

Matthew 9:35-10:8 [9-23], Second Sunday after Pentecost  
Synod Staff Sermons  
Context: racial riots triggered by the killing of George Floyd  
Sunday, June 14, 2020

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This past week, I watched the movie *Just Mercy*<sup>1</sup>, a cinematic version of the excellent book by Bryan Stevenson about his experiences founding the Equal Justice Initiative. If you haven't already seen the movie, it is very much worth your time and also free for the month of June on several streaming services.

Stevenson is a Harvard educated lawyer and activist based in Montgomery, Alabama who takes on biases of the criminal justice system. He guarantees a defense for anyone in Alabama sentenced to the death penalty – a sentence in which minorities and the poor are overrepresented.

The film begins with Stevenson visiting prisoners, families of those incarcerated, court houses, and police stations. He finds himself in some incredibly difficult situations. Despite his stellar credentials, he finds that the local authorities question his qualifications. The house he stays in receives a bomb threat. The police pull him over on an empty road and slam him against the side of his car. A young attendant at the penitentiary strip searches him before he can visit his client.

Through each of these experiences, he brings us on the journey of confronting racial bias, amidst his own feelings of helplessness. Fear. Confusion. Sadness. Anxiety. Anger.

Stevenson's emotions seem to encapsulate our current moment in time: Over one hundred and ten thousand people are dead from the coronavirus. People are still people dying. Not somewhere else, but dying in our communities! The impact of the virus continues to spread. Salaries have been slashed. Jobs have been lost. Have we even seen the worst of it? Fear. Confusion. Sadness. Helplessness. Anger.

Then another virus rears its ugly head - again. The virus of racism. We watched in horror as two men killed Ahmaud Abrey while he was jogging down the street. Breonna Taylor killed in her bed. George Floyd killed under the knee of a police officer. More Fear. Confusion. Sadness. Helplessness. Anger.

Our communities responded to the killings. Peaceful protests by all races and ages and genders. Also riots. Hate rhetoric. Hurt and anger and despair. We weep. We cry out. We turn to the words of Jesus.

In our gospel text from St. Matthew, Jesus, seeing the great needs of the people and acting with boundless compassion, chooses, authorizes, then sends out the twelve disciples to continue his

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<sup>1</sup> Stevenson, Bryan. 2015. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.

work, God's work. The work of forgiving sins, casting out unclean spirits, curing every disease and sickness, proclaiming the kingdom of God. Jesus tells his disciples to go out and do the same - *now*.

Don't go to some far off place. Don't bite off more than you can chew. You have received grace, so don't expect payment. Jesus doesn't want the disciples to wait to do his work until they can go to the right training class, have the right equipment, or read the right book. He definitely doesn't assure the disciples that everything will be all right.

Instead Jesus gives them the power to kick out the evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives.<sup>2</sup> He sends them to live out his love. He promises to be with them. But...they need to go out *now*.

Are the disciples afraid to answer this call? I can't imagine how they couldn't have been afraid. They were sharing the radically new message of grace, healing and forgiveness, of love; like sheep in the midst of wolves. Although afraid, they listened, they trusted, and they responded to Jesus' call.

We are called to do the same. Like the disciples before us, in our baptism we are called to trust God, to tell others about Jesus through both our words and our actions, to care for all others and the world God made, to work for justice and peace. When we take communion we are strengthened and sustained so that we *can* continue God's work in a world so desperately in need. But we too might be afraid to hear and respond to the call.

In his book, Bryan Stevenson tells of a visit with Rosa Parks and her friend.<sup>3</sup> Ms. Parks asks, "Now, Bryan, tell me who you are and what you're doing." ...Stevenson says "...Well, ... we're trying to help people on death row...We want to free people who've been wrongly convicted. We want to end unfair sentences in criminal cases and stop racial bias in criminal justice...Ms. Parks leaned back smiling and said '...all that's going to make you tired, tired, tired.' They all laughed and Stevenson looks down, a little embarrassed. Then Rosa's friend leaned forward and puts her finger in Stevenson's face and says: 'That's why you've got to be brave, brave, brave.'

Bryan Stevenson is indeed tired, tired, tired. The work seems endless. Racism is not a new thing. Racism isn't something that came about because of these recent deaths. Stevenson's work is preceded by generations who have come before him and he accompanies so many in their work today. So many continue to cry out: How long O Lord, how long? So many are tired, tired, tired.

But Bryan Stevenson is indeed brave, brave, brave too. He does not back down from tackling taboo subjects; calling into account corrupt justice systems and powers that be; uncovering skeletons in long forgotten closets. Can we too be brave, brave, brave? This work of dismantling racism is work for all of us.

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<sup>2</sup> Loose Biblical translation from Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 292-292. This conversation has been edited for the sake of sermon brevity.

Maybe we feel like we're not ready. Just ask Moses, or Noah, Jonah, Mary, Peter, or any of the disciples about being ready. They weren't ready. Bryan Stephenson wasn't ready. We won't *ever* be fully ready.

I will never ever be perfectly prepared to answer God's call. God will not wait on me to get ready. Instead God loves us right now, sinners though we may be. And God calls us to go now; just as we are.

Jesus tells the disciples not to worry about what they'll say or how they'll say it. The right words will be there; the Holy Spirit will supply the words. Stevenson doesn't always have the right words. When we speak out for justice, we too may stumble with our words and our actions. But the Holy Spirit will be with us and will supply the words of love and healing. Now. We are called. Now.

Some of us are called to publically proclaim, both written and verbally. Others to pray for justice and mercy; march in protests and carry signs. Some to write laws. Defend laws. All to vote.

Others are called to read and to learn; to ask questions and dismantle the historic assumptions; listen to the cries of those most directly impacted. Others to uncover the deep seated biases; sitting and listening on our porches with family and friends, having those hard conversations face to face.

I don't know what you're called to do, but God has been calling us and will always call us to action, learning, healing, and transformation. Our past words and actions, though, haven't been enough to erase the hatred from our human hearts. We have not loved *all* others as God has loved us. We need to repent and to listen for God's call in our lives again. I need to listen again.

It's also important to remember that God's call to action shouldn't be only a *moment* in time – a time when we mourn a death, repent, and then continue doing the same. Instead of a *moment*, as many have said, God's call in our lives must be a *movement*.

As the disciples were held up by Jesus, you and I are held up today by the gift of the Holy Spirit moving through our lives. We are filled with the *ruah*, the Spirit moving over the waters at creation, the divine breath, the wind. We are filled with the Spirit enabling us to do the hard work which will make us tired, tired, tired and require us to be brave, brave, brave.

We are not to worry, though. The Spirit is with us. Now...

I want to end with a prayer released by the ELCA Worship Team. It's a prayer that will be prayed this week during remembrances for the Emmanuel 9 and for Juneteenth, a day commemorating the end of slavery in the United States. I hope and pray these words will do more than just be whispered from our lips. I pray they will change our hearts and our lives and our actions.

Save us, O God, from ourselves,  
from racism often cloaked in pious words,  
from the machinations of white supremacy hidden in calls for civility,  
from micro aggressions thinly veiled in arrogance,  
from apologies when they don't give way to action,  
from forgiveness without facing the truth,  
from reconciliation without reparation.

Deliver us, O God, from expecting siblings of color to continue to bear this emotional work,  
which is not theirs to do.

Grateful for the long arc that bends toward justice, we pray:  
Grant us wisdom, give us courage for the facing of these days,  
by the power of the Spirit, all for the sake of the kingdom that we share in Christ Jesus. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> From ELCA Prayers, Litanies, and Laments for the Commemoration of the Emanuel Nine, June 17.  
[http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Prayers\\_Litanies\\_Laments\\_Emanuel\\_Nine\\_Commemo-ration.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Prayers_Litanies_Laments_Emanuel_Nine_Commemo-ration.pdf)