



SUNDAY SERMON

The Promise and Cost of Repentance

DATE

Lent III
Sunday, March 24, 2019

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

Earlier this week, I met with a large group of clergy - Christian, Jewish, Muslim, black, white, Asian, Hispanic - from congregations in every ward of this City. While relationship-building and immigrant rights were integral, the main topic was affordable housing and the needs of the poor, especially in light of the huge tracts of land under consideration with the closing of DC General Family Shelter and the prospect of 190 acres surrounding RFK Stadium. Our text for the day was Katherine Shaver's article from Tuesday's Washington Post reporting that, "D.C. has the highest 'intensity' of gentrification of any U.S. city," and to discuss that article in light of our respective holy scriptures.

The article confirmed what many of us have already observed: "40 percent of the District's lower-income neighborhoods experienced gentrification between 2000 and 2013." 'The District also saw more than 20,000 African American residents displaced from their neighborhoods during that time, mostly by affluent, white newcomers.'

One of our conveners, a Baptist pastor, had told one of her congregants that she'd be meeting with a group of city-wide clergy to discuss the article. Her congregant said sharply, "well I certainly hope you're going to begin with prayers of repentance." She was struck. In what ways is she responsible for gentrification - if not actively, then passively? Isn't it inevitable, given the insatiable forces of capitalism and the drive among individuals and businesses alike for financial security and gain?

She retreated to her car, feeling shame for her silence and complicity. Then heard in this person's words, Jesus' call to repentance is not an invitation to deeper shame; repentance is an invitation to deeper imagination. To repent is to turn from and relinquish what has been, and to turn toward and embrace what might be, toward that which is life-giving. In today's Gospel, Jesus' call for repentance is coupled with an urgent story of fruitfulness. Give the fig tree one more year; if it bears fruit, well and good; if not, cut it down. Now is the time to repent and reorient.

The call to repent may come from another, but the desire to act emerges from within when we begin to recognize that who we are being and how we are being, is not all that we might be. Poet, Beth Resler Walters ([Women at the Well](#)), speaks of listening within. "That holy, caring voice was saying, "Whatever your call is, Beth, this ain't it." She continues: "God said the same to Moses, grieving over Israel's painful slavery and saying that whatever their destiny was to be, "This ain't it!" I did not create you as my beloved for you to be enslaved by others. The first step of their restoration was to come out of whatever it was that was destroying them.

continued

Jesus' meets countless individuals who are diseased, crippled, stuck, he engages political, economic and religious systems that keep people stuck. In each, Jesus sees the promise they could be living. Whatever the possibilities in their lives, his vision of wholeness for them started with knowing, "This ain't it." The desire for repentance emerges from this recognition.

The event of repentance, to the extent there is an event, is compelled by an encounter with the Holy, an experience of grace. When I have repented of sinful beliefs and behaviors - when I have said "I reject perpetuating this crippling view of my self" or "I am no longer going to treat this person or those people that way".... and I've said "no more".... On those occasions when I have had eyes to see and courage to act, I believe it was a gift of God's grace.

This is what we see as Moses encounters God in the burning bush. We know Moses was fed up with the slavery of his people. He's already said, "This ain't it." The story is crystal clear on the next point, and one to note in our own journeys: God heard their cry. "I have observed the misery of my people..." "I know their sufferings, and have come ... to deliver them."

Dear Ones, we are not free to remain as we are. Encounters with God will change us. In this, as Moses quickly realized, there is promise, and there is also cost. While in most cases repentance begins and ends as a personal act with personal consequences, the reorienting of one individual can have a far-reaching effect. From Moses' experience at the burning bush shall come the exodus and the liberation of his people.

Parker Palmer (Let Your Life Speak) observes that "the [great liberation] movements that transform us, our relations, and our world emerge from the lives of people who decide to care for their authentic selfhood." Commenting on Rosa Parks' words on the bus, "I sat down because I was tired," Palmer says, "she did not mean that her feet were tired. She meant that her soul was tired, her heart was tired, her whole being was tired of playing by racist rules, of denying her self's claim to selfhood." "Rosa Parks sat down because she decided, "I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be." That is repentance; an act of courage, imagination, and grace.

Moses was just one of hundreds of thousands of Hebrews living in slavery. An early commentator wondered why, given their numbers, the Hebrew people had not simply fought back. He concluded, "they were psychologically incapable; for centuries they had not defended themselves - not, at least, by fighting." (Michael Walzer, Exodus and Revolution).

Rabbinic scholars have explored the text immediately preceding ours today (2:11-25) when Moses, "saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. [Moses] looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian." It is not the case, say these rabbis, that there was no one there, it is that there was no one with the personal strength, no one with the backbone, no one ready to champion the cause of God, so Moses acted himself. Rabbi Hillel concludes: "where there is no man, try to be one."

While there can be no experience that is "like" slavery, we know what it is to be in bondage to forces that bind, numb, and overwhelm us. Even those of us with a great many choices submit to the inevitability that some things just are the way they are. Stuck in cycles or patterns: internally with our sense of self-worth or relationships; externally with the systems we inhabit, such as the voracious appetite of gentrification.

If someone is going to lead us out of the various forms of oppression that we endure, it might just have to be you. And that is scary. Moses' encounter with the Holy leads directly to a second encounter: one with Pharaoh, the one who is the source and perpetrator of oppression. We cannot encounter God and expect to not encounter the powers of darkness - within ourselves and in our society.

Promise and cost. "Come, I will send you," says God to Moses. There it is; the hinge of repentance and faith that bears fruit; come in through God's mercy; go forth in God's justice. Says Brueggemann (Exodus): "The grand intention of God becomes human responsibility, human vocation. It is Moses who will do what YHWH said, and Moses will run the risks that YHWH seemed ready to take. The connection of God and Moses, of heaven and earth, of great power and dangerous strategy is all carried in the statement "I will send you."

"It is Moses (not God) who will meet with Pharaoh." It is Moses (not God) who will bring out "my people." It is Moses who acts in God's place to save God's people. ...the joining of God and human history. And the joining is done through the vulnerable, risk-taking body of Moses, on whom everything now depends. He must frontally challenge the enormous imperial power of the status quo." And so, methinks, must we.

By what authority? I AM has sent you.

At my clergy meeting, a Rabbi told of a couple who had met with her for spiritual counseling. Newly married professionals carrying law school debt, they had an opportunity to buy a house for a really cheap price in a rapidly changing DC neighborhood. They were troubled because they knew that in doing so they would contribute to gentrification and the inevitable displacement of lower income neighbors - to which they were philosophically and theologically opposed. Yet, they reasoned, if we don't buy it, a developer will. I was impressed this couple even weighed the larger implications of their action. Initially constricted by a sense of shame that they were complicit in the problem, they reached a more creative solution: that they accept the benefit being offered them and buy the house; then commit their legal expertise as advocates for equity and affordable housing.

Where there is no one to stand up, be that one. I AM has called you; I AM has sent you.

Amen.