

Sermon for Sunday, June 21, 2020

Wednesday marked 5 years since the murder of 9 black siblings in Christ at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston SC. Last year the ELCA at its Church Wide Assembly passed a resolution that designated June 17<sup>th</sup> as a day of repentance from racism and white supremacy that still pervade our church. It is also held as a day of remembrance and mourning for the loss of Clementa C. Pinckney, Cynthia Marie Graham, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Kibwe Diop Sanders, Daniel L. Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton and Myra Thompson. The church recognizes their deaths as a martyrdom because at the moment of their death, they were living out their Christian faith, studying the scriptures and welcoming a stranger into their midst. That stranger -- a young white man named Dylan Roof -- happens to be a member of our own church -- the ELCA. Meaning that he is baptized into the same body of Christ. Has the same grace poured out on him that God has poured out on all of us.

You see, racism is not about good people and bad people. As though we can heap all of the culpability for the deaths of these 9 precious souls, on one wayward individual. His sin is our sin. And their deaths are wounds to the Body of Christ. Just as are all the deaths of people of color because of systems and powers beyond the control of anyone of us alone.

When we meet the prophet Jeremiah in the reading today, he is done. He feels worn out; burned out by the work of speaking truth to people, when that truth is so hard for them to hear. What strikes me about Jeremiah's role is that he is not sent to speak to strangers but to his own people -- to his family, his friends, his neighbors. They know him. He knows them. And God has sent him to point out their sin and call them back. But they won't hear it. Instead, they try to shame him into silence. They laugh at him; call him names; make light of the real destruction and violence he is trying to get them to see.

A day of repentance is a call to the baptized. To you and to me. To all who have been marked with the cross of Christ forever. A call for us to turn back. To turn away from the sin of racism and to turn toward the transformative possibilities God offers to us. To not ignore the violence and destruction that has been, and continues to be, a heavy burden carried by our siblings of color in this world. To not turn away from the truth in order to protect our self-image as good, well-meaning people. But to turn toward the truth that every person is made in the image of God. So that if anyone who has the breath of God within them is diminished and denied by the systems in our society, faithful people are called to action.

Repentance, this turning around, really can only come first from facing ourselves and the world we live in clearly. You can't repent of something unknown or kept hidden from your awareness. For me, the awakening to racism in our world and my life has been like this over time.

Growing up it is almost as if it were some secret passed on to me through the very fabric of our culture. Sometimes it was passed on through subtle language or hidden messages. Sometimes it is as if it were something absorbed by the culture we live in daily. In the gospel of Matthew for today Jesus isn't speaking of racism, but he is speaking to a culture of wrongful secrecy around sharing the Good News of God. He reminds the disciples that the work of truth-telling will come with costs, including the fear of speaking about what God is up to in the world and experiencing rejection for it. He invites them into the work in spite of that fear saying, "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." I've come to learn and recognize that racism is a part of the systems of our American culture, built into the fabric of our institutions, and this is being uncovered right now more and more for me as I begin to look more clearly and examine my own privilege.

I think most families hold secrets, but secrets have a way of coming out. Secrets don't like to stay hidden and covered up. I wonder if racism in a way has been the family secret of whiteness that because of our systems white-bodied people haven't had to face as clearly as now with all the videos and awareness of inequality happening. It made me reflect back on a childhood experience. I grew up and went to a high school in New Jersey that was mostly white. I thank God for football and athletics. That's where I had most of my connections to other athletes and friends that were black and brown. One day my family gave a ride home to three teammates, all who were black. They told us where they each lived and to my surprise they all lived in one area of town within one or two streets of each other. I noticed other people of color on the block as we dropped them off and I remember thinking that's odd. And I remember comparing the contrast to the block I lived on. And I remember also for some reason feeling and knowing that maybe I shouldn't talk about this discovery. I'm beginning to see and feel the loss in my own life from that experience and wonder how my life has been diminished by a lack of natural contact to a more diverse group of friends and neighbors. I've uncovered many other white-bodied people with a degree of this story, as they reflect on their own lives too.

Two years ago Zayd and I took a trip south from NYC to the Carolinas. We absolutely loved Charleston. It's a charming city with a lot of history, though much of it steeped in racism. It's a city wrestling with its own truth -- that it was one of the primary ports of entry and sale of enslaved human beings. Those brought to our fledgling country from their homelands against their will. We visited the McCleod Plantation, where the tour focused on the people who were 99% of the inhabitants of the plantation -- over 100 enslaved, forced into labor to preserve the livelihood of the 3 or 4 family members who lived in the big house. We took a walking tour with

a long-time white resident of Charleston that took us through the Old Slave Mart Museum – the largest market for the sale of human beings in the US between 1856 and 1863.

But what I remember most about that trip was that we worshipped on Sunday morning at Emanuel AME three years after the massacre of 9 of their dear church members. Zayd really wanted to go. I was hesitant. I didn't want to seem like the white person practicing disaster tourism, visiting a place with such public tragedy just to say I had been there. And if I'm honest it was my white fragility at being one of only 2 or 3 white-bodied people in worship that morning. And knowing, of course, the recent history of a white man perpetrating such violence and hate in that space only a few short years before. It gave me pause. The destruction of that act put the genuine welcome I received from the people of Emanuel in high contrast for me. I wondered if they fear something like that happening again. If every time someone who looked like me or like Dylan Roof walked through the doors on a Sunday morning, they had to fight against that fear to welcome them as Christ would welcome.

That is what faith is really, acting as Christ would in spite of perceived threats and dangers in the world around us. It's right there in Matthew's gospel, in what is a very challenging reading. There is a lot in there that makes us uncomfortable, primarily because it hits directly at our deepest fears, even and especially our death. When it comes to repentance away from racism and toward anti-racism we face a number of fears. The fear that speaking truth might alienate or cause conflict with our family or friends. The fear of shame because we don't know the right words or have done things that have hurt people of color in the past. The fear of saying the wrong thing, so we say nothing.

This Sunday our church and denomination repent of the sin of white supremacy and racial injustice in our lives. All of us are invited to self examination. In this service you will be invited into this through a ritual of repentance where we renounce racism together and all that draws us away from God. Repentance means to turn around, but it's not turning around to complete a circle. It's a turning around to start a new path, to begin to see things in a new light with God's grace and mercy guiding us the whole way. Repentance is something we are called to do through our baptismal calls and promises, a very part of that sacramental moment where we were adopted into the body of Christ. We are inviting you to an open mind and heart to this kind of self examination and repentance, and know that you are never alone. We walk this faith journey with God as our guide and with each other.

The purpose of our faith in Jesus Christ is not to keep the status quo. In fact, our faith is about holding onto hope that the way the world is right now is not the way it ought to be. Through baptism we are made citizens with the saints in the kingdom of God. Which is an amazing and radical good news for us. But it is also challenging to our tendency to want to stay right where we are. Faith is risky and the gospel message like we heard today from Matthew, will stretch us beyond our comfort zones. So, if you are feeling a little unsettled, a little provoked today then you are in the right place and we are right there with you. This call to repentance is the call from God to real transformation, to turn away from sin so we can live into the fullness of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.