



SUNDAY SERMON

Opening the Blinds

The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 12, verses 49-56

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

It was about two in the morning in Queens, New York in 1964. The young woman drove her red Fiat home from the bar where she worked. She parked in a lot near to her apartment building and began to walk the two blocks home. On her way to the front door, she was attacked and left bleeding. Her cries for help went unanswered. The attacker left her, drove around the block, then came back and attacked her again. A second time her cries for help went unanswered. And she died later that night. 38 residents of the building heard the cries and did nothing. Their windows were closed. Their blinds were down. They didn't want to get involved. This wasn't their problem. So goes the traditional recounting of the murder of Kitty Genovese. Perhaps many of you studied this case in high school or college as an example of the "bystander effect." How easy it seemed to the witnesses and the neighbors to keep their blinds down, to drown out the cries, to think someone else would do something and so they didn't have to. Windows closed, blinds down. They could not, would not see.

What does Jesus say to these bystanders? Hypocrites! Hypocrites. He says in today's Gospel, "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" Jesus is saying—hey, it's easy to talk about the weather—we know that about that, don't we?—but Jesus says, you aren't so good at seeing what's going on in front of your eyes. You willfully ignore the pain and suffering in front of you, and that makes you hypocrites, when you fail to interpret the present time.

And what is this present time that Jesus is talking about? Well, Luke is often called our social justice Gospel. For the Jesus in Luke, the present time is a time of pain and suffering and oppression and powerlessness. And so in Luke we hear Mary's Magnificat, in which she sings that the powerful will be brought down and the lowly lifted up. In Luke Jesus preaches against the Pharisees who love money and against the scribes who cheat the poor. Jesus wants the crowd to understand that the powerful hold their power at the expense of those who are powerless, who are expendable. The people can't see, won't see this reality. Their blinds are down. Their windows are closed.

Continued

DATE

The Thirteenth Sunday
after Pentecost
Sun., August 14, 2016

PREACHER

Serena Sides,
Candidate for Holy Orders

READINGS

Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9, 43
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

I don't think I'm alone in saying that I've had my blinds down for too long on the state of race relations in the U.S. This summer many of us were forced to raise our blinds and open our windows to understand how bad things really are. The white on black violence and black on white violence brought home to me the deeper, more treacherous social and economic ills, the deep fissures and inequities in our country. It made me—and others I know—understand the ease with which many of us construct our lives, with our college degrees and graduate degrees, our financial resources that enable us to live in Tenleytown, Bethesda, Silver Spring, our support structures of friends from college, family we love, neighbors we trust, and our safety so that we live without bars on our windows and our kids can walk to their friends' houses and school. For many of us, what we have known intellectually, we began to feel emotionally. And it wasn't possible any longer sit to inside behind closed blinds as a bystander.

But what does it look like to start opening the blinds on race? Maybe it is realizing that we know we can wave and smile at police officers and they will wave back. We trust they know we have good intentions and we trust that they have good intentions. But, after this summer, many of us now realize that most black Americans don't enjoy this same sureness, this same trust. Maybe it is realizing that African American parents feel they have to tell their young kids not to run in and out of stores like CVS or Best Buy or on the sidewalks in case the store manager thinks they stole something; and not to congregate on street corners in case a passerby thinks they're a threat. These are things that most white parents don't think about.

Maybe opening our blinds on race is seeing the reality that is homelessness in DC, where hundreds of African American families live in places like DC General in a barren corner of Southeast DC. DC General used to be a hospital and the families live in unsafe and unsanitary conditions, with children sharing bathrooms with strangers, and rooms with vermin and bedbugs. DC General is adjacent to DC Jail, when I drove by recently, I couldn't tell which was the jail and which was the shelter until I saw the meager playground amid the weeds and brown dirt. I couldn't keep my blinds down any more on the lives of these black children.

But if all we do is finally see the pain and suffering and oppression that is going on in front of our eyes, we still have our blinds down. When Jesus talks of the present time, he speaks not just of the corruption of the scribes and Pharisees but of his own work. Jesus is talking about creating the kingdom of God in the present time. In Luke, Jesus doesn't just criticize the status quo, he seeks to change it, to overturn it. Jesus heals lepers and dines with sinners. He proclaims the good news to the poor, the blind, the captives, and the oppressed. Amid the pain and suffering, Jesus's divine activity unfolds and he wants the people to see it too.

And this divine activity, this creation of the kingdom of God in the present time, didn't stop with the death of Jesus. The author of Luke is also the author of Acts of the Apostles, which describes the birth of the church. The church is called to continue the work of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, to change the status quo as Jesus did. And that church is us. That's us. So when Jesus says, "You hypocrites! Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" Jesus is talking to the crowds not just about seeing the reality, but about doing something to change it. It's important, but not enough, to pull up the blinds and open the windows. Jesus was telling the crowds—and telling us—to step out of the house, out of the apartment building, out of the church and engage. To be part of the divine activity to change the status quo.

You know, the traditional telling of the Kitty Genovese story is wrong. There weren't 38 people willfully ignoring her cries for help. People did call the police, people did yell at the attacker to stop. Her neighbor cradled her head in her hands as she was dying. They chose to see and to act. This is divine action. When it comes to race relations, it is when we choose to see and when we choose to act as individuals and as churches that we are engaging in divine activity. We can start small, changing our personal status quo—being intentional about conversations with colleagues and neighbors of all races (and if we are white, especially with African Americans), sharing our personal histories; thinking about ways to make sure our children play with and study in truly multicultural environments; supporting efforts to close DC General and relocate homeless families to acceptable shelters.

And our churches are starting to do the same, to take steps to change the status quo, to stop being bystanders. St. Columba's is starting a book group reading a book on racial reconciliation; the Diocese of Georgia's training session on race issues were once ignored but are now in high demand; and the Diocese of Virginia brings mostly black and mostly white churches together for joint service projects. We have a choice to stop being bystanders and start being part of divine activity. To pull the blinds up, open the windows and see the reality around us, but even more so, to walk out of our houses and our churches and engage. The present time is now. Amen.

Serena Sides is a parishioner and seminarian. She and her family have been members of St. Columba's since 2007. She is currently in her senior year as a Masters of Divinity student at Virginia Theological Seminary and a candidate for the priesthood in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington.