

Again and Again We are Called to Listen

It was the spring of 1995. I was in Adrian to be interviewed by the Board of Ordained Ministry hoping to be approved for ordination as an elder in the United Methodist Church. There is a lot of paperwork you need to turn in. You are questioned on theology and practical ministry. When you turn your paperwork in, a team of 7 clergy read your paperwork and you get it back with either a satisfactory or unsatisfactory mark.

When I received mine back, I had received an unsatisfactory mark for one of my questions which was, "Explain a time when you experienced racism." I wrote about two times when my naïve self felt like I had experienced racism. The first was when I was a youth director at the Troy Korean church and I had taken the youth to Cedar Point and I heard people making fun of them as a group and pointing fingers at them. The second time was when I approached a black ordained elder in the church. He was wearing a beautiful African stole. I complimented him and said I would like one and he said, "You can't wear one, you have to be born Black."

Remember this was my naïve self that was sharing these stories. I felt like I really understood the question and felt my answers were well stated. But I received an unsatisfactory. Not only did I receive an unsatisfactory, I received the unsatisfactory from one of my heroes in the faith, someone by the name of Rev. Rowe.

I had seen him fight for justice and stand with those on the margins and I wanted to be just like him. And yet, here was an unsatisfactory mark from him. I was a little worried about it as we went to lunch.

We could sit wherever we wanted and of course, Rev. Rowe sat right across from me and my husband, Gary. So I thought I would be a smart ass, and begin to question him on why he had given me an unsatisfactory mark. He started off by trying to explain the difference between prejudice and racism. Racism is systemic. Racism is about power.

I argued my point over and over and really wasn't listening to him. I wanted him to see my point without listening to his knowledge. The whole time Gary was elbowing me and kicking me under the table to make me stop talking. Rev. Rowe was patient, but continued to try to educate this naïve white girl. I just would not listen.

Hard truths are hard to listen to. Hard truths trouble the waters of our understanding and challenge notions of what is real. In our scripture for today, Peter, when he heard Jesus talking about his agonizing death and resurrection must have made no sense. Just before this, he had named Jesus "Messiah".

How could Jesus talk like this? Peter wants to quiet Jesus. Jesus instead quiets him.

And then we move into the transfiguration which Anne preached about two weeks ago. Now this is what Peter would call a messianic moment and he wants to build altars to mark the event.

And again Peter is told to Listen.

The Lenten journey calls us to examine the things we've invested our hearts in. How important is comfort to us? Would we be willing to listen to hard truths and be changed by them even if it proved to be difficult? Or are we committed to the status quo, because, though it may be imperfect, it's at least familiar.

You have probably heard the expression, "the elephant in the room." This simple expression, "the elephant in the room" addresses our tendency to avoid the obvious. The plain fact that is that there are some realities that are so painful and difficult that we go to great lengths to deny their importance.

One thing I like about Jesus is that he has this ability to name the Elephant in the room. Jesus isn't in the wilderness this week but he is being tempted nevertheless. This time by one of his own followers, his disciple Peter, is the tempter, encouraging Jesus to take the easy way.

Jesus asked his followers if they understood who he is. After most of the disciples acted as if they didn't understand the question, Peter blurted out, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Beloved of the Living God."

So Jesus decided it was time to explain what it would mean for him to challenge the great powers of their time...the religious establishment and the Roman governmental authority. Jesus spoke to his disciples about confrontation, resistance, crucifixion and death.

This is not what Peter and the disciples wanted to hear. When Peter heard Jesus' prediction of what would occur in the future, his response was immediate: No Jesus. No suffering and death. What are you thinking? You are the Messiah – the promised deliverer of God's people!

We are in the season of Lent and I believe it is appropriate that we are also celebrating Black History Month. The church in the United States has yet to effectively proclaim the Gospel in a manner that denounces racism in both its personal and its structure manifestations. We are still in need of repentance and conversion.

Racism against black people remains in the forefront of our society. We saw it in Charlottesville a few years ago, and we saw it at the capital on January 6. The

very fact that white supremacists and Neo-Nazi's continue to exist in our society is extremely disconcerting, but even more worrisome is that they feel empowered to come out of the shadows.

These examples bring back the ideas of lynchings, segregation and slavery and they remind us, as William Faulker noted, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

These grotesque acts also distract us from less obvious, structural forms of racism, like we find in our economic arrangements and in our justice, immigration and education systems what demand our attention.

Heinous acts allow white people like me to define racism only in terms of its ugliest manifestations and therefore say to myself "I'm not racist." Yet, being a member of a majority race that sometimes benefits from structures of oppression, I cannot be complacent. Being against racism demands solidarity. I am compelled to work for racial justice as if I was the one being oppressed. This is the meaning of the second half of the Great Commandment after all "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Let's look at our art today, entitled Transfiguration by Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman



She says this about her art:

I'm not a good listener. In the midst of our national reckoning around structural racism and white supremacy in the U.S., I've found that I've done a terrible job of listening to my Black and Brown siblings. I constantly have to resist the urge to explain myself, to be seen as good and antiracist. I try saying all the right things, I do performative acts of allyship and quite honestly, I need to be quiet and listen. I need to be ready to accept criticism, and instead of trying to prove anything, I need to gain awareness of my internalized biases and learned racist tendencies and do the difficult work of unlearning them in every moment. "Get behind me, Satan."

Here we find Peter stepping in and saying all the right things, rejecting the notion that Christ must suffer and die; but in the end, he's not listening to Jesus. It seems Peter's rejection of this narrative reflects his fear of the suffering he also might face in following Jesus. "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Six days later, the disciples are called to listen once again. In this image, I zoomed out to focus on the moment of Transfiguration. Jesus shines like a beacon atop the high mountain while the former prophets appear. The disciples are terrified but also want to live this moment forever, making the glory-filled rock face their home.

At once the cloud descends, obscuring things further and God's voice echoes down, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" It's almost as though Jesus had exhausted all efforts to get the disciples to listen and God had to spectacularly reiterate the importance of listening. I think it's important to note that following God's words, all the disciples could see was Jesus.

This is my beloved, listen to him. When it comes to racial equality and respect for the human dignity of all persons, we need a socio-cultural transfiguration, but we have not been listening. The Church must do better. United Methodists must do better.

I close with a poem by Rev. Sarah Are entitled "Truth that Ricochets"

I went to a lecture once-
An interfaith conversation with
interfaith leaders.
Whispers bounded off the church's
tile floors
as people shuffled into place,
Carrying hope alongside assumptions-

mixed into pockets like loose change.
About halfway through the evening,
A young woman in a blue hijab
began speaking.
She was the youngest person on the panel,
seated far to the left. You might almost
miss her.
If you weren't paying attention.
But not here, not when she spoke.

In quiet determination she told us of fear
and persecution.
She told us of hatred and racial slurs,
Thrown at her people from car windows
like bombs.
It was a truth I did not know.
And that truth ricocheted like sunlight
through the cathedral windows,
touching almost everyone that day.

Then a man in the back, who could
have been me –
who has been me –
approached the microphone and said,
“Your people are persecuted. You live in
fear. You are battered by hate.
If that is true, then why am I just now
hearing about it?
Why is your story not on the news?”
Why have you not spoken up about it?”

And the air was still, partly because we held
our breath in anticipation.
And partly because the spirit slows her
dance when we stand at the edge of truth.

The woman in the blue hijab leaned into
the microphone.
And whispered with a quiet strength that
can only come from years of practice.

“We are screaming.”

If there is one truth in my life
that unfolds again and again,
it is the need to listen.

For again and again, I will try,
with good intentions,
to act and walk with love.
But again and again, I will make mistakes.
Again and again, I will say the wrong thing.
Again and again, they will call me Peter,
And again and again, they will be right.

So again and again,
I will pray for a truth that ricochets,
For ears that will listen
And for space to hold truth.

If people are screaming,
and to be clear, - people are screaming.
I do not want to miss it.

Amen.