

The Voice of the Risen Victim

Matthew 28: 16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

A friend sent me a picture about how pastors might consider conducting a baptism while social distancing these days. It is a picture of a parent holding a child in her baptismal gown out at arm's length. The pastor is standing there in a collar, six feet away taking careful aim at the child with a super soaker. It is a hilariously fun image. But for a moment, shift the perspective, considering what baptism might mean if you were the child! What if your induction into God's loving community was through someone taking aim at you from a distance with a water rifle? What kind of therapy might we need to recover from that one!? And, what kind of symbolic distorted relationship with God might that represent?

When Jesus tells his disciples to go and make more disciples, I really don't think his goal was to coerce the whole world into worshiping him. I am pretty sure he wasn't commanding them to scare people into submission by using the threat of going to hell as leverage. No. Jesus is telling his disciples to build a grassroots movement by drawing others into the life of God based on his teachings about love and justice; and he tells them to do so in the name of a communal relationship modeled after the relationship God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit have. In other words, based on the foundation of equality, self-giving love, generosity, and interconnected wholeness.

So this week as our attention has been on protests; as we've been feeling the gut-wrenching raw reality of racism in our country, I began to wonder what this life of God we are being drawn into looks like, and what some of the teachings Jesus was referring to might sound like to our ears. Here are a few:

“You have to lose your life, if you want to find it. What good is having all the white privilege in the world if it costs you your soul?”

Or how about, “If anyone wishes to be one of my disciples, let them deny systemic injustice, pick up their cross and their picket signs, and follow me.”

Then there is this one: “You can't serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. *You cannot serve both God and White Supremacy.*” (This one I stole from my brother-in-law.)

You see, this command to baptize others based on the foundation of what Jesus taught comes to us as a resurrection story—when we encounter the Risen Victim. Which means when Jesus tells his disciples to go and baptize, he is telling them to build a new coalition who find themselves

drawn into the life of God; not from the perspective of the system's privileged, but from the perspective of the system's victims.

At our session meeting last weekend—over zoom of course!—we all shared how we are processing the current events. What our leaders said over and over again was that this time feels different. What do you think, does this time feel different?

Personally, I have been relieved to see people on all sides of the political aisle waking up to systemic racism. The other day when our kids were streaming videos, there it was on top of the screen, “Black Lives Matter!” Books about anti-racism have sold out on Amazon. Police officers—in Winston and other places—are asking the protesters, “What can we do to support you?” (Of course, we also the opposite happening in other areas.) The mayor of Washington D.C. had “Black Lives Matter” painted on the street. Rural counties are organizing demonstrations, and people internationally are protesting police brutality. All nations are joining in on the movement. A collective consciousness is being stirred awake. And I think what we white folk have to own with humility is that what feels different this time, isn't within African American community, but within the white community. It is us who are finally being drawn into a new perspective. It is us who are, in a sense, being immersed into a new way of seeing—not from the perspective of the privileged, but from the perspective of our society's victims.

At a protest in downtown Winston on Wednesday, we marched liturgically. We started in front of city hall chanting, then stopped at the Hall of Justice. Then we paused at our downtown detention center where many black and brown neighbors are serving time for petty crimes.

Now if you've ever been outside the detention center building, you would know there are narrow horizontal windows that each prison cell has to let the natural light in. We stopped on each side of the building chanting, “Black Lives Matter!” and, “We love you, we see you.” In response, the inmates knocked on the windows in support. They made hearts symbols with their hands and held up the sign for love. And when we got to the final side of the building, we were asked by the organizers to get on the ground, face-down on our stomachs, placing our hands behind our backs. We stayed in this position for eight minutes and fifty-five seconds—the amount of time George Floyd was on the ground with a police officer's knee on his neck. Toward the end of the time someone screamed out, “I can't breathe!” and then someone else, “I can't breathe!” and like a ripple, everyone started saying it at different times in a cacophony of voices. Then came the outpouring of sobs; the weight of the horrific violence felt and internalized inside of our bodies.

Now, I want to share this experience with you because there was something washing over me. I could feel myself being drawn deeper into a new way of seeing and being in the world. Not from the perspective of one who was ordained, or as one whose job it was to baptize, or even as one who benefited from the system. But from the perspective of one who was on the ground, face down and crying out, “I can't breathe!”

Three years ago, our church started a resolution for Black Lives Matter that spread throughout our presbytery. We hung a banner. Actually, we hung two banners. We made some commitments to organizations led by people of color. We have done some internal work to recognize our whiteness in ourselves and our institutions. Today something is washing over our world again,

drawing us further into the life of God if we let it. I believe it is the voice of the Risen Victim. Encouraging us by saying, “Keep going. You can do this. Remember, I am with you all the way to the end.”

Keep at it, Trinity. In the name of Communal Equality, Self-giving Love, Generosity, and Interconnected Wholeness. Amen.