

Luke 6:17-26 Reflection February 13, 2022

Today's gospel lesson is part of one of the longest teaching discourses in the Gospel of Luke. Here, Jesus is portrayed as prophetically teaching about the partial completion of the kingdom here on earth, with its finality to be experienced later. This profound message is markedly different from the similar sermon that the Matthean gospel places "on the mount". While the mountain symbolises a closeness to the Divine, a decree. This teaching is "on the level place". In the Greek Septuagint, the word "level" often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, hunger, annihilation, misery and mourning. It is in this place that Jesus as prophet dares to reveal the ways of the Heavenly Realm in the midst of a world that bears a far greater resemblance to a level place. He, of course, was not the first to do so. The prophets of ancient Israel also spoke of God's desire and intention to heal and restore the level places.

And do we not know well today places of misery and annihilation, of idolatry and mourning, of injustice and suffering?

Church, it is February, and I am so grateful to be in the pulpit with you all and to be in collaboration with the great work of Brent and the choir for BHM. Together, we seek to shine a light on the contributions, on the joy and the suffering, and most importantly, upon the deep beauty of Black people. I have taken on this task willingly and wholeheartedly. But unfortunately, the reality is that for most Black people, both in the church and in other workplaces, even in this month meant to honour and celebrate us, we find ourselves being tokenised and burdened by others to teach when we do not choose to do so. The expectation looms for us to bear the onus of doing the emotional labour for those who refuse to do their own work to understand us.

Last week, with only two days' notice, I was asked by a colleague to show up and be involved in something which I was not asked to participate in the planning of, nor was I given enough consideration to actually offer my own contribution to. The invitation did not sit right with me, and so I declined. I was pressed further after saying no, and it was then that I responded by saying that this did not feel like a genuine request for collaboration with me, nor a compliment to my talents, but rather an attempt to use me as a token of "representation". I invited this colleague to do some reading on the topic and wished them the Peace of Christ and good luck with their service. I wish I could say that the response I received was shocking, sadly though, it was one I have experienced time and time again when having any kind of discussion around race with a white person in which I suggest they might be wrong. I was chastised. I was told that they were doing me a favour by wanting even to recognise BHM at all and that the easier thing for them would be just to ignore it completely because they aren't Black and, thus, have no connection to

it. (I want to stop here and remind the congregation of what I said in an email I wrote to you all just two weeks ago--we ALL have a connection to BHM. Black History *is* Canadian History.) I was told they didn't reach out to me to be criticised and that I didn't need to decline their offer because the offer was withdrawn. And then, when I said that I wished they could have sat with my words for *even one hour* before reacting so defensively; I was told that they were so sad they couldn't even speak. Ah yes, sadness as a weapon. Black people often find ourselves on the receiving end of this. As if our feelings are not hurt. As if we ought to be grateful and fall to our knees for even the laziest of efforts at inclusion. Church, I do not compare this kind of racism to the kind that is violent or that precludes freedom, the kind that was the norm even 35 years ago when someone first referred to me, not by my name, but as a n*gger. What I experience for the ten thousandth time this past week is not the same as that, but it is a relative. It is not benign. And the daily microaggressions take their toll year upon year. The fragility and fluster of those who cannot receive the love of a correction is real and bears real scars upon the spirit. Upon my spirit.

Last week, I was also reminded of something my mum always used to say growing up. It is hard to express that my own white mother was not immune from racism toward her own child. But she wasn't. She, like all of us, was raised in a culture where racism flourished and while her people may not have gone out of their way to be racist--they certainly absorbed and transmitted the zeitgeist. I won't shame her with a list of examples, but there are many and most she would have never interpreted herself as racist. She did fight for me and protect me in many instances from the racism of others that was more overt. I know she would have (and did) vehemently denied being racist. And I can hear that denial now. It was some version of, "I don't care if the person is pink, purple, or blue with green stripes..." On its face, this sounds like a mantra of tolerance and acceptance, but if we take a deeper look, it can be perceived as one of erasure. If I am talking about Black people, who in fact do exist and face racism on a regular basis, and you respond as such, with imaginary people who do not exist and deal with oppression--it does not bind us more tightly together as the unified body of Christ. It erases my lived reality and the lived reality of those who look like me and like my Black family members. For us to be unified in the body, we must truly see one another. We must sit with the discomfort of one another's pain. We must be willing to accept a loving critique, even when it stings, because we are wise enough to know that no correction at all leaves us on our own to figure it out.

Jesus preached this sermon on a level place, and unlike in the gospel of Matthew where he began with nine beatitudes, he offered there four beatitudes and four woes. The word "blessed" here refers to being aware in the present of having a place in the movement towards the Realm. To be "blessed" though, does not mean an absence of struggle. Woe must be expected and

attended to. Indeed, as verses 22-23 indicate, to be in the community moving towards the Realm can invite hatred, exclusion, being reviled, and being defamed as others reject the Realm and all its witnesses. To be blessed is to live through such opposition, aware that the struggle is temporary and that “your reward is great in heaven,” that is, that God will gather the faithful into the Realm. I would go even further here and say that our reward, our spiritual reward anyway, comes when we are willing to lose our privileged life to take up with those who seek justice here on earth.

Jesus blesses the hungry, the weeping, the reviled and excluded, and the poor. Surely those who are not fully seen and fully valued are among these. But must we wait to be blessed? I think we can read the text today smugly satisfied that it will all work out in the end, and all the right pieces will find their right place. But each Sunday, do we not pray “on earth as it is in heaven”? Church, I think we must examine closely how we participate with God in bringing the kin-dom to be here. In this level place. That is the struggle of those who find themselves blessed here on earth. To hunger as deeply for transformation, for a world turned upside down from the one we know, as those who might benefit most from such a world.

The reality is, many Eurocentric congregations in the mainline church are in a peculiar relationship to this passage. Though we might perceive and be aware that today’s world is a fractured “level place”, how many congregations are deeply hungry for (much less weeping for) the level of social transformation implied in the Realm. Only a few contemporary Christians and congregations are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed because of their faithful witness. I am reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s dangerous witness in a time of fascism during the Second World War. Before his witness cost him his life at the hands of the Nazi Party, Bonhoeffer wrote a book in 1937 called *The Cost of Discipleship*. Many of you may be familiar with the term “cheap grace” that comes from these writings. What you may not know is that it was a biracial Black minister, The Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., who was then-pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, who coined the term. It was the Black church that convinced Bonhoeffer that there was anything within the North American church that went beyond self-satisfaction. And I believe that without his experiences at Abyssinian Baptist, he could not have aligned himself with Heaven, with righteousness so completely that he would lose his life to gain his life.

There is a cost to our discipleship. We must come to know that whiteness is more than a skin tone that requires extra sunscreen. Whiteness is systemic and it must be dismantled. Ruth Frankenberg defines whiteness as “a dominant cultural space with enormous political significance, with the purpose to keep others on the margin. ... [W]hite people are not required

to explain to others how 'white' culture works because 'white' culture is the dominant culture that sets the norms. Everybody else is then compared to that norm. ... In times of perceived threat, the normative group may well attempt to reassert its normativity by asserting elements of its cultural practice more explicitly and exclusively" (qtd. in Estable, 1997, 21). Found within this explanation of how whiteness as a system operates is a simple truth about being a white person--there is never a time when based on race, one will have to explain who they are or convince a crowd as to why they matter. And the insistence that that basic human right to matter will never be countered by a flippant, "well, everyone matters."

I think that as a church we can begin to do this work of dismantling the idea of whiteness as normative, and as the center of power by leaning into how profoundly countercultural we actually are as church. What we do and what we believe is no longer what the world, at least this part of the world, understands to be true. And what do we do as church? What is the point of all this? Essentially, we gather folks who have different backgrounds, differing politics, and unique perspectives and gifts around this idea that if we worship God together, do ritual together, and strive toward the lofty goal of being forgiving, justice-seeking human beings we can make something new, something that is greater than the sum of its parts. We believe that we can, by grace and Spirit, actually become the body of the living Christ. That we can be part of an enacting within the world a reality where the poor, the weeping, and the hated are the ones who are favoured. That is weird, folks. It would behoove us, I think, to grab onto how strange and unusual this is. Perhaps if we live this way, embracing this strangeness, we can glimpse even a little better at what it means to be the Other. We do this by establishing a posture of humility and curiosity. We must listen more than we speak. We must embrace the fact that by the standard of today's world, we, as Christians are all Other. No longer are we the standard of neutrality and rightness. Of course, our racial, gender, and economic privilege must be unpacked. That is hard, deep, and personal work that cannot be avoided. Disciples of Jesus are asked to be willing to examine how we exclude others from kin-dom by our complicity in harmful systems. Still, the deeper ask, the one that comes with all of this supreme blessing and exalted bliss, is to be willing to mourn with those who have been done mourning. For the folks who come into this world and stand upon its level places bellowing and moaning the blues. Because the world in which our Christian identity aligns us with power, that world is gone. The cost of our discipleship in this time is to hunger for justice as deeply as those who have never known that power to begin with. May we be willing to pay that cost for the coming of the kin-dom. Amen.