say we are?” If we say that that we belong to him by our baptisms then with God’s help, we are to be counted among those courageous and bodacious enough to change the world. We are to be bold enough to defy the pharaohs of our time and all those who spew hatred and fear, those who espouse death over life, separation over unity. Bold enough to claim all God’s children as our sister and our brother. Neighbor and friend. The apostle Paul reminds us in Romans- “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect...*” And later, “*...we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another...*” We each have the potential to change the world. We really do!

Please turn to page 823 in the Book of Common Prayer (the red book) and pray with me the Prayer for Social Justice there at the bottom of the page. Let us pray.

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart (and especially the hearts of the people of this land), that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“The things we do this week -- our actions, decision, choices -- will, in fact, ripple out with consequences foreseen and unforeseen, for good or for ill, for the health or damage of the world. That question isn't whether, but what...what will we do this week to make a difference in the world. Some of these actions may be big, bold, and courageous. Others may be small, hardly noticeable. And yet they all have the potential to ripple out, affecting countless lives. In today's (first) reading it is Shiphrah and Puah (a Levite mother, a big sister, Pharaoh’s daughter), quietly standing up to a bully and tyrant. Who knows whom it will be today, this week, this year.”** Will it be you? Will it be me?

Heal the world
Make it a better place
For you and for me and the entire human race
There are people dying
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for
You and for me.

We could fly so high
Let our spirits never die
In my heart I feel
You are all my brothers (and sisters)
Create a world with no fear
Together we'll cry happy tears
See the nations turn
Their swords into plowshares
We could really get there
If you cared enough for the living
Make a little space to make a better place.

Chorus:
Heal the world
Make it a better place
For you and for me and the entire human race
There are people dying
If you care enough for the living
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'Heal the World'-music and lyrics by Michael Joe Jackson

**excerpt taken from David Lose, Dear Working Preacher, "The Butterfly Effect", for Sunday, August 14, 2011.