

Proper 17A

The Rev. Emily Richards

August 30, 2020

*To Learn from the Suffering*

“Do you want to know how I got to be so smart?” That’s the question the mentor of a priest friend asks him at the end of their conversations. “I always come away from our time together with new insights,” my friend remarks. “He opens my eyes to things about myself that I either did not or would not see. He offers me a larger vision of my life. In response to his question, I always smile and say, “Yes, tell me how you got to be so smart,” and he always provides the same answer. It never changes. ‘Suffering,’ he reveals. ‘Michael,’ most everything I’ve learned in life, I have learned through suffering.’” “I don’t like his answer,” my friend reflects, “but I have begun to recognize that he is telling me the truth.”

Suffering is weighing heavily on Jesus’ heart in Matthew’s Gospel reading this morning. He begins to tell those closest to him, whom he had spent three years mentoring, about what was to occur in Jerusalem. And in response, Peter, who moments before had made the most miraculous statement of faith declaring his teacher to be the Messiah, now manages to insert his foot into his mouth. Good ‘ole, Peter. We can always count on him to mess up magnificently. Peter begins to rebuke Jesus, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Our patron saint would have failed his Pastoral Care class because of this dismissive statement. One of the first and most important things you learn as a pastoral caregiver is to refrain from dismissing another’s experience. You must first listen! Not try to fix, disregard or ignore another’s pain. To pause before you speak - not one of Peter’s strong suits.

This particular passage is mostly remembered for what comes next out of Jesus’ mouth. “In the Hebrew tradition, Satan is not God’s adversary, but the adversary of humanity, which is helpful in understanding the nuance of Jesus’ and Peter’s interaction in Matthew 16, writes the Rev’d. Daniel Strandlund. “Just as Satan accused Job before God and sought to make Job’s fidelity incredibly hard, so too is Peter making Jesus’ walk towards his suffering in Jerusalem more difficult. Jesus reacts so strongly to Peter because he loves Peter, and because a few short verses ago he thought Peter was finally starting to

understand what it's all about. Perhaps Peter's closeness to the truth is precisely why Jesus starts telling his disciples how it's *really* going to be, with all the suffering he must undergo. You tell the hardest things to people you trust, after all. Then Peter has to go and reject Jesus' honesty. The rock is now a stumbling block. Jesus is a little more alone with his future than he thought he was."

This summer I have been on a soul-searching journey to understand my whiteness; and awoken to my own complicity in the sin of racism. The journey is just beginning. And I am grateful to the white, black and brown voices whom I have listened to even amid my great discomfort. This journey is informing how I engage with scripture, experiencing the Good News through a new lens. As I encountered Peter's bristling dismissiveness towards Jesus, I recalled the words of Debby Irving in her book, Waking up White. "The fact that our playing field is not level means that life experiences are not merely different, but unequal and unfair. Not understanding this basic reality made me unaware of how people of color experience America, and more than that: it set me up to be skeptical and judgmental when a person of color tried to explain it. I've had people question me when I've tried to convey a painful experience—it's infuriating and alienating. Not being believed, especially about an experience that is painful to begin with, is salt in the wound. It drives a wedge in a relationship, creating mistrust and disrespect. My oblivion acted like a wall, a warning of danger, between us.

The charged barrier that makes crossing the racial line so fraught reminds me of the electric fencing systems people use to train their dogs to stay in the yard. It doesn't take many startling Zaps for the dog to know exactly where the line is and retreat back to safety. For decades, the racially charged Zap, also invisible, sent me scampering back to my comfort zone like a well-trained dog. While I had been conditioned not to see race at all, people of color had been conditioned not to bring up race to white people.

While friends bottled up accumulated racial pain, I maintained a degree of racial oblivion that made me a poor listener for their tender and charged words. Looking back, I can see now that my few friends and colleagues of color had in fact made attempts to share the burden of racism with me, only to have their worst fears realized. As I openly or silently judged and questioned their stories of discrimination with words and body language that said, 'Really? Are you sure she meant it that way?' they must've thought, 'You don't have a clue, do you?' Without knowing terms like 'segregation' and

'avoidance,' I stuck to my white-dominated world and ideas. I did what felt easiest.

I had a revelatory moment this year as I was writing down the word 'ignorance'," Irving continues. "Interesting that the word, which implies a passive state of being, shares the same root with the word 'ignore,' which implies an active choice. Cross-racial relationships are essential to racial healing. The kind of contact and connection they engender is indeed the antidote to the centuries-old pattern of segregation and avoidance. But it doesn't work without understanding and braving the Zap factor, an important step in the process of building trust."

To take up the cross and follow Jesus means that we must not ignore or dismiss the suffering we encounter. Whether it is the suffering of another human being or of our own. It does not mean that we ask Jesus to heap upon us more suffering, or that we relish the burdens we must face. It means we have the courage to listen and to learn from the crosses we and our neighbors must bear. Fifty-seven years ago, on Friday, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached his 'I Have a Dream' speech at the Lincoln Memorial. To commemorate this historic event thousands marched again in Washington this week and King's dream of racial equality and justice echoed in the words of brave, young black Americans. As a white person I have the power to ignore the cries of pain in the protests, marches and speeches. I can choose to dismiss my siblings of color's centuries-old experience of discrimination, oppression and brutality. I can choose not to talk about it or learn from it.

But not so for my friends of color. Not so for the members of our parish who are black and brown skinned. Not so for my own daughter who will have to confront what it means to be a Chinese American in a nation increasingly afraid of and hostile to her culture of origin. "People of color can't escape knowing what life looks like in White Land," suggests Debby Irving. "White life is everywhere. People of color must learn the dominant culture, the white culture, in order to survive." In the protests and the marching our fellow citizens are crying out that they do not want to die anymore. They do not want to simply survive; but be given the same opportunity I and most of you have been given - to secure for themselves and their children and grandchildren the American dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The hope for us I believe lies in the story of our patron Saint. After Jesus calls him his accuser, Peter continues to mess up. With the shadow of Jesus' cross bearing down on him, Peter refuses to learn from his teacher and his words. To save his own skin, he dismisses even knowing him. Benefitting from his own power, he chooses to ignore the truth of Jesus' message. He turns away from the moment when Jesus needs him the most. And yet, by the grace and goodness of God, he becomes one of the greatest witnesses of the resurrection. The stumbling block does become the rock on which our church has been built. In Peter, we realize that it is never too late. It is never too late to learn how to take up our crosses and follow Jesus into the way of love which will always triumph over the way of hate and fear. Amen.

NOTES: A special thank you to the wisdom of these writers and preachers who inspired my sermon for today.

- 1) The Rev'd. Michael K. Marsh's blog, <https://interruptingthesilence.com/>.
- 2) The Rev'd. Daniel Sandlund's blog, <http://www.st-liz.org/father-daniels-blog/>.
- 3) Waking up White by Debby Irving. To learn more about her, go to <https://debbyirving.com/>.