

June 21st, 2020

Guest Speaker Rev. Georgeanne Bennett

FCC Sermon, 6-21-20, Matthew 10:24-39

According to the ridiculously complicated measurement of the church calendar, we are now, post-Pentecost, in “ordinary” time. Which, as I learned in seminary, does NOT mean that it is somehow a common, regular or mundane time; no, ordinary is related to ordinal, as in ordinal numbers; first, second, third, etc. So, we are, by some indirect reckoning, at the 12th Sunday in Ordinary time. Trust me, you don’t want to know more than that.

Here’s the thing though. We are NOT living in ordinary times, are we? We didn’t expect to give up THIS much for Lent! And we didn’t expect to be living in the midst of a new revolution, or perhaps an old revolution re-imagined, but here we are. And I believe Jesus would be goading us, pushing us to join that revolution.

The Jesus portrayed in today’s Scripture has NOTHING in common with the nice guy Jesus we often meet in the Scriptures. This guy is bad-ass! He is a revolutionary and he doesn’t come with a gentle touch; he comes with holy fire! He has summoned his twelve disciples and is giving them their marching orders. They will no longer be disciples, they are now Apostles, those who are sent out. He endows them with all of His authority to heal, teach and preach and he insists that if they follow his

example and proclaim His message, God will be with them. Which is not to say that they will have easy lives; they will most likely be persecuted and worse, but they will be doing Jesus' Kingdom work, God's work, so there you go! Get out there!

And Jesus' Kingdom work is not easy. As Jesse said last week, the message is simple, but the work is HARD! Jesus tells these new Apostles that He, and all of them by extension, has not come to bring peace, but a sword. And the sword Jesus brings is the sword of his Word. He had come to divide the things of the world from the things of God. He has come to forcefully remind faithful Jews that the laws laid down in Torah aren't just pretty words, but in fact are meant to be followed.

Jesus knew his disciples would be coming up against the might of Roman rule and that of the religious establishment that collaborated with it. He knew that the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace, ruled with a knee on the neck of the people he loved most. And that Roman laws often transgressed God's laws. And he knew that challenging those laws would be dangerous, would create a host of enemies for his followers. His message? Challenge them anyway. Preach MY message. Recall the faithful to Torah and righteousness. Their very lives are on the line here, because continuing to live by the world's rules is killing their souls.

I learned something new this week from a couple of Facebook friends. One of them mentioned how much she

HATED being referred to as a minority. Now, I try not to get my news from Facebook, at least not without double-checking and fact-checking, but this seemed worth following up. So I asked why being called a minority stung. And I got schooled! That question started a whole new thread; fortunately for me, most of the comments were gentle and seemed to understand that I was clueless, **NOT** argumentative.

Turns out that the designation of minority is fairly universally viewed as meaning “less than”. It isn’t necessarily meant as derogatory, but all too often means, “those poor people that we, as white people” need to rescue, to save in some way. Enter the white savior complex, which **IS** demeaning. So, “People of Color” is more neutral and more acceptable.

Whilst I was being schooled, I felt some serious shame about my prior use of the word “minority”, and it occurred to me that had this been a face-to-face encounter, I would likely have been defensive. In fact, my friends would probably have skipped the lesson in order to save **ME** from feeling bad, because those are the norms they grew up with, and there are so many ways it can go badly for them if they deviate from those norms.

And that’s just not the way it is should work. White folk **SHOULD** be asking questions about our words and behaviors. We **SHOULD** be willing to hear uncomfortable things and then change the way we operate. But here’s the thing. Most of us

were taught, or learned along the way, that racists are **BAD** people. End of story. So when we learn that we have acted in a racist way, we resist that knowledge. Impossible; I am not a racist!

But I am, we all are. We all have biases, many unnoticed, many we disclaim saying, “oh, that doesn’t matter”, oh, “they’ are just over-sensitive” or, “I don’t see color; what’s the big deal?”. We don’t want to admit to our white privilege. We don’t want to admit that, IF we are white, we have benefitted hugely from that white privilege. We don’t want to see the baked in the bone pain caused by systemic racism that rarely, if ever, affects us.

Three weeks ago, we saw a prime example of white privilege played out in Central Park in New York City. Christian Cooper was enjoying a morning of bird-watching in a semi-wild area of the park when he was rudely interrupted by a woman named Amy Cooper, no relation, who was letting her dog run free in this area where leashes are required. Christian asked her to leash her dog and she refused, stridently. At this point Christian wisely chose to record the encounter, knowing that if it came down to any sort of a showdown between him, an African American and her, a white woman, he would likely lose.

Amy knew that as well. She threatened to call the police and tell them that “an African American” man was threatening her. Then she proceeded to work herself up and make that call,

sounding frantic and essentially choking her poor dog until it yelped. Amy was deliberately unleashing weaponized “white women’s tears”, a powerful and well-known tactic that has, in the past, led as far as lynching. In this case, it did nothing except make her look manipulative and provide a prime example of entitlement and how things work across the color barrier. Had Christian Cooper not recorded the exchange, it is quite possible that things might have gone very differently.

We should ALL assume we are racist, we should ALL be willing to listen and change the ways that are hurtful, we should ALL be willing to correct one another when we mess up. And we should all humbly follow the People of Color who are standing up and saying, “No more of this”. “No more of this!” And, as Christians, we are in fact required to do so. Just where do we think our Jesus would stand in this battle? Our little brown, Jewish Messiah would be right out in front with the sword of his Word in hand! Shouldn’t we be standing with him?

A few years ago, I was on an interfaith study tour of southern Spain led by a friend. We started and ended in Madrid, and at the end of the trip, when others had gone off in different directions, I decided I would be remiss if I didn’t go see Picasso’s *Guernica*. After all, it is SO famous, and our hotel was only a few blocks away from the Modern Art museum where the painting lives.

I didn't expect much. I'm not a big fan either of modern art OR of Picasso. But I was destroyed by that painting. I remember it as being in a room by itself, although I have recently read that the room also has sketches and preliminary paintings in it. I didn't see them. I just sat in front of *Guernica* for a very long time. For one thing, the painting is huge. But mostly, it is just so powerful.

I had only a general idea about the background of the painting, but I read the descriptions in the room, and have since educated myself a bit more. Turns out that during the Spanish Civil War, Francisco Franco offered up the Basque town of Guernica to the Nazis as a place to try out their new idea of carpet bombing. The Basque Separatist government was annoying Franco and hindering him in his ultimately successful attempt to rule all of Spain. So why not teach them a lesson and destroy one of their towns?

At the time of the destruction, Picasso was living in France and had been commissioned to paint a mural for the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 World Fair in Paris. Something grand and martial, no doubt. But what he painted was *Guernica*.

It is horrifying. Yes, all war is horrifying, but Picasso manages to show what happens when we cease to think of whole groups of people as less than human. When we decide very deliberately that some people are disposable.

Our country was built on stolen land by people whose very lives had been stolen. People who were declared to be disposable. Trevor Noah has a thoughtful monologue talking about the social contract that underlies our lives and our laws. We declare that all men are created equal and must be treated equally. Those of us who are white might nod wisely and agree, but our brothers and sisters of color will only laugh. Bitterly. They know it isn't true. They know they don't have equal opportunities on the whole and they know that the laws are generally much harsher for them. The social contract has been irrevocably broken and MUST be re-written.

So here we are. I don't know about you, but I really, really hate conflict. I hate confrontation. My guess is that many of my black and brown friends hate it as much as I do. Maybe even more, since confrontation is so much more dangerous for them.

But we have ALL been avoiding the deep injustices in this country for way too long. We need to demand changes to the way our laws are enforced. We need to re-distribute our monies to put more social workers, more mental health workers, more youth workers, out there, working alongside the police. I can't even imagine the changes that might happen if we stop right here, right now and begin that work.

We have a mandate as followers of Jesus to confront injustice and work to eradicate it. Remember that thing Jesus said about reclaiming the values of Jesus? Remember that

thing about simple messages leading to HARD work? Well here we are, Church. As individuals AND as the Body of Christ. It is time to follow our brothers and sisters of color into battle, armed with the sword of Jesus' word. If we mean what we say, this won't be easy, but it will be oh, so worth it! And if we are who we say we are, we need to stop putting our trust in worldly powers and principalities and align ourselves with God, with Jesus, with justice.

This is what Annie Dilliard says about church:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians... sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

Let's follow that waking God to brand new places. We are in for a wild ride, because this following Jesus thing is dangerous work, but it is OUR work.

