

June 21, 2015

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 4:35-41

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Shippensburg

The Rev. Carenda Baker

I think we all have a story to tell of how it is we came to follow Jesus, how we came to “get in the boat with him”, as we hear in today’s gospel. As best I can recall, I was 7 years old when I first made a conscious faith commitment to “get into that boat” and follow Jesus. Well, my life experience at 7 years old was certainly pretty limited. I really had no idea what I was getting myself into by simply saying, “Yes, Jesus, come into my heart; I want to follow you”. The one thing I was sure of was that this beloved Son of God demonstrated God’s love for me and the whole world, and gave his life as the proof. Why wouldn’t I want to follow One who offers such incredible love, One whose life could teach me how to show that same kind of love to others?

Somehow, where we find ourselves today in the gospel story, I don’t think those first disciples were all that much further advanced in knowing what it means to follow Jesus than I was at age 7. They are “newbies” really, green & uninitiated followers, just beginning to learn to know Jesus as a spiritual teacher. At the very least, they seem to be learning that he is a man on the move with a strong sense of mission.

So, when Jesus says to them, “C’mon, let’s go to the other side”, they don’t stop to ask him about it. They don’t say, “Well, what if there is a storm out there?” They probably would have never gotten in the boat because there are always storms on the Sea of Galilee, and they come up very quickly, when you least expect it. And can you imagine if they had asked Jesus, “Well, first tell us – what’s on the other side that we need to go over there for?” They would never have gotten into the boat because they were leaving their comfortable and familiar home region, to go into foreign, unfamiliar territory, the country of the Gerasenes. “Wait – what’s that you say, Jesus? We are going to meet a demon-possessed guy who lives in the cemetery? And you are going to send his demons into a herd of 2,000 pigs which will all run off a cliff and be drowned in the sea?” It’s there in Mark’s gospel. You just can’t make these things up.

The disciples are beginning apprentices, and quite naïve. Jesus is a gifted teacher – this they can see. But what they don’t yet recognize is that Jesus is intent on heading straight for those who suffer and are in pain. As Mark’s gospel tells it, after they get off the boat on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, they are met immediately by the demon-possessed man in the cemetery. Jesus casts out his legion of demons and restores him to his “right mind”. Then there is a sick little girl, near death, who actually dies. Jesus restores her life and gives her back to her parents. And while Jesus is on his way to see that family, an unknown woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years, makes her way through the crowd behind Jesus and touches his cloak, saying to herself, “If I can just touch his clothes, I will be healed and made well.” And she is. So much of Jesus’ mission was to reach out and heal people in pain – all sorts of human pain.

But the disciples are novices, and have just started their training. So, there on the boat, with Jesus asleep on a pillow, when the storm is brewing, building in intensity - when the wind starts to howl, the waves are getting choppy, and bigger and stronger, and the boat starts quickly to take on water - they panic. They are at a point of crisis, a place of danger and opportunity. They focus on the danger in that moment, and who wouldn't? It's a powerful life-threatening force they are up against. Their fear makes perfect sense. So, they wake up Jesus. "Teacher, don't you care that we are about to die?" In their panic and fear, they hurl an accusation at Jesus. Don't you care what's happening here? Jesus tells the wind to quiet down and says to the water, "Peace! Be still". And there follows then a "dead calm".

We were witnesses this week to a tragic and incredibly destructive storm. A horrendous, demonic storm of racism, driven by human hatred and violence, claiming the lives of 9 innocent, faithful people. Beloved children of God, each and every one of them. Who can make any sense of such hatred? This hatred is fueled by a spiritual force that actively opposes God and "God's dream for this world for wholeness, restoration, and peace", as Bishop-elect Audrey Scanlan wrote in her blog this week. Reactions ranged from holy and righteous anger, to shock & numbness, to gut-wrenching pain and sadness that we feel deep down in our bodies & souls.

Jon Stewart, host of "The Daily Show" said on Wednesday, this massacre points again to "the gaping racial wound in our country that will not heal and still we go on pretending it doesn't exist."

Yes, this is the hard and painful truth. So what are people of faith – especially white people of faith – to do about it?

The Rev. Dr. Dorothy White is an Episcopal priest who is the chaplain of St. Catherine's School, in Richmond, VA. Hers is one of the best responses I have read to help answer the question of how we are called to respond.

She writes: "I would urge that you take time and focus on ***“those things that break the heart of God.”*** Loving as God loves is not without challenge. Loving as God loves will stretch our lives to such a degree that only a Holy God can make possible."

She continues with a bit of her personal story: "As a young girl, in times of hardship, when revenge and anger seemed like the best answer, my parents would lead us to pray. And they would keep saying, "Let us pray." There were times that they even had to remind each other that the avenue of lasting change is always paved with prayer.

As we cry with Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, may we find in our prayers the voice and the actions that we so desperately need. May we not only love through social media outlets, but in thought, word and deed. *Oh, "that our hearts would break with the things that break the heart of God."* "

Now, for just a minute I will interrupt Dr. White's reflection and offer my own commentary on what she is saying. ***This is a hard reality about what it means for us***

to be disciples in that boat, riding out life's storms with Jesus. For the love of God, being a disciple means getting our hearts broken with all that breaks the heart of God.

The Rev. White continues. "So as we pray, what shall we do? We raise the bar on what we will and will not stand. Silent, passive indifference – "because it's not happening in my neighborhood" – is not what is needed from God's people. Our baptismal vows call us together as the Body of Christ to renounce destructive actions and agendas no matter their origin.

We are far from powerless. I urge us to embrace the God that we are to present to those around us.

Pray, yes. Act, yes. Let us live into the reality of our lives as God's people. Reconciliation is hard work. ***The best place for the Church to start is in prayer, with a willingness to be changed.***

Referring to the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, in September, 1963, which killed four young African American girls, the Rev. White says:

"I remember the news in 1963. I was nine years old growing up in Knoxville, TN. I kept looking at the television and thinking, "We go to church too." I recall praying, asking God why such things happen in the world. I am still living with this question, especially today as we pray for Emanuel, but I have found what my response is to be to such atrocities. I am to use my resources and energies to challenge wrong and promote equality in thought, word and deed.

And my heart is to "break with the things that break the heart of God." "(end quote).

For your consolation, hope, and encouragement to continue praying and working for justice, join us as we gather in prayer tonight from 4:30-6:00p.m. This week, take time to read again and pray the Beatitudes – the promised blessings for those who follow Jesus and with him, face "all the things that break the heart of God". Listen now to those Beatitudes from Matthew 5, in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*:

"This is what Jesus said:

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT. You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and God's rule.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN.

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced completely by the Holy One dearest to you.

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK. You're blessed when you're content with just who you are – no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. God is the food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL. You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being "care-full", you find yourselves cared for.

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART. You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS. You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE.

You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom."

Friends, the power of the storms of hatred, evil, and death are no match for the power of the truth and love of God. How do we know this? Because of the very fact that we are here today. We are the living testimony of that power, the power of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We are his living Body. And we know, too, from the responses of some of the victims' families to the one who murdered their dear ones. "Hate won't win", said one. Another said: "We are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive."

Lord, have mercy on us all. I am in awe and incredibly humbled by such gracious responses. I need to learn from and allow myself to be changed by such grace, because on my own, I know I would not be able to utter such confounding words of forgiveness in the face of what these people have suffered.

Only in opening more deeply to that Divine healing love will our lives, and our world be transformed. It is what God intends, and God can be trusted to see it through to completion.

"Lord, we need your help. Show us the way, and give us the courage to trust, and follow." Amen.

