

# Sermon for Sunday, June 14, 2020 - "Disruptive Compassion"

Second Sunday after Pentecost - Commemoration of the Emanuel Nine, Martyrs, 2015  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Click [here](#) to read scripture passages for the day.

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This Gospel reading reminds me, once again, that Jesus is not so interested in being nice. I grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis where "Minnesota Nice" is highly valued. I've lived almost my whole life in the Upper Midwest and have learned well how to be polite and appealing. I work hard not to offend. Sometimes I take this a bit too far. The other day I was biking on the Dug Road Trail and called out to a man walking ahead of me, "on your left"; but my voice was too sweet and too quiet. He couldn't hear me over his headphones. By the time I realized he hadn't heard me, I'd almost crashed into him. Sometimes 'nice' isn't so helpful!

Jesus is not so concerned with being nice. In our Gospel reading today, we're told Jesus has compassion when he sees people who are harassed and helpless - a better translation is those who are oppressed and put down - but his compassion isn't sweet niceness. The word used to describe compassion is connected to the Greek word for bowels - meaning Jesus is moved deep within and feels the pain of others right in his gut.

Jesus' compassion also leads to action - he sets about the work of healing people and setting them free. He proclaims the good news that God's kingdom has come near. He cures sickness and frees people from the power of unclean spirits. Then Jesus sends his disciples to do the same. They're told: "Proclaim the good news ... cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

Jesus is about healing and setting people free from all that binds, all that oppresses. This is compassionate work. It's also pretty disruptive.

Jesus makes this clear as he sends his disciples out. He warns them that enacting his compassion in the world will sometimes lead to persecution and turmoil. It will upend the status quo. Yet sometimes we need to be disrupted in order to be healed and set free. And, this is Jesus' desire for us - healing and liberation. Jesus doesn't seem too interested in whether we feel comfortable. He doesn't seem to worry much about whether we are offended. When we're walking with headphones turned up loud to shut out the noise of the world, Jesus isn't afraid to raise his voice to get our attention, to get through to us.

Sometimes we need to be disrupted in order to be healed and set free. Right now, white Americans are being disrupted. I so hope this disruption leads to our healing and liberation. May it be so, O God. We are being disrupted and asked to come to terms with the systemic racism and white supremacy that is harming our siblings of color, our nation and each one of us.

It's hard for us to hear that we need to be healed of racism and white supremacy. We get offended to think we're being called racist. And certainly, we aren't like those white supremacists. We're

tempted to defend ourselves and blame this situation on bad actors, criminals, law enforcement, extremists, anyone else. We can't be racist. We are good people.

Yet that implies that whites can be morally superior and somehow remain pure - unimpacted by the racism that has shaped our country since its founding. We who are white Americans are shaped by this racism; we cannot not be shaped by it. We cannot remain above it somehow.

Like sin in general, racism is not so much about specific actions. Sin is all that separates us from God, others and creation. When Christians talk about sin, we aren't talking about all the bad things that we do. We're talking about the brokenness that prevents us from being in a right relationship with God, neighbor and creation - all that holds us captive.

This is the case with the particular sin of racism as well. Racism isn't about whether we do good or bad things - it's about all that prevents us from being in mutual relationship with our siblings of color.

Racism leads us to fear those with darker skin, and so sanction strategies and policies that harm them in the name of our security.

Racism robs us of our empathy. We can't simply lament the harm done to black and brown bodies, instead we try to justify it or blame the victim. We aren't moved with compassion the way Jesus was, the way he wants us to be. Racism leads us to expect people of color to act and talk and think like us, and prevents us from experiencing the rich abundance of gifts of our siblings of color. It prevents us from receiving their perspectives and insights that can help to heal our communities and nation.

ELCA member Shari Seifert also writes that "White supremacy tells us that we have a right to comfort in church. What? Jesus was about flipping power structures, lifting up the lowly - he was executed by the state ... Jesus was intensely political. But we want the church to 'not be political'. We want the church to be comfortable. We think talking about race is racist. We wonder if we could just use some words other than 'white supremacy', which after all isn't really that big of a problem. So, without thinking about it, we have created the equation that white comfort is more important than black lives."<sup>1</sup>

The way the ELCA has prioritized niceness and comfort has had real consequences. One of the most tragic examples of this is in the story of the Emanuel Nine who we remember today. They were killed by Dylann Roof, a young man who was raised and confirmed in an ELCA congregation. He drew pictures of a white Jesus in his journal in prison.

As ELCA leader Elle Dowd points out, "The church Roof grew up in was full of good and faithful people ... many there are horrified about what he did. Our church may not have taught him white supremacy directly, but like many of our churches and beloved institutions, it did not do enough to teach him to resist it. His formation within the ELCA was not enough to teach him to recognize the image of God in the people who would become his victims."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://blogs.elca.org/elcaracialjustice/?p=285>

<sup>2</sup> <https://blogs.elca.org/elcaracialjustice/?p=283>

Beloved of God,  
We are captive to racism and white supremacy.  
Jesus sees this; Jesus has compassion for us.  
Jesus comes near to disrupt us, heal us and set us free.  
He sends us out to do his active work of healing and liberation in the world.  
But this work must be grounded always in repentance.

To repent is not about feeling bad for specific things.  
It is about naming that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.  
It is about turning to God who heals and frees us - to repent means to turn.  
It is about asking God to uphold us by the Spirit so that we can live and serve in newness of life.

Let us join in this repentance now.