

Message for the fifth Sunday of Lent, April 2, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: John 11:1-44

We wait

It's hard to wait. Even at the best of times. But it's especially hard to wait when things are difficult, when you're feeling awful, when you don't know where to turn, when you just want things to be made right again. The words of the psalmist take us to that place of pain and desperation: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! ... I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning." This is an expression of deep longing. How very hard it is to wait.

There's a lot of waiting going on in our story from John 11 as well. And a lot of pain. Martha and Mary send word to their friend Jesus that their brother, Lazarus, is very sick and on the verge of death. They expect a response. They know Jesus is a healer. Surely he will come and make things right.

But Jesus doesn't come. Instead he intentionally delays. Intentionally. "After having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." He let them wait. Can you imagine how excruciating this must have felt to Mary and Martha? Why doesn't Jesus come? Time is running out. Lazarus is going to die. We need help now! Come, Jesus, and make things right.

But Jesus doesn't come and Lazarus dies. The sisters and their friends lay his body in a tomb and begin to grieve. We know the pain and disorientation of this kind of loss. It is such a difficult, awful place to be.

Jesus finally decides that it's time for him to go to Judea, to Bethany, the home of

Mary and Martha, which is within spitting distance of Jerusalem, a place of uncertainty and danger for him. His disciples are distraught. They don't understand why Jesus would go back to a place where folks are out to get him. When Jesus tells them that his friend Lazarus has fallen asleep they assume that means that Lazarus is getting well and Jesus is no longer needed. They are confused. Then Jesus tells them, quite plainly and coldly: "Lazarus is dead. And I'm glad that he is because now you will believe." What!? This can't be happening. What on earth is Jesus doing? Why are they stuck in the middle of this? What are they waiting for?

Jesus and his entourage arrive in Bethany. It's now four days after Lazarus' body has been placed in the tomb. These four days are significant. It was commonly believed at that time that the spirit might reenter the body at any time within the first three days after death. Beyond three days, this was not possible. Too much time had lapsed for this to be able to happen for Lazarus. Those who grieved his death knew that while they were waiting for Jesus that window of hope had closed.

Martha meets Jesus on the road. She cries out, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And she makes an appeal: "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again." They enter into a theological discussion which seems to be happening on two different plains: Martha believes in the resurrection of dead in the last days. Jesus is talking about resurrection here and now. Martha doesn't yet understand but she knows, somehow, that what Jesus says is true. She believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. She trusts him and in his presence she will wait.

Martha goes to get Mary, who is still at home. Mary comes to see Jesus. She

falls at his feet and cries out, like Martha earlier, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She is in great pain, now clinging desperately to the one she loves and who she thought would help. Jesus is caught up in this grief. He is surrounded by a community of mourners. He feels their pain. He enters into their pain. In fact, it makes him mad. Apparently the Greek word used here is stronger than what is translated as greatly disturbed and deeply moved. Jesus feels anger and indignation. Those of us who have lost a dearly loved one, especially prematurely, understand that emotion. We rail against the horrible unfairness of death. Jesus felt that, too. And along with all the mourners, he wept.

Then, after waiting through Lazarus' illness and death, after waiting four days as Lazarus' body deteriorated in the tomb, after waiting as pain, anger and grief wracked the community, Jesus finally makes his move. He goes to the tomb. He prays. He calls out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And, miracle of miracles, Lazarus appears, a dead man walking. Jesus says to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

As you know, I recently spent five intense days in Louisiana as part of a MCC learning tour on mass incarceration. As I've continued to process all that I learned and experienced in those five days, and as I sat with these scripture passages from the Psalms and John, I've been thinking a lot about what it means to be in an uncomfortable, confusing yet morally and spiritually compelling position and to have to wait.

On this tour those of us who are white were brought very starkly into an understanding of our white privilege. As white folks, we live lives that are generally untouched by a reality that makes life difficult and uncertain for black and brown folks. They live with a much higher stress level because of the need to be vigilant. They know

what it is like for them or their children to be treated badly and how random this can be. This happens for them not necessarily because of what they do – which is the way we rationalize it – but because of what they look like, because of the bodies in which they live, because of who they physically are.

This discrimination happens on a systemic level, which is hard for us to understand, believe and accept. Author Drew Hart, who will be speaking at the Mountain States Mennonite Conference Faith and Life forum in Colorado Springs at the end of this month, explains that here in the U.S. we have a “racialized system.” The way things are set up and operate benefits white folks at the expense of people of color. It is intentional. This was quite obvious in what we saw on the learning tour. The prison system needs bodies in order to make money. In effect, they need slave labor. Where do modern-day slaves come from? Look at all the black and brown folks; let’s call them criminal. Let’s start a drug war. Let’s highlight law and order. Folks will be very afraid and will clamor for these criminals to be locked up. It’s very doable. And it’s self-sustaining. The more folks are criminalized, the more their communities are torn apart. The more they are denied services and opportunities that would help them re-integrate when they are released, the more criminal they become. Money is made, white society benefits and it becomes so ingrained in the system that no one questions what is going on.

Hmmm... When your eyes are opened and it becomes clear that what you’ve always assumed was basically just and fair, is instead deeply flawed and unjust, that people, including children, are being exploited in your name, it hurts. You enter a dark place, a place of pain. You descend into the miserable depths of self-loathing. How can this be? How can I not have known? This is an extremely uncomfortable place to be.

We want to get out of it fast. White folks on our learning tour kept saying, “This is awful. I want to do something. What can I do to fix this? How can I make this right?”

Well, this is where the waiting part comes in. Our white privilege allows us to see and learn, perhaps to act, and then basically to escape and forget because in reality our lives can go on as they always have. We don’t have to stay conscious or “woke,” as our friends of color would say. Our bodies aren’t on the line. The choice to remain conscious is difficult. It’s difficult because it is a choice to dwell in the pain, to stay in discomfort, to let go of any illusions of power, to watch with longing for the morning, to helplessly wait for Jesus to come.

I want to share with you excerpts from a letter written by George Yancy, professor of philosophy at Emory University in Georgia. Prof. Yancy, a black man, starts his letter, “Dear White America.” He speaks of the need to enter in and wait. He offers his words as a gift, in love.

“If you are white, and you are reading this letter,” he writes, “I ask that you don’t run to seek shelter from your own racism. Don’t hide from your responsibility. Rather, begin, right now, to practice being vulnerable. Being neither a ‘good’ white person nor a liberal white person will get you off the proverbial hook. Take a deep breath. I ask that you try to be ‘un-sutured.’ If that term brings to mind a state of pain, open flesh, it is meant to do so. After all, it is painful to let go of your ‘white innocence,’ to use this letter as a mirror, one that refuses to show you what you want to see, one that demands that you look at the lies that you tell yourself so that you don’t feel the weight of responsibility for those who live under the yoke of whiteness, your whiteness.

“I can see your anger. I can see that this letter is being misunderstood. This letter

is not asking you to feel bad about yourself, to wallow in guilt. That is too easy. I'm asking for you to tarry, to linger, with the ways in which you perpetuate a racist society, the ways in which you, too, are racist.”

[end of the quote from George Yancy]

Listen to that last sentence again. It's where the waiting comes in: “I am asking for you to tarry, to linger, with the ways in which you perpetuate a racist society, the ways in which you, too, me, too, are racist.” Linger in this place of reality, this place of accountability, this place where the façade cracks and glimmers of a more just reality begin to shine through. As I hold these words from George Yancy, as I let them sink in, the words of Psalm 130 resonate within me: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.”

After an excruciating period of confusion and waiting, Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, called to Lazarus, “Come out!” Lazarus immersed, still bound in the wrappings of death. Jesus said to the crowd, “Unbind him and let him go.” Jesus will come to us, too, in the depths of sin and sadness when we are still bound in the wrappings of death. He has forgiveness to offer. Unbind them and let them go, he says. In him and with him there is always new life, for us, for our society, for those who are oppressed, for those who have benefited from oppression.

O Israel, O USA, O Glennon Heights Mennonite Church, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem us from all our iniquities.

We believe, we trust, and with broken and expectant hearts, we wait. Amen.