Having spent years at Hazelden talking with people of many faiths and no faith, I have fielded a fair amount of negativity about religion in general and Christianity in particular but I had a new experience this summer. I did some off-site services; I like to go a little early and check in with the funeral home personnel as well as the family and then find some space to sit and go through the service. Some facilities have loaned me an office for that hour, others do not. At one without an office, I did find what I thought would be a quiet place though it proved otherwise. I was easy to spot in this collar and several people sought me out tell me that since growing up in the church, their beliefs had changed and they no longer thought of themselves as Christians, naming specific practices or doctrines that drove them away or the practice/philosophy which now guides them. I usually find these conversations interesting but timing is everything really. I thought, ‘OK, good talk, I have to go preach the resurrection now, maybe I’ll catch you later.’

At that moment, I could have related to Jeremiah – he represented the unbelievable, he was at the house of the guard for the treason of prophesying defeat of the king so he was under arrest and under siege. A siege is an enemy attack of a walled city, castle or fort; if they could not breach the walls to gain access to the populous, they trapped them within and starved them out over time.

For us, the siege is more ambiguous; it’s driven for good and for ill by the shifting values that come with our rapidly changing lifestyles. Samuel Huntington, a social scientist who died in 2008, well before our current situation, political and otherwise, once said, “Cultural America is under siege.”

There have always been sieges on our bodies like cancer and diabetes; some have referred to depression and other mental illness as a treason of the mind and addiction is surely a siege against body, mind and spirit. And then there are the communal struggles: we have been besieged all summer by orange barrels and cones, not sure whether to call it the construction season or the construction attack. Beyond that there are changes in most sectors of life: education, medicine, insurance, travel – just because you knew the process last year doesn’t mean you’ll know it this year. And, we all have to worry about identity theft, healthy boundaries, privacy and hackers.

The whole world of nutrition and food science has suddenly turned its back on sugar, wheat, and processed foods; I understand that some local food companies are betting that the frenetic pace of life will keep most families hooked on their products even if they are not the most nutritionally sound while others are working to create new products that come closer to what they call “eating clean.” And even if we cook our own food from scratch, there have been more concerns about the safety of our food creating a mild sense of ‘eat at your own risk’.

There is another yearly siege coming soon: woe to anyone who feels their grief or sadness or reality in December when we are all besieged by the demand to make it ‘the most wonderful time of the year. I
would call the Thanksgiving Day media blitz for Black Friday bait not advertising, because it’s you they want to capture. Is it possible after all these years that the Christmas-y songs played on Muzak at the mall has had a Pavlovian effect on spending? And, the very name, Black Friday, puts the onus of responsibility for retailers selling more than the previous year on the shoppers. Don’t fall for it.

Who came up ‘Small Business Saturday’ and ‘Give to the Max’ day? I happen to love shopping locally and whole-heartedly give to non-profits (like the House of Hope) but who created this day by day siege on our credit cards from Thanksgiving to Christmas? How did they become a part of my life? Who gets to decide?

Since Huntington tells us that the siege is not new, I posit that we have been developing a siege mentality for years that is focused on personal survival alternating with opportunities for escape, and clearly for me draws out stored up cynicism, confusion, and anger. The real sadness of an embattled state of mind is the narrowing scope of public awareness and community that has become apparent in this presidential campaign, a mindset lacking in creativity and without hope for the future. I return again to Huntington, “Cultural America is under siege. And as the Soviet experience illustrates, ideology is a weak glue to hold together people otherwise lacking racial, ethnic, and cultural sources of community.” Ideas about or faithfulness to fitness, karma, shopping, happy holidays, Facebook, and Black Friday, will not hold us together.

Journalist Janine de Giovanni wrote about (the siege of) Sarajevo years ago: “Sarajevo was this beautiful city, very cosmopolitan, multiethnic, full of wonderful people, artists and writers and poets and Serbs and Muslims and Croats, and living side by side. And then this medieval siege, and it was a medieval siege, came, and the Bosnian Serbs were on the hills lobbing in rockets and grenades and mortars.” Not only does a siege mentality block hope for the future, she is saying, it moves nations back in time.

There are sweeping changes in everyday life, change coming so rapidly that we do not have time to intentionally develop new norms and values in our common life. Violence is a norm of any siege; God forbid we come to accept this kind of violence as a norm of our communal life.

There is an insert in your bulletin about the Peacemaking and Global Witness offering that we will take next week on World Communion Sunday; it is one of our PCUSA offerings and an opportunity as a connectional church to give both locally and internationally at the same time. The picture today is of a table out in a beautiful wooded place and set for a service of communion; it offers peace while conveying a message of peace. Last week’s insert echoed a poster that is on the bulletin board outside the church office if you want to check it out. It returns us to the siege, by showing that same rustic table but in the middle of a street surrounded by bombed out buildings. Though the framework of the structures still stand, all of them have rubble pouring out of them like fountains – fountains of loss, destruction, and desolation/carelessness and disregard for communal well-being. On the table as with today’s picture, is a gold flagon and chalice and a beautiful, crusty loaf of bread. The contrast is purposely stark; this is not, as Indiana Jones would say, “the cup of a carpenter,” but communion-ware that are very fine and well-crafted works of art. These treasures, along with a clean, crisp, white cloth must have been taken from some safe storage place and out into the woods and then into that danger zone.
The actual locations of the photos were not available, but the hollowed buildings, rubble, and broken glass reminded me of Syria where, according to one report, 430,000 people have died and somewhere around 11 million people have been made homeless.

What is happening in Syria for me represents a will to violence and power unleashed as never before in human history. The will to power in and of itself is not new and has shown itself in many ways over the centuries, but never before with such effective and powerful weapons and technology.

In short, the world is besieged by sin and it’s not all out there; our gospel lesson today reminds us it’s in here in the heart and in here in the mind, and in these our hands and feet. We might cast ourselves into a lower income bracket than the unnamed man, but then we’d miss the point. The sin of the rich man is not strictly being rich; it’s that he didn’t see the needs of the community around him. Wealth protects us from need, it can become like a cocoon and possibly prevent a person from reaching out and forming community; it can fund escapes, pleasures, and greater safety that can take away that feeling of siege. Alternatively, the one who is in need is often going out of their way to looking for help. Anyone in this economy without a job is vulnerable beyond measure and keeping eyes and ears open to network and find openings. Those who are grieving are the most honest witnesses to the coming of the Christ child and the season we call Christmas. Perhaps a part of God’s preference for the poor is their preference for trusting in God.

In the midst of this conversation, we might ask (as someone in every one of our lectionary Bible studies did), why does God care about a real estate transaction in around 567 BCE? What makes Jeremiah’s purchase of land from Hanamal biblical? And the answer is two-fold; first, the purchase of the land is an example of hope. The defeat will come, then there will be exile, but after that, there will be a homecoming from exile; when that happens, there’s a jar with a purchase agreement in it for those who return. It is hope and in the Hebrew tradition, the one who buys the land from the one who needs to sell it is referred to as ‘a redeemer,’ the one who helps, the one who acts on God’s behalf is called ‘a redeemer.’ This real estate transaction shows redemption to future generations through the values of the past.

And the second reason is because God cares about every transaction, every communication, and purchase, God is concerned about the corruption that infuses our systems; God wants good nutrition for everyone, public safety and safety within intimate relationships for everyone, access to education and medicine for everyone, jobs and a living wage … For God, there are no unseen victims!

So in reading this, spending time with this, I have become convinced there is another kind of siege going on. God has mounted up a siege of love on this world from the beginning. We keep stumbling over our need to earn God’s love and tripping over our belief that we have to be worthy of God’s love and until we settle those issues, we rely on our own ingenuity which, unfortunately, includes both building up and blowing up the world.

The real siege mentality to which we are called is the siege of love God has waged against humanity – on behalf of humanity – since the beginning. The story of Lazarus and the unnamed rich man is about our inhumanity to one another and its resulting torment. And the answer both literally and figuratively is to stop fighting. So oddly, I come to the refrain from a song by Dido:
I will go down with this ship
And I won’t put my hands up and surrender
There will be no white flag above my door
I’m in love and always will be.

I come to this because it reflects human action for centuries but it’s all backwards. We fight for everything, even love and all we need to do is surrender.

The mini-sieges of my life do not compare with that of the Syrian refugees – the fear that prevents our giving them help and home though, comes from our siege mentality. Their plight and the violence we see, tell us, as they always have that we cannot surrender, we cannot come out from behind our walls, it’s too risky. But this is not God’s word or God’s peace.

God’s word is community, together we have redeemers. Compassion, vulnerability, gratitude and love are God’s siege. And acting in ways that show God’s love are our most effective way of transmitting this faith to future generations. Next week we will set the table of peace and all are welcome; invite a friend to come and find relief from the siege and meet a community of love.

Amen.