

Saved From Patience

There's an old expression applied to the work of journalists: that their job is to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable. The same can be applied to the work of preachers of the Gospel: that our job, too, is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

This is something we often see Jesus do in the gospel stories. He regularly pleads the cause of the little ones, the most vulnerable members of society: in the synagogue, in the temple, and even on the cross. That's comforting the afflicted.

But Jesus also afflicts the comfortable: warning about the dangers and the limitations of wealth, and directing us to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison--reminding us that whatever we do to the least of these--the little ones--we do to Christ, to God's own self, so identified is God with his little ones.

The Gospel text before us today is normally thought of as a text of comfort. As Joanna read for us, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

One of my favourite presentations of this text is in Handel's Messiah, and it's certainly a text of comfort for Handel, paired there with a text from Isaiah: "He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

But notice that even in this text, there is more than comfort: there is also a challenge: "I will give you rest," yes; but also, "take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." And even though the yoke is described as easy and the burden light, it's still a burden and a yoke, a commitment and a constraint, a binding of ourselves to the way of Jesus. A yoke is what you put around the necks of livestock to keep them in line and pulling together.

So, in this one text, both a word of comfort to the little ones, the afflicted; and a word of affliction, of challenge, perhaps particularly for those who are comfortable. In our gathering today, there are surely those who are afflicted, some of God's little ones. I hope you will hear in this sermon a word of comfort.

There are, just as surely, a larger number of those gathered here this morning that fall somewhere in the "comfortable" category, me included. And while I don't want you to leave here feeling afflicted, it would not be a bad

thing if you were to go away feeling “convicted,” in the way Christians use that term: to be made aware of the ways that we are, or are not, living up to our commitment to follow the way of Jesus, to accept that yoke and burden.

I was reading this week about the origins of the American Civil Rights movement in the 1950s, the story of Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks was a black woman who was arrested when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger in the days of segregation. After her arrest, the black community of Montgomery, Alabama gathered together at churches.

One of the speakers at those early meetings was a young preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr. The night after Rosa Parks’ arrest, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech in which he said: “For many years we have shown an amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice.”

“To be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice.” That really hit me.

King is naming the complacency that can settle around us--around the afflicted and the comfortable alike--and become a different kind of yoke, a different kind of constraint. The kind of constraint that says, that’s just the way it is. It’s always been this way. It’s never gonna change. King is calling for us to be rescued from that, to be saved from a

complacency that leaves in place a system in which some are over-privileged, taking up too much space and too many resources; while others are under-privileged, left with the scraps, the crumbs, the refuse.

King’s audience was made up of the afflicted. He was calling them to wake up, to shake off their complacency. Rosa Parks herself said that the reason she refused to give up her seat that day was because she was tired--not so much physically tired, but tired of the daily indignities imposed by the system of segregation: “the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

The bigger part of the problem though was not the complacency of black people, the afflicted, but the complacency of the comfortable, of the whites, those who were over-privileged by the system of segregation. For things to change, those with privilege needed to hear King’s words, and take them to heart. They needed to be saved from patience, stirred out of their complacency; they needed to become unwilling to live with a system that denied freedom and justice to black people.

Many did; and many things have changed since that time. But I also know from my recent experiences in the United States that the sin of racism continues to have a devastating and costly impact on too many lives, and on the country as a whole.

In our Canadian smugness, we like to think that we’re better than that, that those kinds of things don’t happen here. In some ways that’s true, but in other ways we’re not that different. This week I

read the story of Barb Kentner, a First Nations woman from Thunder Bay who was the victim of a brutal assault that appears to be racially motivated. I posted a link to the article on the Trinity Facebook page, and it will be linked to the sermon page on the website as well.

In January, Barb was struck in the stomach by a rusted trailer hitch that was thrown from a passing vehicle as she walked down a street with her sister, Melissa, one night. It's alleged that someone yelled, "I got one!" as the car sped away. One young man has been charged in the incident.

The article tells of Barb's daughter, Serena, now 16 and a straight-A student who dreams of becoming a doctor. It tells how Barb's dad was a survivor of abuse in a residential school who turned to alcohol to dull the pain; and how her mom died from cancer at a young age. Barb also lived with an alcohol addiction that complicated her and Serena's lives.

This article is important to read because the writer does us all the great service of putting flesh and bones onto what otherwise might be another grim headline about the difficult lives of troubled people on the margins of our society.

The story of Barb and her family comes through as a powerful testimony to human resilience, to the attempts to live life: to love, and to work, and to be a family, against all odds; all in the context of terrible, widespread, systemic racism.

The article goes on to describe the everyday indignities experienced by First Nations people in Thunder Bay (and of

course in many places in Canada). Insults, obscenities, objects thrown from cars. Being called "dirty Indian" or "squaw." Being tailed by mall security guards as a potential shoplifter or troublemaker.

None of this makes any sense of course to people who are victims of racism. It didn't make sense to Rosa Parks that she should give up her seat to a white person because she was black. And Barb's sister Melissa can't make sense of it, either: "Everyone is the same colour underneath," she affirms.

After the article went to press in late June, an update was posted. Barb Kentner died of her injuries this past Tuesday in a Thunder Bay hospital, surrounded by her family.

After I read this story, I put my iPad down and I said to myself, "This just has to stop." And I wondered what it would take for us to hear and respond to those words from Martin Luther King Jr.; what it would take for us to be "saved from patience," from the kind of complacency that says "that's just the way it is," or "it's all so big and complicated," or worse, "it was all so long ago; why can't they just get over it?" January, when Barb was attacked, was not so long ago; nor was last Tuesday, when she died.

In light of this story, how do we hear Jesus' words, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me," alongside his words of comfort to the afflicted, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." What are we willing to do, as those who have accepted the yoke, those who have agreed to be bound together in

a common purpose and a common commitment to the way of Jesus Christ?

Maybe that's it: maybe the answer is the yoke, the willingness to be bound together--the afflicted and the comfortable--no longer separated by differential access to privilege, but instead being willing to be bound together, to share life together, to carry one another's burdens, to weep together, and yes, to laugh together too.

Can we do that? Can we imagine our way into this? Are we willing to be rescued from our complacency, to be woken up to a truer vision of how the world ought to be?

This week, I saw that someone had set up a GoFundMe page to create a trust fund for Barb's daughter Serena, to help her perhaps fulfill her dream to become a doctor. That's an example of yoking our lives together.

I wondered about the idea of sending letters, cards, notes to Serena and to Melissa, Barb's sister, offering our condolences, and affirming our recognition that "everyone is the same colour underneath." That's another example of closing the gap, the unholy and sinful privilege gap, that separates us.

You may have other ideas of how to do this, and no doubt some of you have already taken great steps, and can show us the way. But let us all take the yoke of Christ upon ourselves and follow him in humble and joyful service.

Let us pray¹:

Lord, of all those you could have called to be your people, to witness to your love, to be signs and signals of your kingdom, you chose us. Even though we have our faults and limitations, you have given us a job to do in your kingdom.

Sometimes the tasks to which you assign us are burdens, and sometimes they are blessings. Help us, good Lord, to fulfill the tasks to which you assign us so that we might discover the joy of working for you rather than just for ourselves. Amen.

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¹ Prayer by Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*.