

Black Lives Matter, Part 3

“Dedicated Perseverance”

Dumbarton United Methodist Church

September 27, 2015

I can safely say that in my 29 years of preaching weekly I have never preached from today’s passage from Ezekiel. This passage is not included in the lectionary and I’ve never done a chapter by chapter sermon series on Ezekiel. But sometimes, when searching the scripture, surprising verses resonate given one’s context. So it was for me. I was searching scripture and found this passage and it resonated.

I had been thinking about the work of dismantling racism and how this work is like tearing down a wall — a wall that divides, a wall that excludes. Computer search engines are amazing things — a search for Biblical texts about walls led me to Ezekiel. Jacqueline Lapsley, writing for the New Interpreter’s Bible One Volume Commentary, identifies Ezekiel as both a priest and a prophet who was likely exiled to Babylon early in the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem. ¹ Ezekiel is a complex and densely symbolic book which defies easy interpretation. That said, this morning’s passage from Chapter 13 finds Ezekiel calling to account the false prophets that have been telling the Hebrew people sweet platitudes which are not a true message from God. Using the imagery of a weak wall, poorly constructed, Ezekiel accuses the false prophets of white-washing the condition of the wall, thus leaving the people vulnerable to the storms that

¹ Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “Ezekiel”, New Interpreter’s Bible One Volume Commentary. Nashville:Abingdon Press, 2010, p.456.

will come. This imagery of white washing a crumbling, faulty wall resonates powerfully with me, in the wake of having read “Between the World and Me” by Ta-Nehisi Coates. For years, for decades, the dominant American narrative has been a white washing of our history and societal foundations. We have listened to and believed the false prophets that have proclaimed America’s exceptionalism. We have accepted at face value the myth of rugged individuals carving a life and civilization out of a wilderness where they had fled for the sake of freedom. We have romanticized the deep south and turned our backs on the problems of inner cities. We believed that we were being led to green pastures that would restore our souls as we blindly bought into the “American dream” of a suburban home designed by community planners who carefully orchestrated who had the opportunities to achieve this dream. And though red-lining neighborhoods has been exposed and condemned its legacy endures. We whitewash history to make it palatable to our delusional selves and rarely grasp the true bloodshed, genocide, and horror upon which this country has been built. We assumed that it was our God-given right to take over this country and push the indigenous people out. We needed muscle and sweat and labor to maintain an agricultural economy, so we made peace with slavery and the buying and selling of human beings. In the aftermath of slavery’s end, we have continued to salve our consciences with false notions of racial differences which belittle and demean people of color. And now, now the very media which would strive to keep us placated, entertained, and satisfied with the status quo gives us access to voices that will no longer be ignored. The storms are here, the rain and hail are starting to remove the white wash and reveal the shaky, inadequate foundations of our society. This is not a land of

justice. This is not a country of equal opportunity. Racism is real and it is destroying all of us.

Knowing this, waking up to the truth of our world, calls us to challenge the status quo, demands that we confront racism.

Of course the big question is how? How do we confront racism? How do we dismantle racism? How do we fashion a country that embodies our deepest ideals of equality, justice, freedom, and peace?

There are no quick fixes — no Z-packs of high power antibiotics to cure the disease of racism. I wish there were easy answers. Here are some ideas of how we proceed, you will likely have other good ideas as well.

We question everything. We do not simply accept the news message of CNN, MSNBC, NPR, Rachel Maddow, or John Stewart. We do not simply accept the grade school and college history lessons. Now Dumbarton is pretty good at questioning the veracity of scripture — we use all the tools available to take a long hard look at classic interpretations of scripture. We need to bring similar tools to bear on examining society, history, media, law enforcement, the judicial system, everything. In “Between the World and Me,” Ta-Nehisi Coates says this about questioning: “An unceasing interrogation of the stories told to us by the schools now felt essential. It felt wrong not to ask why, and then ask it again... My mother and father were always pushing me away from second-hand answers — even the answers they themselves believed. I don’t know that I have ever found any satisfactory answers of my own. But every time I ask it, the question is refined... a constant questioning, questioning as ritual, questioning as exploration rather than the search for certainty.”² Question. Why is it that

² Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015, p. 34.

people of color receive harsher sentences for the same crimes as white people? Why are African American students more likely to be suspended than white students? Why are African Americans more likely to be stopped by police? Why do we as a country remain complacent about these inequities? We question everything.

We listen to people of color. We listen to African Americans. We respect what they say. We do not belittle or diminish their experience. We listen and invite others to listen. In listening, we learn the language African Americans choose to for engaging racism. For example, “Black Lives Matter” is language embraced by African Americans to speak to this time of racial crisis in the U.S. So we respect this language, we amplify this language, and we help other white people understand why “Black Lives Matter.”

We question. We listen. We recognize the intersectionality of justice issues and the gnarly complexity this brings to dismantling racism. This work will include issues of economic disparity, educational inequity, judicial reform, gun violence prevention, privatization of prisons, ending the war on drugs, access to medical care and mental health services, transphobia, sexism, homophobia, militarization of domestic law enforcement, to name a few. Many of these issues are concerns no matter what one’s skin color, but the issue of race may intensify any of these. It’s a gnarly intersectionality that makes the beltway mixing bowl seem as simple as riding a merry-go-round.

We question. We listen. We recognize the gnarly intersectionality of race with a myriad of justice issues. And we find an issue we feel passionate about and we give time, talent, resources, and energy to that particular aspect of justice, but always with the awareness of the interconnectedness.

If you are passionate about ending sexism, then work on issues of sexism, but do so in partnership with women of color. If your issue is economic justice, then work on it, but do so mindful of the distinct concerns for people of color. If your issue is gun violence prevention then work on it and learn ways to work for gun violence prevention across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines. Heaven knows there are plenty of justice issues to go around. Where is your area of interest? Of expertise? And what are the similarities and differences experienced by people of color within that particular justice issue?

For this Black Lives Matter series, we have been surrounded by a cloud of witnesses of black lives that have ended too soon in violent or suspicious circumstances — from Cynthia Hurd, to Tamir Rice; from Emmet Till to Amber Monroe; from Freddie Gray to Sandra Bland, and all the rest pictured here, and even more still. Sandra Bland was the young African American woman who was stopped by police in Waller County, Texas for failing to signal a lane change. The police officer used excessive force, arrested Ms. Bland. She was jailed for three days. She died in police custody. The sheriff's department claims it was suicide but many, many questionable and suspicious circumstances surround Ms. Bland's death. For 74 days, Rev. Hannah Bonner, a young, white, United Methodist clergywoman has been holding vigil outside the sheriff's office in Waller County, Texas — Questioning — ASKING “What happened to Sandra Bland?” Early in the vigil, Rev. Bonner and others who joined her in vigil, sat just outside the door of the sheriff's department, in the shade of the eaves of the building. 30 days into the vigil, the sheriff's department resorted to intimidation tactics — pointedly videoing the protesters, writing down license plate numbers, calling Rev. Bonner a “minister of satan.”

Overnight, the sheriff installed barricades that prohibited anyone from sitting in the shade of the building. When those keeping vigil moved to the shade of a stately old tree, the sheriff's department cut down the tree. Clearly, the department does not like having people question their actions and the fate of people in their custody. Rev. Bonner posts short videos each day to social media. She keeps her guitar at hand and sings with others who keep vigil. And during these 75 days, she has taken time to visit her family, return to Houston for worship, and have an occasional dinner with friends. Rev. Bonner has remained a steadfast ally — through the intense heat of Texas in August, through name-calling and veiled threats. In life beyond the vigil, Rev. Bonner is the Curator of The Shout: a spoken-word poetry focused activism movement seeking to nurture a community of multi-ethnic, multi-generational, justice-seeking, solidarity-building people. She serves on the staff of St. John's UMC Downtown in Houston, Texas. Her vigil for Sandra Bland is her ministry for this season.

Know that the work of justice, the work of dismantling racism is going to be long, it's going to be hard, it's going to be time-consuming, inconvenient, disruptive, and frustrating. It's going to mean reading powerful books which shatter cherished notions about our society. It's going to mean heading out after a long day into a rainy night for yet another meeting across town that doesn't really seem to move us very far down the road, but we go, we show up because being present and being committed to justice matters. It's going to mean holding our tongue to make space for people of color to speak. It's going to mean speaking up and challenging the racist comments of family and friends even when it is uncomfortable to do so. It's going to mean taking a break from the work to savor the joys of this life — else what's the work of justice for? It's going to mean after a break,

picking up the mantle again and getting back to the hard work. It's going to mean making mistakes sometimes and learning that good intentions are not enough, we need to be open to learning how even with the best of intentions the way we say something or how we do something may be subtly racist. It's going to mean being willing to let go of our white privilege in order to make room for equity for everyone.

For me, one thing it will mean is that I will not try to wriggle my way out of jury duty. Even Grand Jury duty, if called again to serve. I can't believe I'm saying this. My experience of Grand Jury duty was hell. It took a physical and emotional toll. During my time on Grand Jury, I saw my doctor 3 times for stress related ailments. I have documented trail of medical concerns that I could use as valid reason to be excused from jury duty. But the gospel call convicts me. I KNOW our judicial system is racist. I cannot overhaul the entire system, but I can show up when called and ask questions, and refuse to support the indictment or conviction for people with non-violent drug usage, possession, or sale. There are other ways I am called to work to dismantle racism, but jury duty in DC is the one that personally and most immediately challenges my own comfort and makes demands of me.

Dismantling racism is a choice. A choice to be dedicated to persevering in the work for justice. Dismantling racism will not be easy, but it is work worth doing, it is God-approved work. Question. Listen. Recognize gnarly intersectionality. Work for justice and dismantling racism. Persevere with dedication.

Amen.

Rev. Dr. Mary Kay Totty