

Flint & Steel (3.15.2020)

3rd Sunday of Lent

by Rev. Emilia Halstead

Now what do you suppose the owner will do when he hears of this? [Mark 12:9a]

[Sung] Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth, from despair to hope, from fear to trust. Lead us from hate to love, from war, to peace, let peace fill our hearts, let peace fill our world, let peace fill our universe.

To begin my sermon, I have two preliminary remarks. The first is about the bad theology that has been placed at the foot of our scripture passage this morning. And the second is to highlight the thematic object on the alter and how it ties to the title of my sermon.

First, squelching bad theology. This parable has been used over the centuries in deeply anti-Semitic ways. In this bad

theology, the wicked tenants have been equated with the Jewish people. Not just the Jewish religious authorities of Jesus' time, but ALL of the Jewish people. In verse 9b it says, "the owner will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others." This verse has been used, in this bad theology, to say "well it's not the Jews who are the chosen people anymore, its the Christian church, so Christians are allowed to destroy the Jewish people without fear of retribution from God."

I cannot highlight enough how deeply wrong that theology is, especially so close to the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Nazi concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz, on January 27th of this year, 2020.

A better interpretation of this passage, which we will dive into deeper in a moment, is that the tenants are religious

authority, or simply “the authorities” or, even more plainly, the ones in privilege and power who make the rules and the laws, be they religious or civic.

Once again – this passage is NOT about Jewish people versus Christian people. It's about those in power NOT being servant leaders, which leads us back into the larger theme of discipleship that we have been reflecting on in our Lenten season this year.

My second introductory remark is about our theme of following Jesus through the wilderness of Lent. Each week, for those just joining us online for the first time, we have been placing a different object on the altar that might be used on a wilderness trek. The object also ties to the specific theme for the day.

To summarize the thematic objects thus far starting on Ash Wednesday: for the theme of "love me" we used a wilderness blanket; for "search me" we used a pair of binoculars; for "keep me we used 3 carabiners. Today, for our theme of "change me" on the altar is a really cool goblet that holds matches, with a striking surface on the bottom.

If your confused about the connection of matches to the theme of "change me," think – chemical reaction: "When a match is lit, potassium, chlorine, phosphorus, and sulfur react and cause a combustion, which produces light and heat." [from Prezi.com]

Another way to say that is: When a match is lit, potassium, chlorine, phosphorus, and sulfur react - and change – into light and heat.

What I REALLY wanted to have on the altar, for “old-time sake” was flint and steel – BUT since no one had any laying around in their house AND because striking matches offers the same great metaphor of chemical change, I went with the matches.

However, since I am a former science museum educator, I would also like to share the chemical reaction of flint and steel, since it's different than matches: “Strike a sharp edge of the flint a glancing blow with the high carbon steel. Doing this just right takes practice. Very tiny particles of fresh iron fly out from the steel. Upon contact with oxygen in the air, the surfaces of the iron particles spontaneously ignite and give off heat as they oxidize (rust).”

[from survivaltopics.com]

Whether lighting a match or striking flint against steel, a

chemical change occurs and produces light and heat. In our scripture passage for today, Jesus is actively turning up the heat in Jerusalem, striking the flint of truth against the steel of authority, hoping to create sparks. And it works. Those in power are ready to take him by force and silence him, by any means necessary, if it weren't for the crowd of people standing there...

So, then what does that have to do with us, how does this passage make a change in us? Well, I'm glad you asked. I want to focus in on verse 9a, "Now what do you suppose the owner will do when he hears of this?" The point of this parable is to get those in authority, power, and privilege to think, to reflect on the roles that are talked about, to get those in authority to ask questions – especially around the injustice in the passage.

One COULD say, "Oh I know that I'm a follower of Jesus, I can see that 'they're' (the tenants) wrong." It's another thing altogether, to wonder "Can Jesus' hearers, those in authority, power, and privilege, "see" or be startled into recognizing the injustice in the parable." Can I, Emilia Halstead, a white woman, "see" or be startled into recognizing the injustice in this parable. Can anyone in authority, power, or privilege who hears this parable today "see" or be startled into recognizing the injustice in this parable?

If so, or if not, how then does that shape the course of action of the one in power who had heard and seen (or not seen) the injustice in this passage?

If I find comfort in this passage, and find myself saying "Oh, well I'm glad it wasn't me. I'm glad it's their fault," then I

fall back into the trap of the parable. To explain what I mean, let me share another parable, this one from the Gospel of Luke 18:10-12,

Jesus said, "Imagine two men walking up a road, going to the temple to pray. One of them is a Pharisee and the other is a tax collector. Once inside the temple, the Pharisee stands up and prays this prayer in honor of himself: "God, how I thank You that I am not on the same level as other people—crooks, cheaters, the sexually immoral—like this tax collector over here. Just look at me! I fast not once but twice a week, and I faithfully pay my tithes on every penny of income." Over in the corner, the tax collector begins to pray, but he won't even lift his eyes to heaven. He pounds on his chest in sorrow and says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Jesus parables, especially the one from Mark 12:1-12 today,

are meant to HOOK the listener – those in positions of power and authority, that is. This parable is meant to startle.

Those, in authority listening, are meant to recognize the injustice that is happening, AND to realize that no matter how one responds TO it, the listener, who has power and privilege, is being implicated in it. In 2020, for myself and my fellow white Americans, no matter whom we “side” with in the parable, and no matter which “role” we mentally put ourselves in as we listen, we are implicated.

We don't LIKE that we are implicated because it causes us to change our course of action. Remember that old adage “be careful what you wish for or pray for?” When anyone asks Jesus to “change me,” it's not always going to be a sweet, comforting, 'cup of tea' kind of change.

For so long, many white people have painted Jesus as the

sweet and tender shepherd that would never do anything to harm his sheep and do anything to save them. Well...often that "saving" gesture is a strong prod in a different direction, a parable if you will, that causes white people to be caught off guard, deeply unsettled, and come up short saying, "Surely, you don't mean me Rabbi?"

The purpose of this parable is to serve as an indictment that brings the listener, who is in a position of power and privilege up short, to startle those in power into seeing the patterns of injustice, in which they themselves are implicated. Just like the prophet Nathan did with King David, with the parable of the stolen lamb, after David has Bathsheba's husband killed in battle, so that he can "legally" marry her.

This opens up the question, "Okay, so where do I, a white person, privileged and given power purely by the color of my

skin, go from here?"

Anyone with privilege, power, and/or authority who recoils at either the injustice done to the slaves, OR at being trapped in the thinking, "well I'm glad I'm not like THOSE people over there," is brought up short. Anyone with privilege, power, and/or authority then has to answer that question, "Where do I go from here?"

Do I get angry and defensive, wanting to silence the messenger? Do I ignore what I'm experiencing and deny that I've been hooked in? Do I get curious about what I'm feeling, noticing the chemical reaction and change in me?

Last month, our First Church book club, which is currently made up solely of white people, read the book called *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About*

Racism by Robin DiAngelo. We had a similar collective experience reading that book, as we might from reading this parable in Mark 12:1-12. After reading the book we started to ask ourselves, "Where do I go from here?" Do I get angry and defensive, wanting to silence the messenger? Do I ignore what I'm experiencing and deny that I feel "hooked in"? Do I get curious about what I'm feeling, noticing the chemical reaction and change in me?

Myself and my white brothers and sisters in this country, daily take advantage of a white supremacist government system that STRONGLY favors us, and has been passed down from generation to generation. On the day we are born, without doing anything, we receive the "benefits" deemed worthy of us by simply having less melanin in our skin.

Similar to the tenants in the parable, who are not owners, we

are benefiting from a system extremely stacked in the favor of white people. They, and we, cling to the benefits without recognizing the obligations, or even that we are clinging to the benefits. This compromises the integrity of people in the story, and it compromises our integrity, as white people, and makes them – and us - complicit in the continuation of an unjust story.

My question today is to my white sisters and brothers – my white Christian brothers and sister, in particular – will you join me in letting Jesus startle us into seeing our own complicity? Can we learn to get comfortable with being uncomfortable so that we can reflect on questions like “what is our higher commitment, our higher loyalty, as a people of faith?” and “What really does belong to God?”

If we are willing to confront our fragile “whiteness,” moving

past the choices of anger, discrimination, defensiveness, and denial, and choosing instead the path of curiosity - that opens up a whole new the path of discipleship. A path that we've happily, in our complacency, kept walled up and surrounded with landmines.

My fellow white people, are you willing to get curious with me about our contentment with the supposed "death and disappearance" of all of our brothers and sisters of the Native Kingdoms of this continent, that we blithely call home?

My fellow white people, are you willing to get curious with me about ALL of the continued injustices done to keep our sisters and brothers of African descent enslaved in this country?

My fellow white people, are you willing to get curious with

me about our continued willingness to be bound in the shackles of fear that are held in place by the lies fed to us about all of our sisters and brothers of Middle Eastern descent?

My fellow white people, are you willing to get curious with me about how we got to the point where we are complicit in putting our Latinx brothers and sisters, and their children, in cages, at the same time that we are “celebrating” the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Nazi concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz?

My fellow white people, are you willing to get curious with me about how we got to the point where we are EAGER to blame our sisters and brothers of Asian decent as the cause of our anxiety and fear about CORVID-19?

Like a lit match, like the sparks from flint and steel, we white Christian people we have a choice to make. Confronted by Jesus as complicit, will we continue to burn in anger & discrimination – all consuming like the fires of California and Australia this year? Will we continue trying to wipe out our feelings of discomfort with defensiveness & denial – reeking havoc like the hurricanes in Puerto Rico and recent tornado in Tennessee?

Or will we allow Jesus to guide the spark he has struck in us, intended to change us, to become useful fires that bring the steady light of understanding and the warmth of healing? My fellow white people of all genders, creeds, financial status, physical abilities, and backgrounds – will you join me? Will you join me in working to set ourselves free from the gilded cage of racist tyranny?

Speaking for myself, I'm so ready to lay down my anger, discrimination, defensiveness, and denial. I want to be changed, knowing that it won't be an easy road, knowing that as a white person I have a lot of personal landmines and that I will need God to help me diffuse them. Some of those landmines, I've put in the ground. Many others have been put in the ground for me, and some of them have been buried for a LONG time, which makes them even harder for me to find and diffuse. Yet, I have all hope, faith, and trust that with God, it is possible for me to begin clearing that field.

For me, a world moving towards freedom from all prejudice and discrimination, with everyone dancing to God's rhythm of Love, and seeking together the ecological healing of our home – planet Earth – now THAT'S paradise.

[Sung] *Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth,*

from despair to hope, from fear to trust. Lead us from hate to love, from war, to peace, let peace fill our hearts, let peace fill our world, let peace fill our universe. Amen.