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Seeing Jesus in the Midst of Conflict¹

Matthew 11:28-30

KAREN D. CROZIER

Introduction

This poetic sermon was shared at College Hour on October 5, 2010, during Fresno Pacific University's annual "Building a Culture of Peace Week." As an African American female ordained minister and professor in an Anabaptist, Mennonite Brethren higher educational institution, I am constantly seeking ways to participate in God's redemptive work in creation, while simultaneously giving voice to those people, places, and experiences that are often marginalized in both the church and society.

During the time I was preparing for this sermon, the U.S. was, and still remains, encumbered by socio-political issues such as immigration as criminalization and exploitation, nationalism, racial injustice and inequality. In addition, the presence of the nation's first black, bi-cultural president exposes and exacerbates social and political divides because we, as a nation, need courage to assume responsibility for the way race and color are embedded in the fabric of our society. In "Building a Culture of Peace" as a process, and not merely an event, I invited worshipers and attendees to explore the complexity of being Christian within this country's racialized, criminalized, and highly polarized social structures and systems. In my opinion, far too many Christians have embraced political ideologies that lack critical biblical and theological reflection and praxis. In the process, the individual and collective Christian witness in the U.S. on the aforementioned socio-political conflicts becomes synonymous with our political affiliation instead of our commitment to Jesus. Unfortunately, confessional Christians in the U.S. lose sight of how to see Jesus in the midst of the conflict, and how to provide a creative, redemptive response in the process.

Towards the ends of helping people to "see" Jesus and "be" yoked to Jesus, this poetic sermon invites us to reconsider one of Jesus' Wisdom sayings. In a time of political unrest, economic distress, military aggression, and personal uncertainty, Jesus invites us to see and come to him. In our seeing and coming

to Jesus, we then come to our true identity, and can experience unity among the diversity, in the body of Christ.

Sermon

The creative expression in this sermon occasion will employ poetic prose that will hopefully stimulate your imagination to see deeper into the heart of Jesus' grand invitation:

Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest

Relief from depression and oppression, Jesus says COME

Relief from addictions and self-degradation, Jesus says COME

Relief from economic exploitation and miseducation, Jesus says COME

Relief from suppression and deception, Jesus says COME

Relief from disintegration and annihilation, Jesus says COME

Relief from confusion and illusions, Jesus says COME

As we delve into peace—the harmony and unity of opposed parties, the conflict and tension transformed into a new reality of righteous relationships that honors all of humanity and God's just authority—we will hear the story of Melody, a biracial, bicultural high school senior of African American and Mexican American descent.

You will hear her psalm, hymn or song of praise as she unveils her thoughts and intentional search for God, the deliverer. Like her Judaic Christian foremothers, she has a song of peace and prophecy. Remember Miriam, Moses's and Aaron's sister, who could not stop praising God after God delivered her and her Israelite kin from the bondage in Egypt, or Mary, the mother of Jesus, one who was of lowly estate, but nevertheless saw God's majestic hand erase her oppressed state. The words that came from her mouth honored her God who dethroned the proud and the powerful, the ones who possessed little or no compassion to relate to Mary and those suffering a similarly politically marginalized fate. Mary magnified the Lord from the depth of her soul as she declared hope and healing for generations untold.

Now, please listen closely to the rhythm and poetry of Melody:

Within my being exists the harmony and unity of two continents, Africa and North America, and at least three countries, Mexico, U.S. and Ghana, a West African country. Yet, this beautiful integration of multiple, diverse nationalities is not a valued, treasured identity in this designated land of life and liberty.

I grow weary of being labeled black or brown when in reality I am both black and brown plus Euro-American too. Yes, you guessed it, my maternal great-great-great-great grandmother was raped by her slave master, deprived of her chastity, and the right to her own body. She nevertheless refused to internalize the violation and subjugation of the then slavocracy, she heard and heeded Jesus' grand invitation to COME, all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens. In the midst of conflict, she saw Jesus as the one who provides rest, peace, ways of creative nonviolent resistance, and ways to love her enemy. She left a praying legacy in addition to helping me love and cherish my own precious human dignity.

Being yoked to, in communion with, or politically aligned with Jesus meant that my great-great-great-great grandmother understood and embraced her identity that far transcended the scientific fallacy of the race category. Red, black, yellow, brown and white are all precious in God's sight, and when Christians, followers of Jesus, act like this is not so, we betray the essence of the Gospel that Jesus told.

Because, I, Melody, love myself, I stand ready to deepen my capacity to extend love to my enemy.

The strength to love is necessary in light of the deep history and wounds of the enemy:

The enemy of white supremacy, and resistance of black and brown inferiority.

That constant temptation of hatred and rage can become like a never-ending plague.

Millions of my African ancestors were involuntary immigrants.

Brought to a land that once belonged to the indigenous and Native Americans.

The legalization of transporting and importing black bodies perceived as mere property rarely was denounced as a crime against humanity.

The few black freed men and women, white and mulatto abolitionists who believed in equality fought to end the disgrace and travesty.

Nevertheless, the conflict persisted in a very unfortunate way.

Southern white Christians versus Northern white Christians.

Southern, white, conservative Christians versus Northern, white, liberal Christians.

Southern, white, conservative, confederate Christians versus Northern, white, liberal, union, Christians.

Unfortunately, one's geographical location, political affiliation and skin pigmentation proved to be more influential than one's Christian identification.

Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery and eventually won the war, a conflict that was between Christians supposedly serving the same Lord.

Political liberation emerged for my ancestors who were once enslaved, but it was short-lived, with no acknowledgement of the harm or evil that was perpetrated.

I trust you see the similarity between slavery of the past, and immigration of the present. Once again, a nation is divided over the migration and labor of human bodies. Involuntary immigrants were my African ancestors. Maybe, depending on your perspective, my Mexican ancestors can be seen as both voluntary and involuntary immigrants. Time does not permit me to present this view, but here is something that I want to draw attention to, if the kingdom of God is without geographical borders, then doesn't that suppose we are all sisters and brothers?

Put differently, shouldn't our religious and spiritual identity trump and transcend our national identity, for I can hear the Apostle Paul saying, in Christ Jesus, there is neither Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free., If he were alive today abiding in the U.S., he probably would add political parties and continue to say, there is neither Republican or Democrat, Independent or TEA because we are ONE whole body bearing witness to a different reality that reflects God's inclusive and extensive love to those who have been forgotten.

If the kingdom of God commands me to love my neighbor and enemy too, then doesn't that suppose I must extend grace and compassion to each and every one?

If the kingdom of God is my highest authority, then doesn't that suppose I am to bear my cross when the law of the land does not measure up?

How would the public and political discourse on immigration be transformed if U.S. Christians of every race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, language, denomination, political party and geographical location would first consider the questions mentioned above?

What new policy and practice would emerge that can reflect our commitment to Christ, God's chosen one? Even if the broader society and government officials refused to hear, what new light from churches and Christians would appear? What new relationships can be formed as we sow seeds of peace instead of more hostility and discord?

"Come to me," Jesus, the man from Galilee calls out to you and me.

Forsake a life riddled with conflict and modern-day politics that continues to inflict injustice and dis-ease in the land.

Come to me, Jesus, the man from Galilee calls out to you and me.

For building a culture of peace requires vigilant intentionality.

NOTES

- ¹ De La Torre, Miguel A. *Trails of hope and tears: Testimonies on immigration*. New York: Orbis Books, 2009.
- ² Freeborn, Jack. "The presence of Christ in Matthew." *Expository Times* 115 (May 2004): 156-161.
- ³ Page, Hugh, R., Jr., Randall Bailey, and et al., eds. *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's scriptures from Africa and the Africa diaspora*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.
- ⁴ Swetnam, James. "Venid a mi" (Matthew 11:28-30): El discipulado fundamento de la etica en Mateo. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (April 2006): 347-348.
- ⁵ The Bible. New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version.