

HOW LONG?

Psalm 62: 1-8

Augsburg College Chapel, 31 January 2011

In the past couple of weeks, I've been in two very different places around the world – in Managua, Nicaragua visiting our Center for Global Education study center there, and here in Cedar-Riverside on campus and in the neighborhood. And in both of these places, I have experienced the central tension of our lives of faith in the world – the tension between the violence and poverty and injustice that marks our daily lives and the hope and compassion and love that we are called to offer in the world that God loves so much.

And I'm angry – angry because the world is not fair, because good people are hurt and cheated and killed, angry because all the best intentions can go awry in a moment of hatred and violence, angry because people don't care, angry because I can't fix it all... How long, O Lord, until you intervene to make it right? How long must your people wait for justice and compassion and love to order our days? How long?

I once heard the remarkable Cornel West, who now teaches at Princeton, rail on for a good hour on all the ills of our world – personal ills, social ills, cosmic ills – and as he closed his analysis, he shouted out, "I am not optimistic, there is no evidence for optimism," and then after a dramatic pause, he continued, "But I have hope." Hope in spite of the evidence.

A member of our Board of Regents with us in Nicaragua said it with equal eloquence when she shared that during our trip she found herself caught between rage and grace, between her own anger at a world in which good people live with the burdens of poverty while we live with more than enough and her deep faith in a gracious God, whose work we glimpsed over and over in the lives of the Nicaraguan people. I am angry, she said, and at the same time surrounded by grace.

How long, O Lord, must we wait for hope and grace to prevail? Surely we believe that God will prevail. The Psalmist tells us so. While the evidence is so clear that we are a fallen people – in pain, separated from our better natures, fragmented from each other – yet we are called to hope and grace. Acknowledging creation's groaning while also believing that the Spirit is sighing on our behalf and in our midst, we find hope in the glimpses of God's reign in our history, in our daily lives. Hope and grace are found in the paradox that Martin Luther proclaimed, the paradox of the cross – a people *simul justus et peccator* – living in the tension of being saved yet still sinful, in the tension of earth's groaning and the mysterious sighing of the Holy Spirit, caught between anger and grace, between despair and hope.

So we cry together, "How long, O Lord?" even as we sing our praises for God's reign breaking in around us in the lives of those God loves so dearly.

It was early Monday evening last week when the first call came from my friend, Tony Wagner, president of Pillsbury United Communities, which includes the Brian Coyle Community Center. There had been another shooting at the Center, a drive-by act of violence injuring two youth standing outside the Center. And all of my memories from two and a half years ago came rushing back. It was on another Monday night, about the same time of the day, when word of Nur Ali's murder on the same site first came. These were not our students – welcome news, surely – but these were our neighbors. And this act of violence so near-by took my breath away for I knew what it would mean for our neighborhood and the fragile calm that had existed.

In those first hours, I was angry again. Angry that someone could perpetrate such a cowardly act in our midst. Angry that all of our efforts to work with our neighbors to keep the peace did not seem to matter – security guards and youth activities and tutoring programs and free meals, all of which our Augsburg community had provided, were not enough. Angry that now we would need to calm the fears of our own community before we could return to work with our neighbors. The evidence was distressing and early reports from the community seemed to indicate that this particular incident could be the beginning of another difficult time for the neighborhood. How long, O Lord, must we wait?

I'm still angry, but I also have renewed hope because of what has transpired in the past week. Faculty and staff and students resolved to get back to work. Vigils of peace and light in the midst of violence and dark. Community leaders gathering to figure out what we can do – not focused on taking revenge, but looking to the future with resolve and courage and suggesting concrete strategies to deploy our common resources to make the entire neighborhood safer. And so we will advocate for more security and for closing a street that has been conducive to drive-by assaults and to building leadership in the neighborhood so that we can solve our own problems. And most important we will link arms with our neighbors in conversation and common purpose, moving forward with hope and grace in the face of tragic and senseless violence.

How long, O Lord? Come now, we pray, for you are our rock and our salvation, you are our fortress, in you we shall not be shaken...

Rosa, the secretary of the 18-member women's cotton-spinning cooperative in Ciudad Sandino, the poverty-stricken domestic refugee resettlement on the outskirts of Managua, Nicaragua, stood to offer her thoughts on the recent work of the cooperative. Her audience – board members and senior administrators from Augsburg in Nicaragua to experience the work of the Center for Global Education in Managua – knew a bit of the story.

The women's cooperative, supported in its work by the Jubilee House community, had worked for years to raise the funds and put in the manual labor to build a cotton-spinning operation. The idea was simple. They would raise the cotton in nearby fields, harvest and dry it, and spin it on machines in their newly built factory into fine threads to be sold on the open market. This was how these women would work together to generate wealth to support their families and

community. It was an inspiring story of dreams and sacrifice and back-breaking work to build a factory and to become self-sustaining.

We had just toured the new factory, built from scratch in less than a year by the women themselves, but instead of the hum of spinning machines and spools of fine thread, what we saw was the women standing over piles of harvested cotton, sorting it—by hand—for imperfections and an ancient spinning machine standing quiet on the edge of their work.

They had raised the capital for the new machines – some of it from Minnesota supporters at the Winds of Peace Foundation – and had entered into a contract with a U.S. company for used machines to be delivered to their factory. They had put a considerable amount of money down, inspected machinery and then waited with great anticipation for the delivery. There were delays and more delays, and finally there was a delivery. But the delivered machines were not as promised. These were decrepit machines, declared unfixable by experts. And there was no response from the company with which they had contracted to offer any satisfaction. So now there were lawsuits aimed at recovering their machines (or their downpayment) so they could continue to pursue the work and the dream.

There were broken hearts all around. It showed in the faces and stories of the cooperative members. Hearts that had sacrificed so much for this dream, only to have it delayed by greed and corruption in a foreign land far from their control. How long, O Lord, we all thought as these brave women recounted this sad story of dreams dashed?

And yet as Rosa rose to speak to our group, it was not the broken hearts we were asked to affirm – it was the spirits of these women, who, despite their obvious dismay and pain and anxiety, continued to show up and do whatever work presented itself and believe in a God whose grace had brought them this far and dream of the days soon when the spinning machines would hum in their factory. It was not some sort of naïve sense that all would work out in the end; it was the faithful assurance of those who knew that the realities of their experience could not define them. Broken hearts, yes – broken spirits, never.

Even as we lament, “How long, O Lord?” we hope and believe in God’s grace because of these faithful women.

Father Fernando Cardenal, the Jesuit priest who led Nicaragua’s literacy efforts in the 1980s and who received an honorary degree from Augsburg last June, joined us near the end of our time in Managua. And he shared once again his compelling stories of serving God’s people in Nicaragua and Central America. He told of his early days as a priest, assigned to Medellin, Columbia, where he lived in a poverty-stricken neighborhood. He learned to love his flock and suffered alongside them in their daily lives, doing what he could do to help. When he was reassigned to his home country of Nicaragua, his parishioners in Medellin lamented his leaving them behind. And he recounted his deep sadness as they met for the last time. All I could do, he said, was to make an oath, to promise them that I would never stop believing in, hoping for

and working to make a reality God's loving intentions for the poor. It was an oath of hope in the midst of despair. And it is an oath he has spent his life keeping.

We are angry, we want justice, we see little evidence for optimism – and yet we too are called to make our oaths of hope, to never stop believing in and working for the reign of love and grace and justice that is God's intention for those he loves so much. These are the sorts of lessons our students in Nicaragua learn every day – lessons of resilience and courage and hard work and faith – lessons of life in one of the most poverty-stricken places in our hemisphere. And these are the sorts of lessons we learn here in Cedar-Riverside – lessons of possibility and justice and hope for love breaking in. Lessons of abundance and promise – not because it means we can fix it and find the immediate personal gratification the world desires, but because it teaches us about what it means to persevere and be patient and help each other and know that God has a plan and this is not how our God intends for God's people to live in the world.

Our hearts may be broken – there is plenty to break our hearts. How long, O Lord, indeed? But our spirits and our hope will never be extinguished. Thanks be to God. Amen.