

“Restoration: Environmental Health”

Matthew 8: 18-27

18 Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. **19** A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” **20** And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” **21** Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” **22** But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”

23 And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. **24** A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. **25** And they went and woke him up, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” **26** And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. **27** They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”

The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.

I came across this quote by James Baldwin during my sermon preparation this week. “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” This quote comes from an unfinished manuscript of Baldwin’s which “reflects on race in America by tracing the lives and assassinations of his three friends, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King Jr. [Baldwin’s intent was to confront] the political and social structures of racism and the emotional poverty of the US” through this work” but unfortunately he passed before it was completed.

These words have stayed with me all week as I have reflected on what is happening in our community, in our state, in our nation, in our world right now. This past week, as we have heard on the news, in three separate shooting sprees, 6 Asian-American women were killed. These women were mothers. They were grandmothers. They were friends. They were someone's daughter. And they were targeted because they were Asian-American.

Officials have been hesitant to call this a hate crime but I don't know what else we could call it. Because this incident is just one of many which is on the rise. This incident is just one of many in a long history of a certain group being targeted for violence because of their skin color, their race, their ethnicity, their gender identity, or their sexuality.

Our history as the United States is filled with such incidents. Concentration camps filled with Japanese Americans after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The Trail of Tears which moved Native Americans from the land which they had lived on for generations just so another group could take over for profit. Jim Crow laws and sun-down cities which had been a staple of our justice system, although have been found illegal, their remnants still remain and effect so many in our community.

Over the years, over the centuries, we can trace how division and assumptions about the supposed "others" have torn us apart as a society. And for

most of us in 2021, enough is enough. We are tired of maintaining a system which thrives on separation and oppression. We have had more than enough because we know that the structures of such a system are grounded in a false narrative of power, might and greed. For many of us in 2021, we have had more than enough of the brokenness, more than enough of the hate, more than enough of the hurt, more than enough of the divisions and the assumptions.

We want a different way to engage each other. We want a different way to be in relationship with one another. We want a different way to be connected with one another instead of tearing each other apart all the time.

In faith terms, what we are wanting and what James Baldwin is referencing is restorative justice. It is the type of justice the prophets talked about in regards to Israel's relationships with the poor, with the orphan, with the stranger in their midst. It is the type of justice which Jesus lived out in his ministry. It is the type of justice we claim as disciples of Christ when we embrace our calling to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

Restorative justice seeks healing not retribution. It seeks wholeness not an "eye for an eye". "It seeks to repair the harm caused by the wrong doing. It [seeks] to fix what is broken and heal the relationship, not just say "I'm sorry" or have a time out".

In faith terms, restorative justice recognizes that we are connected to all, that we are connected with all. In faith terms, restorative justice is grounded in this idea of God's Shalom, in "this vision of living in a sense of "all-rightness" with each other, with the creator, and with the environment." In faith terms, restorative justice is a call to discipleship.

And it is this understanding of restorative justice which shapes Matthews telling of our text for today. This week, we are going back a bit in the narrative found in the Gospel of Matthew. At first glance this story appears to be an odd choice for our conversation about healing and wholeness. Yet, we know that a large piece of recovery, a large piece of restorative justice is accountability. As I often tell my children and remind myself daily, that we are free to make our choices but we are not free from the consequences of those choices. Whatever the result, we are the ones who made those choices. We can't blame anyone else, although we might and often do try.

By framing the call to discipleship in terms of restorative justice, Matthew wants his community to understand that when we accept the call to follow Jesus, we are being invited to transform our lives, to experience a different way to be. And living out that call cannot and will not be on our terms. This call to follow Jesus cannot be something we take for granted nor will it be something we do once

and never think about ever again. Matthew wants his community to know that as people of faith, as ones who have named Jesus Christ as our Lord, our call to follow Jesus is a choice we will make daily. It is a choice we will make consciously over and over again for the rest of our lives through our actions, through our words, through our interactions with others.

Matthew does all this, says all this in this text because he understands that the Kingdom of God is too important, that there is too much at stake for us to only be disciples of Christ when it is convenient for us. Matthew understands and wants his community to understand that anything less than our full commitment to becoming the people God created us to be, to becoming the people God calls us to be misses the mark in fully realizing the vision of God's Shalom coming to fruition here on Earth.

I know this sounds harsh. It is just as harsh for us today as it was when Matthew's community first heard it some two thousand years ago. But Matthew shares this reality because he knows that this calling to be a movement of wholeness in a fragmented world goes against everything this world holds as its values and priorities. Matthew knows that in a world which values power and greed, that it would be so easy for us to walk away from a life which calls us to healing, which calls us to repair the breach, which calls us to bring wholeness for

all because it is hard and difficult work. Matthew understand that this call to be disciples of Christ, to be followers of Jesus will have us making and engaging in unpopular choices, choices such as being a voice for the voiceless when they continue to be ignored or forgotten, will have us welcoming the LGBTQIA community when other religious institutions will not recognize their right to marriage and adopting children. Matthew understands that this call to be followers of Jesus will have making and holding firm to some unpopular choices like seeing all as created in the image of God when others really only want to see the color of skin, really only want to focus on the person's country of descent when they engage the supposed "other". Mathew understands that if we as people of faith do not embrace fully what it means to be a disciple of Christ here on Earth, with all its joys and the frustrations, with all its hopes and the brokenness, with all its stormy seas and the lilies of the fields, if we do not fully embrace what it means to be a disciples of Christ here on Earth, then we will never truly understand the Kingdom of God when it is in our midst. We will never truly experience the fullness of God's Shalom here on EArth as it is in Heaven.

Or let me say it this way...I know that I am supposed to talk about restoration in terms of environmental health today. But in light of the incidents of this past week, it seemed naive to only focus on restorative justice as it relates to the environment because it is all of it, connected together, coming together to be

whole. From how we care for God's creation to how we care for God's people, we cannot talk about one part of restorative justice without talking about how it relates to all the rest.

The beauty of this season of recovery is that we are experiencing an invitation like never before to see how it is all connected...our community health, our spiritual health, our mental health, our creative health, our physical health, the health of the environment. Because as we have said before, if one part of the Body of Christ is not well, then the whole Body is not well. We cannot claim healing and wholeness until all can experience healing and wholeness.

And until we name, until we acknowledge the brokenness, the hurt, the hate in our midst, we as people of faith, we as a culture, as a society, as a community, as a nation, cannot be made whole.

For too long, we have ignored the cries of justice. For too long, we have placed a band-aid over the wound while ignoring the infection underneath. For too long, we have over-consumed, taken what is not ours, and simply said I'm sorry without changing our behavior.

I feel like I say this every week. I don't have all the answers but what I do know is that no longer can we ignore the cries for justice, no longer can we ignore the cries coming from the voices of the poor, the forgotten, from the voices of our Asian American brothers and sisters, from the voices of our African-American

brothers and sisters, no longer can we ignore the cries for justice coming from the birds of the air and the creatures of the sea and land.

If as disciples of Christ, we take seriously our call to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, now is the time for our actions to begin reflecting our words.

Because the reality of it is, we will never be able to fully experience God's Shalom here on Earth until we do. May it be so. Amen.