

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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They just don't get it. How many times does Jesus need to talk about his betrayal, execution, and resurrection? How many times will he need to tell them to focus on the marginalized, the lowly, the poor, and the outcast? It's as though the disciples will never understand.

In last week's gospel, Jesus made the first prediction of his fate and reminded the disciples to take the way of the cross by serving instead of lording over. Today sounds a lot like the same. These disciples don't get Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the anointed one, as the Christ. The disciples don't understand, or choose not to understand, where Jesus' ministry is heading. For nine chapters now Jesus has been explaining the main message, but they still don't grasp it. And, I imagine that Jesus felt like a broken record. Saying the same thing. He repeatedly said that that messiahship isn't about ruling, it's about serving. Jesus said, "I'm going to be betrayed, I'm going to be executed, and I'm going to be resurrected." Again and again. Jesus said his message was about including those left out, about welcoming the stranger, about centering the marginalized, it's about love, it's about justice, it's about peace. When will these silly disciples ever understand?

And, O Lord, do I understand that feeling, and I imagine you do too. How many times do I need to say that church work and non-profit work is about being community and not about the individual? How many times do I have to

preach about God's love, kindness, and justice before it becomes our communal language? How many times do we have to tell kids to share? How many times do we need to remind people that anti-racism work is not about people of color "teaching" us? How many times do we need to explain that gender is not a binary? How many times do we need to say that women's rights are human rights? How many times do we need to say Black Lives Matter or Trans Lives Matter? How many times do we need to say Jesus was an immigrant, or that Christianity is not about nationalism, or that being poor is not a crime? How many times must we say it this way and that way seeming to make no difference? How many times? O Lord, how many times? Do you ever feel like that?

Let me tell you a story. I entered seminary in 2008, and it was a time before our denomination allowed those of us who were queer to be out and be ordained in the church. My seminary in Philadelphia was known for being a place that protected and advocated for queer seminarians before it was allowed. As is often true about those on the margins, us queer folk still found each other in the seminary, even before Grindr existed. I remember finding out that one of the professors of Christian history used to be ordained in an ELCA predecessor denomination but that he was defrocked (the church's fancy way of saying removed). It turned out that he had a long-time partner who happened to be of the same gender. I remember asking him about it, why he stuck around, and how he gets through. And being his sarcastic self with a dry sense of humor he said, "there's nothing new under the sun." Being a young and naïve seminary student, I did make the connection to the Biblical passage he was invoking from Ecclesiastes. There in Ecclesiastes the author is complaining about the monotony of life. But, my professor was

naming something that he saw throughout all of history. Not only is much of life repeating what has already been done in some form and fashion. But, unfortunately, restricting people from being pastors has been a power tactic from the very beginning of the church – whether it was married individuals, women, or queer people doesn't matter as much as the human tendency to want to be the greatest, the best, and the most preferred over another.

And the church isn't the only entity that suffers from the same old cycles of control, power, privilege, and competition. We see this human tendency cause ecological destruction on environments throughout all of history. The Mayans likely ended their civilization due to slash-and-burn agriculture that destroyed forests and led to a megadrought. Iran, Iraq, and Jordan's fertile crescent was destroyed by deforestation, salinization, and overgrazing. So too, the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Vikings, and Polynesians also destroyed their environments and led to their demise. So, sure, this time our looming ecological catastrophe is globalized and that is rightfully scary in a whole new way, but we humans have an ever-recurring issue with taking too much and destroying our own environments. Dare we say, "there's nothing new under the sun." Or what about the recurring issue of people choosing fascism for their governments, we saw it in Bible when the judges were replaced with kings in the Hebrew Scriptures, we saw it elected in Germany, and we see hints of it in our own time throughout the world. Perhaps, there really is nothing new under the sun. From generation to generation, we seem to constantly advocate for the rights of those on the margins. We see elderly protestors holding signs saying, "I cannot believe I still have to protest this crap," which remind us that each generation responds to the same injustice regarding the respect of women, queer folk, BIPOC individuals, and

immigrants. We as a people focus on the wrong things, we don't learn, we don't change, we don't learn from the past, and darn it, we prove that there is "nothing new under the sun." It's the same old thing over and over again.

And it's depressing. It's infuriating. It's predictable. We are annoyed by people like the disciples who don't listen and change. We are equally those same disciples failing to learn and remember. Yet, we have a God who will go at lengths to repeat the same message. A God who shouts it so the people in the back can hear. A God who will point the Christian symbol of execution to remind us to care for those margins. A God who will literally pick up a child and put it in the center of us to say, look, this is what God's work is about. A God who will stop at nothing to center those on the margins. A God who will name the realities of the world, who will expose the structures of inequality and the agents of oppression, and who will say it again and again and again. Because here's the thing about our God, while we humans may just be caught in endless cycles of selfishness and destruction, our God is caught in an endless cycle of reminding you that you are loved, that God's focus is on those the world tries to exterminate or ignore, and that God will stop at nothing to repeat and repeat that same message.

So, today's reading is a lot of the same as last week's. But until we as a people can come to truly love our neighbors, until we welcome the outcast, until we center the most vulnerable in our work, then we need to hear it week in and week out. We need to be reminded that our opportunity is to break the world's cycle with God's repetition. May we be strengthened by God's holy repetition, and may we respond to the "nothing new under the sun"

experience with our commitment to an endless repetition of God's love.
Amen.