

1.17.21

Vicar Paul

As I was preparing for this sermon, since Monday is Martin Luther King day, I thought about inserting a generic Martin Luther King quote. But that didn't seem right, because as a friend of mine mentioned, there is a balm in Gilead. I myself have preached a handful of "Sunday after" sermons. My first sermon in seminary was the Sunday after the Parkland massacre. You gotta admit that's a hard sermon, when kids are dead. I preached another sermon, and it was Maundy Thursday. My hometown of Sacramento was going through its own Black Lives Matter moment. Stephon Clark was murdered in his grandmother's backyard just a few days before. It was a hard day for me, growing up in Sacramento, growing up in South Sacramento, my community. I preached the Sunday after two men, Shawn Nelson and Dante Robinson, were arrested at the Starbucks at 18th and Spruce in Philadelphia, the same exact Starbucks I spent numerous Sunday nights late at night studying at. These two men were arrested and Philadelphia was upset. And the last time was the Sunday after the young man walked into the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. He killed 11. And that Sunday was reformation Sunday. So you're already celebrating this day for our faith, but also grappling with Martin Luther's anti semitic writings. After a tragedy for our Jewish siblings happened. It's a hard day.

I know how to preach a sermon. You got your intro, you got your exegesis--I'm using the keyword, Mark. And you give a mini-resurrection. We celebrate that Sunday morning hope, that Easter Sunday when the tomb is gone, and we find Jesus on the road. He finds his disciples Mary and Martha are in disbelief. Mary arrives at the tomb and tells the disciples, "He's not here." It's a monumental moment for us as followers of Christ, that mini-resurrection.

This morning's sermon was probably one of the hardest I've ever written or pondered on. As I read the text on Monday, I thought to myself, where is the good news? Where is it? Because as a preacher, as a person who in the future will be a rostered minister, as a person of color living in the United States, who yes, has the skin color that allows me to pass in a lot of certain circumstances...how do I be true to the pain that I'm feeling, but that others are feeling this morning or this time?

I'm at a loss for words. But I can't stay silent. So my sermon might upset some folks, and for that I apologize, but it's an apology that I'm asking that we invite ourselves into a relationship, into a conversation. A conversation that we as clergy, as seminarians, as vicars in the Lutheran Church, one of the whitest denominations, we've found ourselves in at times. We've wanted to avoid getting political. And I'm not saying we need to be political. And not that we're partisan. There's a difference. As a political scientist can tell you, there's a difference between being political and being partisan. And partisan should never come into a congregation.

But there's times when we as clergy, as rostered ministers have to grapple with these hard truths. That's what I named my sermon this morning. I normally don't tell you the name of the sermon, but this morning's sermon is called "Hard Truths". I got that from my spin instructor that I've been so graciously learning from these past couple months. We need to have our hard

truths. We need to have a conversation. We as a country are divided, we're broken. I was thinking the other day, three weeks ago a suicide bomber blew up a city street in Nashville. Just three weeks ago. Last week rioters and folks stormed the US Capitol. And they wanted to, I don't know what they wanted to do. They wanted to take out the Vice President, they wanted to take out members of Congress. It was a horrifying image. And just in the past 16 days, we have lost almost 50,000 people to a microscopic virus. Folks in Los Angeles don't have oxygen. They're running out of oxygen or they're dying in gift shops. For what? For things to be normal? Because we want to ignore the truth? We want to ignore the cries of our siblings of color who have been telling us time and time again that Black Lives Matter. Brown Lives Matter. Indigenous Lives Matter.

We are a country built on white supremacy. And I know that might make some folks uncomfortable. But George Floyd didn't deserve to have someone on his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds. Eight minutes and 46 seconds. For what? Why does a black man have to die? And I'm not going to get into conversations about cops or anything. But why? Why is that our solution? We ignore these cries time and time again. We hear their hurt. And at this time in our political climate it's easier to close the browser on our tab history or mute the voices we don't want to see or ignore the voices because we're too focused on radio and cable television.

In this morning's gospel, Nathaniel was a skeptic. He was unsure. He even asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And if you're not familiar with Nazareth, it's a city of about 200 to 400 people. So it's a small town, and the word town is a little too generous here. You're from Iowa to Kate, you probably know. 200 people, not a big town. So it's a village. It's far off from Rome or Athens, it's nowhere near Jerusalem where the Messiah was supposed to come from, but a tiny town in Galilee. Nazareth. That is where the Messiah comes from. Last week was the Epiphany. And the three wise men, they come from the Far East, they go to the temple, and they find King Herod. And King Herod's like, "There's no baby here." And so he sends them out to go find them; they don't come back. We know the story. But where was the first place they went to? It was the temple. The place where King Herod lived.

Nathaniel made that same mistake. He thought, what good could come good could come out of Nazareth? And that's where this moment is so powerful. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Can anything good come out of 2021, when we want to press replay or, I don't know, ask for our money back on this free trial because 2021 hasn't been great. It hasn't started out great, at least. I think as followers of Christ, we want to view ourselves as Simon and Peter. As followers who are just reluctant and just say, "Yeah, I'm gonna go, I'm gonna go. I'll follow you Jesus." Some random dude that comes up to you, you're gonna follow. But Nathaniel, he's unsure. Again, he's a skeptic and says...can someone remind me? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

I love the gospel of John. It's one of my favorite gospels. Because as Pastor Barb mentioned a couple weeks ago, you get sort of the story, you get the word became flesh and dwelt among us. But there's also another thing. There's this key. Jesus keeps talking about this beloved disciple. And I'm going to give you a spoiler, the beloved disciple is you. It's a cool moment.

You're the beloved disciple, you're the follower of Christ. You know what it's like to follow Christ. And these disciples, they kind of are dumb. I'm just gonna name it, I'm sorry. Sorry God. But the disciples, they're not the brightest people in the bunch. They keep making mistakes. I just love reading the gospels because it's like when you watch a movie, you're just like, "What? *What?*"

But as I've mentioned before, Nathaniel is a little skeptic. But Philip, maybe Philip's a smart one. He says, Come and see. And what does Jesus say to Nathaniel? He says to Nathaniel, "I saw you under the fig tree." I saw you under the fig tree that Nathaniel. You didn't see me. But I saw you. And I told Philip to call you. It's a beautiful moment. Jesus sees the humanity of Nathaniel, the skeptic, this person who is unsure. And he says to him, "I saw you at the fig tree." And I think that so often in our lives, we don't really see that Jesus is around us. Not that he's actually there, but that Jesus that follows, comforts us when we're grieving, that holds us tighter when we're feeling loneliness or anxious or feeling depressed. It's that comfort that Jesus sees us, calls us by our names, and invites us to come and see this kingdom of God. This moment of grace, of truth, of light. And he continually invites us, even when we're skeptics. We are members of this kingdom of God. And God loves us, Jesus loves us.

And yes, we are called to be changemakers in this world and to follow that path that Jesus blazed for us, telling folks that grace, mercy, love and truth are real. Jesus invites us into a relationship. Hopefully that's something you take away today. That Jesus is always there. God is holding us tighter, even in those moments when we don't feel it. This world is a world of a lot of stories, complex voices. And this week, share some love with someone. Share some love. Call that friend. Maybe it's that friend who voted for the other person. Show them that you love. Show them that love. Can I say that word again? Someone want to say it for me? Love. LOVE!

But show that love to somebody, because we're all searching for it. And maybe that's the mini Easter Sunday in the sermon. Show love to one another, especially right now.

Amen.