

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Last week, Jesus sent the disciples with the authority to cast out all that which separates us from God's vision, and today's reading was a part of that sending. And the location of today's episode is really important because Jesus shared hard truths about enacting God's vision—namely that those who do will be called names and accused of wrong-doing (verse 25), they will have their bodies threatened (verse 28), and they will feel useless and devalued (verse 31). And Jesus went on to articulate that God's vision, or to say it another way, God's kingdom, will produce division- namely, that we will find those closest to us against God's vision and our enemies more supportive.

You see, Jesus reminded us that living into God's vision by confronting evil and selfishness will get push back. For, to challenge narrow-visioned responses to oppression will result in false accusations. To stand up and confront the status quo that has given security, satisfaction, and status will be divisive. And, you and I, we know this is so very true. For, to come out and say, "Black lives matter" will anger those who find their privilege in their

whiteness, and... that will divide. To say that we should care for the most vulnerable among us in a pandemic will frustrate and anger those who are able-bodied, and...that will divide. To challenge individuals to look at the ways oppression is at work in similar intersectional places of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and other xenophobic ideologies will stress the privileged so much that they'll be avoidant, and... that will divide.

The thing about God's vision in Matthew's gospel is that it's rooted in a confrontation with evil. It's a vision that challenges us to enact real, authentic love. It's a vision that recognizes that power and privilege are not God's currency. And, in Jesus Christ, we see that embodied. For, Jesus was killed as a prisoner of the empire. Jesus led a famous protest in the streets while riding on a donkey. Jesus empowered those who felt weakened by the Roman's excessive force. Jesus gathered people from all walks of life – that is, people of all statuses, all places, and all backgrounds – to work towards God's divine visions for real justice and true peace. But, ironically, his message of peace resulted in division. And it didn't stop after Jesus was gone. After all, as the early church expanded it continued to be problematic. For, indentured servants, women, men, wealthy, poor, and foreigners would all gather to read the scriptures, pray, and eat. They shared what they had with those in need.

And this Christian cross-pollination along with their failure to give loyalty and submission to the authority of the Roman government was incendiary, literally. For, Emperor Nero's animosity toward the Christians led him to blame them for a fire that destroyed two-thirds of Rome. And, Nero's scapegoating led to almost 300 years of persecution of those whose loyalty was towards the way of Christ¹ – that is, toward forgiveness, love, peace, and virtue.

You see, *that way* of operating is a characteristic of both oppressors and oppression. They tend to blame and point fingers at the oppressed, because, from privilege's perspective, it's better to have infighting among oppressed groups than it is for them to confront the real oppression. And, we can see it as well. For, systems of oppression desire to make Black people rise against gay people, for immigrants to rise against trans- individuals, for differently-abled persons to rise against women. And, this infighting simply confuses those of us who have privilege. For our privilege seems to apply blinders so that we can only seem to gaze at one "issue" at a time or we get overwhelmed. So, we can only look at racism *or* homophobia *or* ableism *or* sexism *or* nativism. And, in our narrow-focus, we miss the systemic problem – that is,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Fire_of_Rome

oppression. And so, we waver in bringing about God's vision, we drown in fear, and we find that we are like those disciples.

But, Jesus echoes the gospel message three times in today's reading saying: "have no fear" (verse 26), "do not fear" (verse 28), and "do not be afraid" (verse 31). Do not be afraid if they call you names as you work towards God's vision to love your neighbor and understand those who are different. Do not be afraid if you are defamed for following in Christ's path to radically welcome all people and work to include, support, and liberate them. Do not be afraid as you pick up your cross, that is, do not be afraid as you give up yourself, your privilege, and your selfishness to follow God's vision, because God's eye is on the sparrow, and God is watching you.

Friends, the power of Jesus's gospel message is that we, collectively, are intertwined with one another. So, if one of us is oppressed, we are all oppressed. Or, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "no one is free until we all are free."² That is our God-given baptismal vocation. For, we, like Ingrid, are reminded that God loves us, God is with us, and God sets us free. So, we,

² <https://mlkglobal.org/>

have an opportunity to reject the systems of inequality and the agents of oppression that undermine God's purposes. Then, as people of faith, we walk together in anger when George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Admaud Arbery, and so many more are unjustly killed, because...no one is free until we all are free. And, we walk together with our siblings of faith at Mother Emanuel AME church as we painfully remember the killing of nine Black people by an ELCA-raised white man, because...no one is free until we all are free. And, together we cry for justice as we remember our queer and mostly Latinx siblings who were murdered at Pulse Nightclub in a gruesome hate crime, because... no one is free until we all are free.

But, God's vision is not only found in our solidarity with anger and tears. For, our God is the God of new life. In baptism, our God reminds us that our final word is "alleluia." So, we, too, rejoice when others find moments of freedom. We celebrate that people of varied sexual orientations and gender identities are finally afforded the same protections that straight people have had since 1964,³ because freedom for the queer community is freedom for us all. And, we celebrate Juneteenth when slaves were finally given the same freedom

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/supreme-court-rules-existing-civil-rights-law-protects-gay-lesbian-n1231018>

that was declared for all Americans generations earlier. And, so, too, we come to celebrate our newest sibling in the faith. We come to eat this meal together as one people. We come together in Christ's gospel that rejects oppression and empowers us to serve with God's love. Here, we come to be one in Christ. Amen.