

Inner Conflicts
Pentecost 5A
PPC
5 July 2020

Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

We are hurting. I don't know about you but yesterday's celebration was spent as I usually spend my Saturday's - writing my sermon. Somehow, that felt appropriate to how we are celebrating the 4th of July this year. All of us needed to spend the day alone, staying safe by social distancing, and pondering where we are and how we got here.

"But to what shall I compare this generation?" Jesus asks (11:16). As a woman in ministry I know what it feels like to be singing my song and no one is paying attention. I wonder, though, what it must feel like to spend 400 years in a world of slavery, Jim Crow, and discrimination. African-Americans and people of color have been playing their flutes and wailing and they have not been heard. For those who are critical of the protests that are taking place in our country right now, I think the boiling point has been reached. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed the issue of riots when he said "A riot is the language of the unheard." He went on to explain "riots do not develop out of thin air" but rather there are certain conditions that exist "in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots."

Howard Thurman is a name that is not as well known as Martin Luther King but it is said that the day King was shot, he had in his pocket Thurman's book *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Thurman and I attended the same seminary although at very different times! In the early 20th century Colgate Rochester Divinity School had the practice of accepting into its very white classes, two Black males. And at that time they were all

males. I feel an attachment to this very erudite and spiritual Christian and his writings were included in many of our classes as required reading.

At one point in his life he and his wife traveled to India and there he met Gandhi. In their conversation, Gandhi said to him, "How can you be a Christian after centuries of being treated so badly by white Christians?" That is the power of the story of Jesus - those Black slaves saw through the white preaching and heard the power of the message that Jesus was teaching and preaching.

Howard Thurman's grandmother had been a slave on a big plantation and she told him the story of Sunday mornings on the plantation for the slaves. They would gather together and the master would arrange for a white preacher to preach to them. Whoever the particular preacher happened to be, he would always reference the inauthentic letters of Paul, preaching "Slaves, be obedient to your masters" if you want to go to heaven. On rare occasions, a Black preacher was allowed to speak. Thurman's grandmother remembered those sermons vividly. The Black preacher, his voice thundering, would speak to those slaves as fellow sufferers caught in a system of human servitude. He would remind them of the exodus - how God led the Israelite slaves out of Egypt and into freedom. And then, as he ended, the preacher would look around the crowd at the gathered slaves and looking into the eyes of each of them would roar "You are not slaves! You are children of God!"

The Christian message is a powerful one. Jesus says to us "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." White silence cannot be tolerated any longer. This does not mean we all have to get up and go march. But it does call each of us to consider what small action we can take to work toward equality and justice.

In God's realm, it seems, the things that attract our very human attention are barely noticed. Worse yet, the blessings of God are intentionally hidden from those who are filled with the wisdom and wiles of this world. It is the infants and the naive who somehow understand best the ways of God.

Liberation theology was born out of the experience of the South American priests who ministered to the desperately poor peasants, or *campesinos*, of South and Central America. Those peasants were invited to join the priests, gathered around a campfire, and the priests would read from scripture the parables that Jesus told. After the readings, the campesinos were invited to share their thoughts on what they meant. The response to these stories, as recorded and written down, opened the eyes of the priests to a new way of interpreting scripture. In so many countries to our south, overwhelming injustice and oppression was the way of life. (We might make comparisons to what was happening in our country at the time, but that is a sermon for another day.) Once these conversations began to be made known widely, accusations were hurled at those religious leaders. They were accused of being Marxists and Communists. Liberation theology grew out of this experience with those who it would seem, from today's reading, are the very ones who understand what Jesus was talking about.

Feminist and womanist theology was born out of the experience of women in the church - white and Black - as they told their stories of oppression and injustice.

The discipleship to which Jesus calls us requires us to focus on his message and not some interpretation that claims those who are most "successful" in our culture are the ones whom God favors. Jesus calls us to a discipleship that is transformational.

It is hard, necessary, and sometimes very lonely work. We will be persecuted for our words and actions. Those in power, the status quo, will not be happy with us. We might even be accused of “not being a real Christian.” But, hold the Beatitudes in your heart for the 9th one says “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

Jesus is not addressing the failure of individuals to respond to God’s call, but the society as a whole. How have we, as a nation, missed for so long the song that is so clear? Maybe many of you, like me, watched *Hamilton*, for the first time this weekend. While there has been criticism of the historical inaccuracies of the play, that is not the point. It is not just a musical extravaganza about our past. It is an indictment of how we have failed as a nation to enact those words that “all men are created equal” and that we all have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” It is a commentary on life in these United States now.

The siren song of our culture is so cunning - it lulls us into a space of indifference. As long as we have our IRA’s, and the stock market is successful and we don’t have to worry about life after retirement, we assume that is true for everyone else. We say things like “just pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” We miss the moments that matter. We regularly dance when we ought to mourn for a nation that is broken.

Before we’re too hard on ourselves, we need to hear what Paul is saying. Why is it that the self cannot rescue itself from sin? Paul’s argument is that the self cannot heal the distorted relationship, cannot cure its self-centeredness by yet more self assertion. In other words, skip right by the self-help section of the library or bookstore.

In the film *A Beautiful Mind*, the brilliant but psychotic mathematician, John Nash, assures his psychiatrist that he will deploy his analytic skills to cure his own illness. “You can’t reason your way out of this,” his doctor replies, “because your mind is where the problem is in the first place.” Just so, writes Paul, the self cannot enact its good intentions without outside help and a relationship with God.

In that relationship with God, Jesus says, we will find rest. Rest is not offered to the most powerful and the strongest among us. Rest is offered to those who have been made weary by a world that fails to comprehend the burden of injustice. The yoke is made easy by the heavenly powers that come to the aid of those whose ways this world fails to understand. Any who believe that they are responsible for their own salvation through military might or political power, by fantastic wealth, intellectual prowess or personal magnetism have no need for the comforting arms of Jesus. Jesus will not trouble them with heaven’s gifts. An easy yoke and a light burden will come to those of us who recognize our need for help. To those of us who cannot remain indifferent when we look out into the suffering of this world.

“Take my yoke upon you,” invites Jesus. How can Jesus promise us rest when he asks so much of us? Soul-sick weariness is not the inevitable consequence of hard work. That disease comes to those who labor in vain - those working poor who cannot afford housing even though they are working. Those whose medical bills threaten to overwhelm and defeat them. Those whose work feels unappreciated. Those heroes of this pandemic whose employers lift up with words but refuse to pay a living salary. That is working in the face of futility. The easy yoke means having something to do with a purpose. It’s when you are doing something that summons forth your best and is

motivated by a desire on your part to be doing what you want to be doing. God's kingdom is realized when workers are offered the chance to a fair wage and a sense of meaning in their work. It means work toward a certain future in which all of God's dreams will finally come true.

That's a world I'm looking forward to for the sake of my grandson. A place where we accept the yoke and know the ease of the burden because we have put an end to oppression and injustice. O what a world that would be!

That's what I was taught America could be. It is our duty now to work toward making that place real.

Hear these words from the poet, Langston Hughes.

“Let American Be America Again”
Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

AMEN.