

Pentecost 3 – Proper 7 – Year A – 2020

I found out this week that one of my favorite scripture commentators, Karoline Lewis, is going on sabbatical for a year. None of her commentary for a year. Then I read her commentary for this week, and I wondered if the awareness that she was going to be away for a year gave her new courage to speak truth, because her words were very strong, very powerful.

Our scriptures for today are also full of strong words. The prophet Jeremiah is ranting at God. He feels as if he has been seduced by God – conned by God into speaking God’s word, only to find that it’s a word that people do not want to hear. He has been telling them that their kingdom is about to fall...that because of what they’ve done or are doing for political and material gain, they will lose their own land, their identity, their own souls. And even his friends are coming out against him now. Yet as much as he might like to stop speaking, he is compelled. The prophet says, “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”

And our Psalm for today sounds as if it, too, could have been written by Jeremiah.

“Surely, for your sake have I suffered reproach, *
and shame has covered my face.

I have become a stranger to my own kindred, *
an alien to my mother's children.

Zeal for your house has eaten me up; *
the scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me.”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says, in this same vein, “A disciple is not above the teacher... If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household?” The passage we heard this morning follows immediately on what we heard last Sunday, where Jesus calls and sends out the disciples to preach the good news and heal every illness, and then tells them all the horrific things that may – and probably will – happen to them if they *do* really take up that mission. So those first words of the gospel we heard this morning are in some respects the answer to “why” all those horrible things might happen. Why would anyone harm those bringing good news to the poor? Because they harmed Jesus – and the psalmist and the Prophet Jeremiah before him.

The problem, you see, is that God’s way, the values of the kingdom of God, are not the same as the values of the Empire – the ruling powers. And anyone who tries to support and empower those who are marginalized in society becomes a threat to those powers that be.

I said earlier that Karoline Lewis had some strong words this week. Here is part of what she had to say:

“Before the Gospel was good news—good news for the poor in spirit, good news for the marginalized, good news for those overlooked, beaten down, good news for the vulnerable and the discriminated, good news for those who mourn, for the meek, for those persecuted for standing up for righteousness and justice—it was and is very bad news for those whose power banks on chokeholds; whose power takes advantage of anyone it can; whose power is hellbent on keeping power any way it can—and will threaten with force and charge with death to do so.”

Jesus says very uncomfortable things in our passage today. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” My friend and fellow priest Michael Wernick shared an insight that helped me here. He said:

“Jesus didn’t come to hurt anyone... or to create conflict... or discord... or dysfunction in families...but to use the sword to shave away those things which stand in opposition to God’s Truth...”

The result of that shaving away, of course, may be division...

Jesus says, “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me,” and we need to remember that this is well before the crucifixion. No, I don’t think he’s talking about accepting the sufferings of our daily lives here as “taking up our cross.” The cross was well understood at the time of Jesus to be a sign of the Empire’s control and domination over anyone who threatened its power. In our time, imagine the Swastika or a cross burning in someone’s front yard. As Scripture scholar Warren Carter puts it, to take up the cross is to identify with those who threaten the empire. So essentially, Jesus is saying here that anyone who is not willing to identify with those who are considered expendable, not willing to confront that power of Empire with God’s way of love is not worthy of him.

In today’s gospel, Jesus also says, “For nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.”

Many folks have commented on the fact that COVID-19 has revealed injustice that was there all along, just hidden from view: The lack of health care for the poor; the fact that those in service industry jobs – *essential workers* – are most often persons of color and persons at the bottom of the economic ladder whose jobs also put them at highest risk for this virus. But the focus in these past weeks on racial injustice has also brought revelations of much that was covered up in the past.

I didn't know. It was not part of my education, and I went to good schools. I was educated in Catholic schools from 1st grade through my PhD. And I never knew that some slaves were not even told they were free until two years after the fact on June 19th, 1865. I knew nothing of the "Red Summer" of 1919 when the fear that black veterans returning home from World War I might not resume their subservient roles caused massive incidents of violence against African Americans around the US, including 97 lynchings. I took US History in an academically rigorous Catholic high school, and did not see any reference in our textbook to the burning and firebombing of the Greenwood section of Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921, to eradicate black-owned businesses, their homes, and their families. I did not know. I could not possibly understand then that what I was taught – and what I was *not* taught – was part of the design of a system that kept me insulated, and that formed my worldview. – I *did* learn the quote from poet and philosopher George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." We cannot remember what we have never known. If we want the world in which we live to be different than it has been, for us and for all those whose dignity we have promised to respect in our baptismal promises, then we need to first learn, and then remember.

Uncovering that which has been hidden, bringing things into the light of day, is hard, painful work. There are consequences. And we have seen that nowhere more clearly this week, perhaps, than in the announcement that Bishop Wayne has been suspended after acknowledging an extramarital affair. As one of my brother priests said, "it will take time for two dioceses to process all the feelings that all the people feel... it will take time to heal and to discern a holy response... time to mete out a just consequence... because we all sin... and God's love for Dana and Wayne... and their families... and the two dioceses has not abated one iota... and there is unmerited grace and forgiveness... I just pray that we're able to reflect that love and grace and forgiveness... too... "

In this midst of it all – COVID-19, the protests, our growing awareness of how far we have strayed from the way of Jesus, the way of Love, the values of God – I feel sometimes like the psalmist when he cries out, “Save me from the mire; do not let me sink... Let not the torrent of waters wash over me...” – and then I remember the waters of baptism... and I hear Paul’s words to the Romans: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” There can be no resurrection without the death that comes first. As we will hear in our hymn later, “A new creation comes to life and grows as Christ’s new body takes on flesh and blood. The universe restored and whole will sing: Alleluia.”

May it be so.

[Jeremiah 20:7-13](#)
[Psalm 69: 8-11, \(12-17\), 18-20](#)
[Romans 6:1b-11](#)
[Matthew 10:24-39](#)