

Sermon title: “**The Paradox of Discipleship**” © Ellen Clark Clémot - 2019

Scripture text: Luke 6:17-26

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Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – February 17, 2019 - Black History month.

Theme: The paradox of blessings as woes, and woes as blessings, is a wake-up call to our responsibilities to make God’s world right – using our privileges to make progress against racism.

Gracious God, Grant us the wisdom and courage to be your disciples, even in the face of social resistance, even in the face of our fears. Embolden us to love our neighbors, to open our hearts and minds to people who look different from us, knowing that we all belong to you in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer, Amen.

I remember so clearly the experience of being a young parent in New York City facing the challenge of school choices as we tried to navigate options and our desire to raise our children in a French-speaking environment. We were living on 58th street and 2nd avenue and sent our kids to PS 59 – the school for so many UN families as well as those of us living around the block. The school was an eclectic, racial mix and our children’s first school friends reflected that rainbow.

And yet we opted to apply to the nearby French school. Perhaps it was an omen when we were rejected on the grounds that my husband and I were a “mixed” couple. “How are we mixed?” I remember asking a Lebanese friend who had visited the school with me and knew that my husband and I are both white, both Christian, and that both our children were born in France.

“Well, you are an American,” she tried to explain tactfully, “and you did ask way too many questions about the quality of the English Department.” I was guilty as charged, on both counts.

It would take another year or so before I could redeem myself with the French admissions committee and our children were enrolled. On the first day of first grade, I escorted my oldest daughter to her classroom. We were met by a sea of white faces, all well-groomed children wearing their smart Lycée uniforms. At home that night, my daughter, whose friends from PS59 were diverse, asked me with concern about her new school: “Where are all the brown children, Mom?” She was only six. And yet, her world had changed. She could sense, even then, that something was terribly wrong.

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This morning we meet Jesus on the level plain. He had just spent the night praying on a mountaintop. It was there that he called all his disciples to him – his many followers. He chose twelve from among them, calling them his “apostles” – from the Greek word *apostolos*, meaning “one sent out with a calling.”

Given the region and the culture, the twelve apostles were all men, no doubt brown-eyed, brown-skinned, poor fisherman and common folks doing their best to get by, looking for a word of hope, and mercy, and justice to live by.

Only then, with his apostles chosen, did Jesus come down and stand on a level place, eye-to-eye with a great crowd of his many followers - more disciples, and the multitudes of people who simply came to be cured by him. Jesus is known throughout the region now. He’s the real thing – and people everywhere are beginning to notice.... But maybe for the wrong reasons.

Jesus has come down from the mountaintop to “speak plain,” as the black church would say – telling the “honest truth” - preaching from the plain, to a whole mass of followers. And we are listening in as disciples ourselves, as followers of Jesus who are still finding our way. His words are troubling. His Sermon on the Plain, as we call it (to distinguish it from the more famous, and easier to digest Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel) presents the grim challenge of discipleship – the discomfoting, sometimes life-threatening, demands of Christian living.

And it evokes a question for all of us disciples this morning - the same question that must have occurred to Christ’s disciples back then: Do we have the courage to follow Jesus? Do we have what it takes to follow Christ’s teachings - to speak up for the rights of the hungry, the poor, the grieving, and the oppressed, in a world of scoffers?

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Peter Marty, the publisher of the theologically liberal *Christian Century* magazine and senior pastor in a midwestern Lutheran Church, describes a recent college symposium where he was invited to moderate a panel of conservative lobbyists on the topic of political strategies for bending the “long arc of the moral universe towards justice.” But Marty was surprised to find that by error, he was placed as a speaker on the panel itself – not as the moderator, and was introduced as a conservative thinker – a title he was not accustomed to having.

When the other panelists began to credit their own hard work for their corporate successes, leaving other possible factors entirely out of the picture, Marty grew uncomfortable. When the panelists described America’s poor as unwilling to do what it takes to work hard, be motivated, and assume responsibility, he felt that he was drowning. Yet he chose not to engage the other panelists head-on.

When it was his turn to speak, he chose to paraphrase the work of Christian theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man who died for following Christ’s teaching in opposing Hitler during World War II. Bonhoeffer had taught that a blessing does not grant privileged status, but rather it confers responsibility. “God blesses our lives for the benefit of others, not for their exclusion,” Marty concluded, with no small amount of courage, in speaking to the conservative, secular crowd.

Marty’s bold truth-telling was not without his own self-awareness, and a confession. He explained:

It is peculiar how – to use an old adage – those of us lucky enough to be born on third base tend to assume that we landed there because our talent and hard work allowed us to hit a triple. The fact that I was raised in an upper-middle class American suburb of quiet, tree-lined streets and not born into fifth generation poverty in a New Delhi slum is not inconsequential to who I am.”¹

Who we are matters: whether we are poor or wealthy, hungry or satisfied, privileged or oppressed. Because if what Bonhoeffer suggests, and Marty echoes, is correct, then we need to understand where we are coming from in order to take up the responsibility that life’s opportunities, and hard-knocks, has given us.

As Christian disciples we have the responsibility to build up God’s Kingdom, here and now, on this earth, today. It means we must address the problems that confront our society that demean God’s creation.

¹ Peter W. Marty, “From the Publisher,” *The Christian Century*, February 13, 2019, Vol. 136, No. 4, p. 3.

It means protecting our planet, speaking out and speaking up against climate change and promoting practices and lobbying for governmental policies that will help us get there.

And it means confronting racism, dismantling it brick by brick, or perhaps first understanding it, as the systemic, societally pervasive virus that it has become.

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In an evocative article adapted from her book called *Parenting Forward: How to Raise Children with Justice, Mercy, and Kindness*, Cindy Wang Brandt addresses the question of teaching children about racism. Helping us understand about critical race theory, Brandt writes that:

racism isn't color-consciousness, nor is it personal prejudice against people of color. ...It is a radicalized systemic and structural system that organizes the society. When we use the term "systemic racism," we are referring to the way an entire society is structured to benefit the dominant cultural group at the expense of another... Therefore, any children born with white skin into white families participate in a system that affords them opportunities at the expense of people of color.²

But hope lies in the work of parents to dismantle racism in their own families first of all. We can start with language – teaching that the way we talk about other people should be with language that treats people fairly. Brandt encourages us to choose children's books that celebrate diversity and show characters featuring children of color as main characters. And she encourages social activism as a response to racism – for parents and children.

I raise these race studies this morning because part of Christ's message to us, that first resonated from the Palestinian plains, is our responsibility to defend the oppressed and restore justice to God's beloved community. This would include loving our neighbors of diverse races, as we do ourselves.

And I also raise race studies this morning in observance of Black History month – a celebration that might be easy for a white person to ignore, or overlook, especially on a Sunday morning in a predominantly white church with a white preacher. But I want to lift up Black History month today, for two specific reasons: one that affects me as a minister, and the other as a participant in the community here at LAC.

First, as a minister in service to God's people, I acknowledge, like Peter Marty, my many blessings, and my responsibilities that flow from them - to serve God by preaching for social justice and seeking it out.

As a white minister all too easily led into the relative safety of inaction, I celebrate Black History month because it helps me remember our black heroes, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I remember the words King wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham City Jail. He was writing in response to eight, white clergymen in Birmingham, Alabama, including one rabbi, who had published an open letter earlier in January 1963 that called on King to stop agitating for civil rights. They wanted him to "go slow" and let the battle for integration continue in local and federal courts – not in the streets. They warned King that his method of non-violent resistance marches would have the effect of inciting civil disturbances. They were not alone with these views. But they were clergy – called to follow God, not the federal court system. These white clergymen were advocating for peace, through inaction. They called themselves liberal, but they were unwilling to stir up the status quo, unwilling to hear Christ's sermon on the Plain that turns

² Cindy Wang Brandt, "Teaching Children about Racism," *The Christian Century*, Op. Cit., p. 26.

the world upside down. They were, I am ashamed to say, a lot like me at times – reluctant to speak out against wrong and stand up for what is right when it ruffles feathers, or risks arrest.

When King wrote his letter of response to the liberal white clergymen, it was April of that year and he had just been arrested in Birmingham for participating in civil rights demonstrations. When I first studied the letter, my seminary professor said to my class: “every one of you should keep this letter on your bedside table. It should always be in easy reach. For the call of Christ on our lives is not to sit idly by, not to protect our positions and our pensions and our comfortable titles, but it is to take risks and speak up for what is right.”³

Martin Luther King, Jr. did just that – and he spoke the truth when he wrote in his letter: “the greatest stumbling block to black freedoms may well be the “white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice.” (295). He wrote that he lamented that the clergymen dismissed him as an “extremist,” until he remembered that “Jesus was an extremist in love, that Amos was an extremist for justice, that Paul was extremist for the gospel,” and more ... concluding that the question becomes “not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremist we will be.” (297-298).⁴

Most difficult to hear of all was King expressing his disappointment with the white church and its leadership for being “more cautious than courageous, remaining silent behind the anaesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.” (299). These are sobering words that hit too close to the mark. And they make all the more clear the blessings and woes that confront us in our community, and how our comforts can lull us to sleep.

There is another reason to remember Black History month this morning. Simply this: the fight for racial justice in our country is far from over. And today, our church community has an opportunity to act: first by learning, and then by doing, as disciples – students of Jesus Christ.

At the end of this month, the Session, our governing body, will meet to discuss offering our building space to host regular meetings of a local community group called C.U.R.E. which stands for the “Coalition for Undoing Racism through Education.” C.U.R.E. is an awareness-based education and justice advocacy group. It organizes public events and small gatherings in Larchmont and Mamaroneck to explore and discuss institutional racism with the goal of building a more equitable world. It’s an important first step. And it’s all about education.

With Session approval, C.U.R.E. gatherings would have a regular place to meet, and a safe space for the discussions around race, bias and the ways we can teach our children to love their neighbors, however they appear. And since, as Presbyterians, we are a grassroots, democratic organization, any of you can seek out your Ruling Elders during coffee hour and share your thoughts with them on the matter of supporting C.U.R.E. It just might be our collective first step at “bending the long moral arc” a little closer towards justice than it might otherwise go.

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The sermon on the plain is where Jesus leveled with his disciples, and that means all of us. He explained the harsh reality that following him means experiencing the world turned on its head. It’s the paradox of discipleship. The poor shall be blessed. Woe to the rest of us - unless we take up our “privileges” as responsibilities - and do the right thing.

Amen.

³ Memorable words of my friend and Religion and Society Professor W. Stacy Johnson, J.D., PhD., Princeton Theological Seminary, Spring 2011.

⁴ References to Dr. King’s “Letter from A Birmingham City Jail” as reprinted in *A Testament of Hope, The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, James M. Washington, ed. (New York, NY: Harper One, 1986).