

Year C, Pentecost 8's lessons on Pentecost 9
"The White Gaze"
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Hope Central Church
8/11/19

Psalms 107:1-9, 43

O give thanks to the Lord, who is good;
whose steadfast love endures for ever.
Let the redeemed of God say so,
those redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;
hungry and thirsty,
their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried to God in their trouble,
and God delivered them from their distress;
God led them by a straight way,
until they reached an inhabited town.
Let them thank God for God's steadfast love,
for God's wonderful works to humankind.
For God satisfies the thirsty,
and fills the hungry with good things.
Let those who are wise give heed to these things,
and consider the steadfast love of God.

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But Jesus replied, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And Jesus said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then Jesus told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then the rich man said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to the rich man, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God."

"The White Gaze"

In essence, the goal of all spiritual practice and the gathering of the religious community is to experience the divine. We are made and meant to develop our individual spiritual receptivity so our congregation may experience God, by whatever media. We are meant to be mystics

together, in my opinion. Our life long work is to in every circumstance of life, each of which is an opportunity, to weed through what keeps us from the experience of the Divine as individuals and as communities - to make Divine meaning so we may see God in glimpses now, and perhaps move to some more full experience of God.

Please, will you pray with me?

In the spirit of each one, teach one, I want to tell you what I understand about concept of the White Gaze. I know you know all about the white gaze if you're a person of color. For some of us, we learned about the white gaze with our mother's milk. Perhaps if you've read Toni Morrison, Ta-Nehisi Coates, James Baldwin, James Cone, you know something about the White Gaze.

I want all of us to know about the white gaze, all of us, together.

Stan Grant, an indigenous man from Australia, writing for the US edition of the Guardian defines the white gaze this way: "[The white gaze] traps black people in white imaginations. It is the eyes of a white schoolteacher who sees a black student and lowers expectations. It is the eyes of a white cop who sees a black person and looks twice – or worse, feels for a gun."

White experience and the white gaze require all etiquette, all behavior, all success, and standards for beauty to conform to a collective cultural idea of what is good and acceptable and clean. The White gaze demands all beings and behavior conform to its small imagination. It both punishes that and those which cannot or will not conform and at the same time allows only a tokens of people or things to be approved of in the sight of the white gaze.

The damage done in the presence of the white gaze includes not being called for a job interview because your name looks "ethnic," not being picked up by a taxi, being followed in a store, not having one's voice and opinion taken seriously because you're the only voice in the room describing a reality that no one else in the room shares. The white gaze restricts access to housing and health care and schools. The white gaze is not curious and sees what it has been trained to see. The white gaze overlooks or does not see, or sees but dismisses, or sees and harms because the white gaze sees danger and not flesh, blood, beloved, relative.

Wanda Sykes, the lesbian comic of African descent tells this story. She says, ""my mother wouldn't even let us dance in the car. A good song would come on and we'd [dancing movements]. My mother would stop the car. "Um, do you want to dance or do you want to ride, 'cause you ain't dancing in my car. White people are looking at you. White people are looking at you." I'd be like, "Oh, damn. She's right.""

Living in the white gaze contorts us, constricts our humanity, our own imaginations for who we are, for our gifts and our loves, our body's movement and soul's joy.

We all know some form of living in the gaze of another reality. Toddlers and teenagers live in the gaze of their parents. That gaze is meant to nurture, teach and keep safe, even if the children don't understand. Anyone who has traveled knows what it's like to tread in cultural waters of which we don't know or understand the standards of behavior or dress, even simple salutations. such travel is meant to broaden our own realities.

Some of us also know what it means to live in the gaze that doesn't love us - the male gaze, the straight gaze, the cis gaze, the rich gaze, the working class gaze. In such a gaze, we are busy all day and night with decisions about how to conduct ourselves - is there something wrong with what I'm wearing? Did that just happen because I'm trans? Did I just laugh at that man's joke because it was funny? Did I just participate in my own oppression? Why am I exhausted at the end of the day.

Of course, the white gaze is really empire's gaze and it is lethal. We are all subject to it - the consequences are different depending on who we are and whether we have temporarily succeeded under empire's gaze.

Empire requires, the accumulation of all wealth and resources for itself. Empire draws the resources from outside itself so to feed itself and stock its stores, and stoke its fires. Empire's gaze is the gaze when I imagine having everything available in Amazon's storehouse. Empire requires labor be paid at sub-living wages, even in those storehouses. Empire requires bodies that will be used to make examples of for the re-election campaign's constituency - like babies and children at the border and the arrest of workers while their children are in their first day of school. This is standard stuff for empire. It does not care for anyone except its own aggrandizement and wealth.

I am, we are horrified and fascinated by empire's gaze. We participate in getting its approval so to receive its promises. We have been taught, conditioned, or at least I was, that a piece of empire could be mine. We believe its promises that we could be a part of empire if we comply. We stoke empire with our purchases and we give it our gold to hold. We study hard how to achieve and how to keep from punishments that are physical or shameful. We go to the right schools, do the right things, behave in the approved ways, to dress appropriately. We learn we are on our own. We learn to bully or be bullied. We tuck away whatever impulse for vulnerability, for sensitivity for ourselves or another.

We believe, once we are approved, once we make the grade, we will be able to acquire ultimate safety from being disapproved of or punished, even if we are a person of color, queer, trans, female, sensitive, artist, loving father, strong mother. Even we, who are good, hope to get what's ours, just what we deserve, to reap the rewards of our hard work, and then retire early and in comfort. We believe if we are good enough, we will be rewarded with ease, safety and a nest egg.

A man in our scripture, a farmer found he had done very well with his harvest. The farmer had no place to store his harvest, so he pulled down his barns, build new barns, stored his harvest and all his goods there.

He said to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

But God said to the rich man, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

"So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God."

About our biblical farmer, Fred Craddock writes, There is nothing here of graft, manipulating the market, theft from neighbors, or mistreatment of workers. The man is not a criminal, and to state or

imply as much would be to miss the point. The farmer's land produces bountifully; the oil, sun, and rain join in making him a death man. He makes an economic decision and replaces his old barns with larger ones. He is, after all, not wasteful and careless. If, then, he is not unjust, what is he? He is a fool, says the parable. He lives completely in and for himself. He talks neither to others nor to God; he talks to himself, he congratulates himself, he plans for himself. He dies suddenly, and "the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Luke, as a gospel writer is concerned with the gaze of empire - what will the people who have been impoverished through violence and bankruptcy do for themselves and for each other. Will they help each other or will they collude with Rome as tax collectors, stealing from their own people, or temple staff to keep their land, to get some relief, some security for their families? When there's a windfall because of a good harvest, will they help the people or will they keep it for themselves?

This is what makes our farmer a fool, in Jesus eyes, he "is not rich toward God."

And what could this mean, rich before God? What is the alternative to Empire's ways, Empire's gaze? Without Empire's standards of what is good and bad, worthy and unworthy - without empire's standards of family and to whom am I related, how then shall we conduct ourselves - how will we know how to put one foot in front of the other? To what shall we give ourselves? If Empire is corrupt, its motives, its loves, its needs, what is un-corrupt, incorrupt? How will I be successful, happy? What are the steps. How, with all I know see, go on? Will I ever go back to work? By what practices will I expand my imagination? Am I allowed to ever feel joy, to be carefree?

The answer is written in our scripture, is as old as Moses who freed his people, but in honor of St. Toni Morrison, let's be her students today, let's let her tell us how to live outside the white gaze, empire's gaze.

Dr. Morrison in her novels and essays, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Paradise*, *Love*, *A Mercy*, *Home*, *Good Bless the Child*, she wrote of her life and of her world. She did not shy from telling the truth, the wholesome truth of the life of Black American as she saw and experienced.

When questioned by white people as to why the white people were ignored in her writing or why the white people there not the hero of her work. Dr. Morrison said she did not write for white people, for the white gaze.

Toni Morrison wrote that "most literature — produced by both Black people and white people — is made with a white reader in mind. Because of this, the material created serves to explain and contextualize the white experience; while using Black experiences and personalities as a way to assist white characters' growth — without much else to offer about the Black character's life."

In her writing, Dr. Morrison saw and named the unseen people, the human longing, the relationships un-beheld by the white gaze, a space free from the White Gaze's constrictions and lies. She made space for her people to breath, expand, be the shape they were, they are, the opportunity to offer one's self on behalf of the whole.

Empire's gaze, its imagination tells us there is only enough space, money, healthcare, housing, human worthiness for a few. Dr. Morrison's gaze expands the imagination, gives language for a larger space, a just space, where there is enough for the longing and needs of humanity.

This is Jesus' lesson about the farmer who was a fool. He made space only for himself.

In God's gaze, in Kingdom space, the people are not used as tools for the wealth of empire, but we are living breathing, mistake making, beautiful beings.

In Empire's Gaze, there's enough for only a few.
In God's gaze, there is enough for the needs of the people.

In Empire's Gaze, wealth is eternal and will save us.
In God's Gaze, all is on loan and is for the community.

In Empire's gaze, the range of beauty and joy is narrow.
In God's gaze, beauty is common and as gorgeous as the variety of humanity.

In Empire's Gaze, only a few are loved.
In God's love is unlimited.

In God's gaze, all are welcome.

This, then in our challenge, to notice the places, outside of the White Gaze, outside of Empire Gaze where messy and glorious life and relationships to each other, to the world, to God are flourishing. Our work is to tell those stories so to open our imaginations, so to welcome all as relatives.

This is the work of Hope Central. We pray God bless and expand this work that is our vocation.