**St. David’s Episcopal Church**

Bean Blossom, Indiana

Pentecost 3A, Proper 7

June 21, 2020

Father’s Day, Juneteenth

Sermon by the Rev. Kate Wilson

*Genesis 21:8-21 Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17 Romans 6:1b-11 Matthew 10:24-39*

Happy Father’s Day. I’ve invited my dad to join us today, and he’s watching over me right there. The 50th anniversary of my dad’s death is coming up this November, but I have many memories to pull from my thick Dad memory folder.

I must tell you a dad story. My dad was a fantastic storyteller, about telephone poles, licorice drops, any number of topics. He told one when I was 7 or 8. I was not a precocious 9 year old, so when Sister Sylvia asked my fourth grade class if any of us knew the story of the first American flag, I raised my hand enthusiastically. “S’ter! S’ter! S’ter!” She called on me and I leapt up from my seat and said, “Betsy Ross made the first American flag, and she used my father’s civil war jacket for the blue part, and she used 13 buttons for the stars. One button got shot off in the war.

Sr. Sylvia guffawed at me. She tried not to, but she guffawed. I didn’t speak to him for three days.

Families. Families always have their differences, their unintended and even intended hurts, separations and comings together, their suffering and pain, and their most joyous moments. Abraham and Sarah and Hagar had enormously painful differences, differences with repercussions for generations to come. In our era, we hear so much about family values you would think Jesus spoke about nothing else. But the word “family” appears only four times in the Gospels. Once in Matthew, once – Mark, and twice in Luke. Jesus doesn’t say “family” in today’s Gospel, but he challenges his listeners, his disciples, about their commitment to him and his teachings. His words are harsh, shocking. A minister said his mother in law insisted this passage was in the Gospel by mistake and Jesus would never carry a sword. Never, and that he absolutely came to bring peace. Period!

34‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.  
35 For I have come to set a man against his father,  
and a daughter against her mother,  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
36 and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.  
37Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew’s gospel sounds like a radical challenge to family values. It sounds like a show down, like Jesus has a burr under his saddle. What is going on here?

Let’s rewind to the Gospel opening, starting with “A disciple.” It can as easily say, “A learner”, because a disciple is a learner of a way of living, a learner of wisdom applied of a way practiced and restarted and begun anew when our efforts become thin, or forgotten. Plato and Socrates had their disciples. Doctoral students often choose their programs based on who their mentor, their teacher or teachers will be, the strength of the program they will become disciples to, often moving thousands of miles for the experience.

In this Gospel and in the next two Gospels, Jesus is preparing his disciples for difficult times. They will carry their message to friends and strangers; some will embrace it; some will spit in their eyes. They will be mocked at best and injured and martyred at worst. Jesus is challenging them, certainly: just how ready are you for such opposition? Just how certain are you about this path? Because I am asking you to change the world. I am asking you to be a light in the darkness of Roman oppression, and religious hypocrisy, and political deceit and the endless, unexplainable cruelty of the powerful. I am asking you to shout truth, to become a spectacle who may stir up the status quo so that it backfires on you. Are you ready?

When I meditate on what Jesus’s insistence means in our culture, I struggle. We share this struggle, having more time to think and to miss our loved ones, to deal with the pain of loss of our ways of life, of our basic beliefs. I am finding I need to redefine what my faith means and I don’t have the answers. Faith is easy in easy times. I’m looking for how this helps us deal with a pandemic that separates families even in times of death. I’m looking for how this level of commitment can be lived when I feel our own national government is working against us. I struggle to see how having such a commitment brings peace to our streets, justice in all the systems we ourselves have created. How well does my commitment to Christ prepare me to proclaim his way from a rooftop or on social media, our 21st century rooftops. How does my commitment help me to light that so critical candle in the darkness?

No amount of schooling and familiarity with Jesus’s own words and interactions seems to be enough to prepare me. Like a student, a learner, I have to admit my inadequacy, how much I have missed, how much I still have to understand and share.

When I was a child, we lived in a post-war brick home in a post-war neighborhood with large yards and safe streets. It didn’t occur to me that everyone was white. It didn’t occur to me that my family lived in that new brick home because of the GI Bill. It didn’t occur to me that all the neighbors were white because the entire community was on the right side of a red line. And I had no idea that the Black veterans were never offered and never received the GI Bill or the opportunities it handed to the white veterans..

It didn’t occur to me when they built a huge arena in Pittsburgh from 1958 to 1962 and called it urban renewal and civic improvement. It didn’t occur to me that people had once lived in that area. It had been called The Hill District, and it was where most of the Black families lived. The gleaming arena not only obliterated their homes and displaced them, it also separated people, scattered them far away from their churches and their markets and their relatives and their lives.

When “real” black voices were broadcast on our Hallacrafters TV, I was frightened. I knew only about Amos and Andy, a stereotype I didn’t question. I knew only about Marian Anderson and Nat King Cole, who were remarkable singers. It didn’t dawn on me that no one who looked like them lived anywhere near us. These black voices were on the news, and they talked about Jesus and justice and civil rights, but the cadence was so different and the accent was so foreign to me that I was frightened, not drawn in.

In the 1970s I learned during a course on African American history about the Greenwood Massacre in Tulsa when enraged whites attacked a proud showcase community built by former slaves and their children. I didn’t hear that it had been called the Black Wall Street. Like that story about Betsy Ross and my dad’s uniform buttons, I didn’t put together the timeline between slavery and unleashed hate and aerial bombardment, the only bombing of an American city in our history. I didn’t put together that 300 people were beaten and killed and 10,000 lost everything. I had been outraged seven years ago to learn that corruption was under the lead poisoned tap water in Flint Michigan. But I was shocked at myself that I had somehow overlooked that they are still drinking bottled water because the problem remains. I learned yesterday during the Poor People’s Campaign virtual march. Poisoned water seven years later.

Like the disciples so long ago, we face our own brand of Roman oppression, and religious hypocrisy, and political deceit and the endless cruelty of the powerful. Our deceit has separated families and is at the base of 120,000 deaths, the majority people of color. I had been stunned by the constant drum beat of deaths, but again, just did not know that it was people of color who carry the brunt of the pain and death.

This is all so huge. I think I must do something. I must do something big! Until I think of my inadequacies, my ignorance, my blindness. What I must do is embrace humility. And pray. It is the season of Pentecost, and minds greater than mine are inspired by the life giving breath of the Holy Spirit, the *Ruach* of creation and now, the re-creation of our society. A Little Child shall lead us.

When did you first notice the striking diversity of the protesters in city after city? When did it first connect for you that these young people of all races and classes and beliefs were walking together for the justice Jesus wants us to create? These young people don’t read about DACA, they know and love dreamers in their midst. These young people don’t only read about young black men being shot in the news, they know those young people. These young people are not playing catch up, they are dragging the rest of us along with them to what is right.

My meditation has exposed that I am the wrong person to lead this charge, but the right person to nurture it and support it in every way I can. Our young people have put their lives on hold to bring justice to the 120,000 who have died and the tens of thousands yet to succumb, and the families who love them so dearly. They have left grandparents and parents and sisters and brothers behind to do this work. They have not chosen to discard their families in order to follow what is without a doubt the way of Jesus. They have chosen to sacrifice their most nurturing family connections for the good of all. They are not burning family bridges, but building them for all of us to cross to a better society.

This is miraculous. This is bathed in the grace and breath of the Sanctifier, the Holy Spirit, the Pentecost gift and the giver of life. This is hope I can see and touch at long last and can stand behind and stand with, as they tell me what they need. This is hope I can shout. This is a light I can carry. And for the humility to see and accept this, I say, Thanks be to God.

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