

Luke 13:10-17
August 21, 2016

“Sherman Park and the Bent Over Woman”

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Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “A Riot is the language of the unheard.”

As Los Angeles was burning in the wake of the riots following the Rodney King verdict, A prominent African American pastor said, “what we saw this week was a kind of spontaneous combustion. After all, that is simply accumulated, discarded materials, ignited by friction or some spark. You cannot have spontaneous combustion unless there is a lot of discarded material that has been discarded for some period of time.”

On a much smaller scale but with equal pain, we experienced some spontaneous combustion in the city of Milwaukee this week. I ask all of us to pray for the people who are scared by the smell of smoke and sound of gunshots near their homes. Pray for those who see no other way to bare their pain than to burn parts of their neighborhood. Pray for first responders who need to get in to the neighborhood. Pray for home care, hospice, public services and others who continue to serve the city. Pray for children caught in the middle of adult problems. Pray for political leaders to use God’s peace and justice as their measuring stick for any response. Pray for national guard and others who have been on standby. Pray for churches and businesses including our sister church Bethel-Bethany UCC, and Pastor Tim Perkins, located on 54th and locust who have been serving the people in Sherman Park for many, many decades.

I still visit the Sherman Park neighborhood to see the pristine condition in which my grandparents’ house and property are kept by the current homeowner. I drive by the Park for which the neighborhood is named and remember my grandmother and I walking there to swing and play. I pass by the building which housed the barber shop my grandpa and I would walk to. I can still hear the sound of tiny berries fallen from trees which would crack under the step of my grandpa’s hard-soled shoes. Part of me is in that neighborhood. To know that people are feeling discarded, to know I have not done much to change or even acknowledge the pain of residents living there, it all breaks my heart.

This week’s gospel tells of Jesus teaching in the synagogue when he notices a bent over woman. Imagine how seldom she saw the sun or stars. Imagine her visual world limited to a few square feet at the ground before her. Imagine being shunned, avoided, unnoticed, ostracized, teased. She was isolated from community, isolated from nature, isolated to the point hardly anyone noticed her, but Jesus. Might we draw comparisons between this woman, unnoticed by anyone in her day... And a neighborhood making the same cry this past week?

Luke tells us Jesus noticed the woman, he saw the one no one else would or could see anymore; and with God’s power he blessed her back to full standing as a child of God. Despite it being the Sabbath... she stood up ... she stood straight... and began praising God in front of everyone in the synagogue.

Jesus is calling us today to notice each other's pain because there can be dire results when we ignore each other's pain too long.

In an article I came across recently called, "Ostracism, the social death penalty," Dr. Lynn Parramore defines ostracism as, "the feeling of being a pariah, of being shunned, ignored by the group, or given the silent treatment."

Dr. Parramore adds, "ostracism is among the most devastating experiences we can endure (it is) deeply connected to our most fundamental human need to be recognized and accepted. Ostracism can reshape the human brain." We can conclude from Dr. Parramore's research that an ostracized person, or group, begins to feel like discarded material.

Jesus teaches us today to notice pain laid bare before us, then shows his disciples how to move our orientation toward the pain of a person or group, trusting the full power of God's blessing and healing is being brought to bear. This is a very difficult step. It is unintuitive. Often our natural reaction is to move away from one's pain but Jesus tells us people of faith are called to move toward the pain. Psalm 113 tells us God raises the poor from the dust, and the needy from the ash heaps." God has entered their pain, right where they are, and calls us to move ourselves toward the pain of others. But we might wonder how do we do that?

This church has a long history of moving toward the pain of others, towards those feeling excluded. Emanuel gave women a vote in spiritual affairs 25 years before our nation gave women a vote in national elections. Emanuel spent over a million dollars to install bathrooms and an elevator which made our building fully accessible. Emanuel, wanting to be more than a loving and caring congregation, went one step further to name ourselves open and affirming. In these and so many more ways Emanuel continues to say, "We acknowledge your pain, we want to move toward you with God's healing power to help restore abundant life."

I wonder. What would Christ demand of us if he were in Milwaukee? I want to share a few ideas for us to consider, they come from an article published on the website Urban Milwaukee. As people of faith seeking to be partners with a powerful and healing God... We might...

Access the online directory of Black Run businesses in Milwaukee, or the directory of Hmong run businesses, or the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and support them.

Give to effectively operating non-profits which are run by people of color.

If we are a decision maker in our workplace, we might prioritize job creation in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

If we live in the suburbs we might contact political leaders and petition to ensure people of color could move in and would be welcome there.

Desegregate our circle of friends.

Push our workplace to develop a clear plan for diversity and equity.

Desegregate our News sources.

Talk to other white people *and finally, one of the most difficult,*

Participate actively in diverse groups and communities but don't take over.

We can't do all of these, but perhaps we could do one, or three or more of them. As the church we are called in each moment to lift before God all who are crippled in spirit, or ailment, or oppression; and we are called to lift beside this enormous pain the mighty one, Jesus Christ, whose touch can heal, bless and restore life.

I believe Milwaukee can respond very differently than in 1967, but it will take many of us doing something that is not intuitive... but is faithful... moving toward the pain we see expressed; trusting a God whose spirit and healing are always present. If a bent-over woman can find abundance in God's blessing... then by that same power healing can come to Sherman Park, to Milwaukee, and beyond.

Amen.