

Ash Wednesday Sermon
February 17, 2015

Fear and I are old friends. We know each other well and are on a daily acquaintance. Our easy intimacy was born from a difficult personal history. I know the many personalities of my fear – how it tastes on my tongue, its scent that fills my nostrils; how it feels moving throughout my body. I also know how it moves through the bodies of others, and how it can move through a crowded room touching each person there like an electrical current. I know fear well.

To better understand fear I have learned over the years what happens physiologically as we wrestle with fear. Scientific studies show that fear and love cannot exist in the human brain at the same time. When we are afraid, a complex hormonal reaction occurs where the brain switches from the love perceiving circuit of the hippocampus on one side of the brain to the fear perceiving circuit of the amygdala on the opposite side of the brain. Fear slides in and we experience the world as a dangerous place.

I have learned from listening to my fear. It has kept me safe, or safer. And it has also held me back, frozen me when I have desperately wanted, needed to move. We can learn a lot listening to our fears. I actually hold a theological perspective about fear. Plainly put, I understand fear as a protective angel of sorts. It keeps me alive in body and in spirit by signaling that an outward danger is afoot. Feeling fear and its sibling unease,

also signal when something powerful is moving within me and asks me to make note.

Case in point – my process writing this sermon. My experience writing this sermon parallels the hymn we just sang:

Just as I am though tossed about with many a conflict many a doubt

fightings and fears within, without.

O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Conflict. Doubt. Fear. Fighting. My truth is that I am afraid to talk about fear, my fear. I am afraid to talk about the work of racial justice. I am afraid of my own thoughts, emotions and memories coursing through me. I am afraid to share myself with you. I am afraid to be vulnerable. By listening, really listening to the words beneath my unease as I fought to write this sermon, I heard certain truths. I heard how frightened I am of authentic intimacy and how urgently I need for you to know me and for me to know you. I heard my passion for racial justice and how badly I want to make a difference in that work.

Knowing this, I choose to speak through my fear since silence only serves alienation from the beloved community and God. I speak because silence will not afford me a reprieve from my fear. And I despair of the silence. So I speak to break the bonds of fear and to choose hope and love and connection instead.

My sermon is prayer and an invitation to you to speak from your own particularity and place in life, those hard truths that make your mouth go dry, your pulse pound in your temples, your stomach feel as if it will empty itself and your breath catch. I speak to you through all of these feelings. Because I must. God calls out within me to speak openly and honestly with love to you about difficult truths. About despair. About hope. So that we may live the work of racial justice in our lives. So that we may consciously do our parts to dismantle this sin piece by piece for all children and the children's children.

I believe that Jesus was afraid when he spoke. How could he not be afraid? Fear that rose knowing that the establishment – Pharisees and Romans alike were not pleased with what he said and therefore represented. And he chose to speak never-the-less. Today's text from Matthew certainly made some squirm uncomfortably. It is a portion of Jesus' longest teaching in the Christian Bible, which we call the Sermon on the Mount.

Scholars tell us that Matthew wrote his gospel for a community of Christians in Antioch in Syria comprised of a large number of adult converts from Judaism. These verses likely address theological issues faced by this particular group of early Christians as they sought to live their beliefs honestly and authentically.

In these verses Jesus instructs on the behaviors of authentic practice of piety; how to give alms, how to pray, how to fast, and cryptically where to place their treasure. I will

say more on this in a bit. Jesus does not mince his words. He baldly names examples of common inauthentic religious behavior - “...do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do, so they may be praised by others.” “...do not be like the hypocrites [when you pray]; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners.” “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others they are fasting...” I believe that many were offended by Jesus calling them out. Who here likes when we are called out? From experience I know the burning feeling when someone rightly calls me out for inappropriate or inauthentic behavior. I imagine I am not alone here in that.

Jesus risked social censure and death when he named his truth. He risked his life, and ultimately gave his life, to call people to live their lives and follow their faith with integrity. He called people to conscious living and loving. He called people to live in right relation with God with the community and with themselves.

He still calls to us two millennia later. I hear him. And I speak with my doubts and wrestling and fears. Why do I risk? Why should we risk? What is there to gain? We gain treasure. This treasure that Jesus spoke of: “Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth...but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also.”

I believe the Treasure he spoke of are the gifts we receive when we work for racial equality. Or for that matter when we work to name and dismantle any oppressive structure – sexism, heterosexism, cisgenderism, classism. When we work for connection. When we turn off the fear switch and turn on the love switch.

What are these gifts? Really knowing ourselves. Knowing and being known by God. Knowing and being known by others. Loving and being loved just for being ourselves. We lose these treasures and more when we live in unconscious silence giving succor to oppressive behaviors and policies. We live in terror.

We dream alongside Martin of the day when racism no longer poisons us and taints our relationships with each other. When fear has no hold over us. And the unfortunate truth is that the work of racial justice is a process and like all processes, it takes time to change. My spirit writhes in anguish over this truth. Overwhelming fear and anger rise in us as we contemplate this truth. We want this now.

And before our fear and anguish take us under – know that there is another choice to be made – there is good news that holds us up as the waves of despair threaten to drown us. We can work together to flip the switch within ourselves so to speak, from fear to love. We can choose to be with each other now in this moment and the next moment as we work and wait and love. Choosing love not fear one step, one moment at a time. Tonight

we are taking a single step in this journey of a thousand miles. And the treasure we have now is each other in God's embrace.

So how do we find this treasure Jesus spoke of? I believe we can find it in a radical re-conception of prayer. This Fall we explored prayer together and expanded the boundaries of our prayer practices. In that spirit of spiritual exploration I propose a working list of a prayerful process to guide us on our journey this Lent and beyond.

First, and foremost, *Know Thyself*. To live a life of integrity and Christian discipleship that Jesus speaks of, we must learn who we are. We must bring consciousness to those unseen shadow parts of ourselves. We must learn to listen deeply to our fear, listen to our anger, listen to our shame. We must learn about our excitement, joy and passion. Each of us has our own work to do. And by grace we learn to hear these whispers and have the opportunity to change; even when we are ashamed and afraid of what we find within.

The work of racial justice therefore must be shared. The work of racial justice requires a loving community to share our grief and our hope. Grief rising from this work is too great for one person to hold alone. Healing grief (which is a messy mixture of anger and pain) requires a loving community. As we all lose our way sometimes, hope is an essential part of this work. We need the community to hold our hope until we can pick it

up again.

To live authentically with each other in community we must learn to be vulnerable with each other. Last week Courtney quoted Brene Brown saying, “Vulnerability is risk, but the way to live authentically is to bring our humanity out of the shadow, to shine a light of truth on stories that keep us disconnected, numbed out, heartsick.” Telling our stories therefore is a vital part of this work. Listening to each other as we ask the questions over and over: Who am I? Who have I been? Who do I hope to be?

Finally, to live in integrity we must take action as individuals and as a community in the work for racial justice. James Cone, founder of Black liberation theology states, “To sing about freedom and to pray for its coming is not enough. Freedom must be actualized in history by oppressed peoples who accept the intellectual challenge to analyze the world for the purpose of changing it.” Without action there is no change. I know from experience that acting, moving forward to a goal can be difficult and fearful work. This is where we must lean into God and our community for help, for hope. Here at Hope Central we will find ways to act together this Lent, learning from each other as we go.

So, in the spirit of love and change, I want to share part of my life story and a memory I unearthed. As part of knowing myself, I frequently revisit points in my life and memory to uncover my own internalized racism. A memory came to me – a source of shame,

regret and sorrow – that involved my Aunt Pat, a close family friend who was a beautiful brown-skinned African American woman. I remember my Aunt Pat with such love – my first memories of life were formed under her roof and were of her.

I am the third child of two brave people – an African American man and a white woman – who married amidst the social turbulence of the 1950's. A relationship broken by the struggles against racial inequality. I grew up not knowing my father or my father's family. My mother, her family and friends agreed to keep our African American heritage a secret. I believe my mother made this choice out of love and the desire to protect us from a world she knew as cruel.

So I was raised as a white child by a white woman in a white small town. My mother taught me that God loves everyone. She taught me that racial inequality is wrong. She taught us about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and the struggle for racial equality. Over dinner one night, when I was 15 years old I learned that my father was a Black man. To be honest it was a long time before I formed that corollary thought from this revelation – that I also am Black.

Since that revelation at the kitchen table, I have spent my life unpacking hidden memories and their accompanying thoughts and feelings. I am doing the hard work of uncovering, acknowledging and healing these places within myself. Discerning how these experiences influence my life today. And speaking honestly to others about my experiences to create openings for authentic change.

My memory: One hot summer day when I was 11 years old, my Aunt Pat, took me and my siblings swimming in the town pond of my all-white town. At the end of a long day of play, I sat in the shallows alone, when a classmate of mine walked into the water. Paul

was a young white boy whose family had just moved into town. He was instantly popular with his blue eyes, light brown hair and dimple that formed on his cheek when he smiled. We made shy small talk which trailed to silence when my Aunt Pat called to me from the shore that it was time to leave. As I yelled back to her that I was getting out, my world changed. I saw his body language shift when he looked at my aunt. I remember him asking - "Who is THAT?" I froze. I felt afraid when I saw his horror and surprise when he beheld her. I felt something I had never felt before in association with my beloved aunt. I felt ashamed of her – of her Blackness. So to my shame, and I felt ashamed, I carefully said that she was a family friend who I called 'aunt'. I carefully explained that I was not related by blood to her in any way. We said good bye, and I walked out of the pond changed from how I had entered.

I tucked that uncomfortable memory deep. Years after my kitchen table revelation, I faced what I had done. I knew the horror that even with my mother's best efforts and intentions, racism had found its way within me. It wasn't just them. It was me. I felt shame and grief. I wept with trusted friends. And with grace, I heal as I share my experiences and revelations with others.

We are given a choice to choose love rather than fear. It is a difficult road. And there is much treasure to unearth walking that road. My invitation to you this Lenten season and beyond – Let us stumble together with God's love through our 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness this Lenten season. We will find our treasure together.

Amen.