

Just Be There: Mary, Martha, and Black Lives Matter. A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church
Kailua, HI

+In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

We have seen a lot of violence lately on the mainland of the US, and abroad. We pray for the people of Baton Rouge, LA, where three men who work as police officers were killed this morning. We pray for the people of Turkey following a failed coup on Friday and in the midst of their political instability. We pray for the people of France as they mourn over the death of 80 people during their Bastille Day celebrations on July 14. As we pray for the world, we must pray for the violence that continues to grip the US.

In our mourning, let us not forget that it has been two weeks since the killing of two black men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile at the hands of police officers. In the days that have followed, there have been protests, discussions, debates, and a whole lot of hand wringing over what to do. Indeed since the death of Philando Castile on July 6, there have been at least 5 more black men killed by police: Micah Johnson, Alva Braziel, Andre Johnson, Delran Small, and Tyler Gebhard. In the midst of this, we have also seen the death of five men who work as police officers following a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest in Dallas. Law enforcement agents killed the accused shooter, the same Micah Johnson I mentioned earlier, using a remote controlled drone, the first such killing on US soil. In the midst of mourning, there has been many people asking how and why we got to this point, and a great deal of hand wringing on the part of many seeking solutions. We have heard a lot of calls for unity, for calls to respect our common humanity, calls for us to come together as we mourn. But many of these calls for unity, even some of the calls from President Obama himself, seem to miss what is at the core of many of these tragedies.

If I may be so bold, I would say that the deaths of these black men are not rare occurrences, but are so common that many of us might treat it as a normal thing. In fact, since the beginning of this year, there have been at least 114 incidents of a black person being killed by a person who works as a police officer. Bear in mind that Black Lives Matter has emerged in our national consciousness as a result of the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner at the hands of law enforcement agents and vigilante citizens over three years ago. And perhaps the retaliatory violence against people who work as law enforcement agents has emerged because of the apparent lack of justice that fails to hold the people accountable for the death of people of color accountable for their actions. Here's the thing, extremism begets extremism, and violence begets violence. These things do not form or emerge in a vacuum, but emerge because of the powerful exercising violence against the powerless, and the powerless responding back

with violence. There are longstanding cycles of violence that continue to perpetuate themselves, and these cycles are older than all of us. We may not be personally responsible for these cycles of violence, but we choose actively in our day-to-day lives to either further the cycle, or to work to break it.

I believe as Christians, we are called to serve and love God, and to serve and love our neighbors. But we sometimes become frustrated over how we do this. And perhaps in our collective frustration, inaction occurs. And in our inaction, more violence happens.

When I look at our Epistle reading, and hear the words of Saint Paul, we hear the promises of Christ. Jesus, who is firstborn from the dead reconciles all to God. He is the Resurrection, and the Life, he is the promise of salvation and redemption, and he brings hope and mercy to a battered and broken world. I have also sat with the words of this morning's Psalm, "Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? who may abide upon your holy hill?" I sit with these, and contemplate over what they mean, and I find myself looking over and again the message of Jesus.

I do not believe that Jesus' incarnation was an accident, or incidental to his ministry. He was born to a poor, working-class Palestinian-Jewish family in a land occupied by the mighty Roman Empire. Of course, we all know and hear how Jesus served and ate with the poor, the outcast, and dispossessed, but we sometimes hear less about how he also ate with the wealthy, the powerful, and the elite. He interacted with priests and Pharisees, and even healed the servant of a Roman centurion who served his very occupiers. We may take this as a sign of Christ's universal love for the whole of humanity, but to different groups he had a different message. To the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed, he brought a message of hope and mercy, but to the powerful came calls and commands to change their ways, to repent to look beyond themselves, and see the poor, outcast, and oppressed in their midst as human beings. To see them as just existing. Perhaps to put it bluntly, God gives to the powerless hope and mercy, and God gives to the powerful warnings of their sins and evil.

It is the poor, the outcast, the dispossessed and the oppressed that the Son of God became incarnate to be among. They are his people. In the midst of the violence and fear: the violence in the US, the violence on Bastille Day, the violence in Turkey, the ongoing violence in the Middle East, and much, much more; in the actual violence, and in the retaliatory attacks, we who have power, we who have privilege must see the challenges and realities of what is going on and name it. If we indeed want to call for peace, for unity, for justice, we who are powerful have to be willing to listen to the voices and cries of the oppressed, and acknowledge how we might be contributing either directly, or indirectly to this state, namely, we must follow the words of Jesus, and pull the log out of our own eye that keeps us from acknowledge our own sins before we can have the presumption to ask others to do anything, let alone ask for unity.

Jesus tells us that we see him in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, and the prisoners. For us today, to see Jesus, we look to those who carry the face of Jesus today to listen to those who are willing to speak, to learn from those willing to teach, and to serve. For Jesus, Black Lives Matter, Latino Lives Matter, Asian Lives Matter, Muslim and Middle Eastern Lives Matter, Migrant Lives Matter, Indigenous and Native Lives Matter, Native Hawaiian Lives

Matter and LGBTZ Lives Matter. Though Jesus loves all people, we must remember that Jesus identifies with and has a particular love for the marginalized people of the world. They are his people.

Though this can all be overwhelming, we should not be paralyzed though into inaction, we as a church and as a society need to find a way to move forward. We cannot do that, until we know what the problems are.

This leads us to our Gospel. In our Gospel, we see Mary sitting, and being present before Jesus. Her sister, Martha, is running around, busting her backside, and trying to be a good host for Jesus. She isn't doing anything wrong, far from that, but Jesus praises Mary for just being present with him. I find that this Gospel story can provide for us a model for how we proceed. Martha runs around, as we sometimes run around, and we loose sight of what matters, of who is in our midst. We get preoccupied with the idea of people that we forget that people are around us. Mary however, is present with Jesus, the only thing that matters, and thus chooses the better part. We need to follow her example, but how do we do that?

Well, I have one answer that I can give to you. Dr. T.J. Tallie, a scholar of African History, and a Facebook friend of mine, posted a video on Facebook a few weeks ago briefly explaining his experience of being a black man in America, and some advice for people, particularly white people, on what we can do in the face of tragedies like the shooting of black men by people working as police in the US, and the daily injustices that people of color deal with here in the US. I would also add that this can also provide a guide to us who are white about what to when the inevitable retributive violence against Muslims, and people from the Middle East and North Africa, occurs in the US and abroad in response to the attacks in Nice, as there are those blaming Muslims for this attack. I have received permission to refer to this video, and would like to read you the transcript of it.

“I wanted to say a little something to my white friends. White friends, this is a terrible and frustrating and exhausting moment, and you may be feeling at a loss for what to do or what to say, or how to make things possibly better. I think it is important to know that you can't fix things. But I also think it is really important for you to check in with the people of color in your life, especially black, and Latino, and Native American, and Middle Eastern people. Just check-in and love them. Don't weedle them for how they are feeling, don't show them how you are a good ally, Just be there. Ask if they need anything. Get them a coffee, give them a hug. Just be. It is so hard to exist every day here, to move through a world that implicitly tells you that you do not matter, that you do not exist. And yes, we are calling upon you to join us in dismantling all of this white supremacist. But we are also calling you in the day to day to keep an eye out for how hard it is to breath everyday. Go check in on your friends, that's what you should do right now.”

We alone cannot fix the evils that exist in this world. If we try to get the political power necessary to do so, we might end up compromising ourselves along the way. We can run around and try all we want, but we will loose sight of the people who are in front of us in this very moment, the people who we call friends, the people who exist around us, and even the people we

pretend are invisible. But even just being with a person is not always easy. We have to accept that we might not get an answer, and that we might be spurned in this action, and that is okay. But we cannot get upset; we cannot give up on doing this because this is not about us. We have to step aside, stop running around, and allow others to just exist. We have to step aside, stop running around, and allow Jesus to exist. If we allow Jesus to exist, we can begin to have hope in this world.

Amen.