

Sermon—Second Sunday after Epiphany, C, 2016, All Saints

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“For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.”

These are the opening words from our prophet, Isaiah. He is describing the belief of the Hebrews that Jerusalem will be transformed. That this land and its people, who suffer from sorrow and discouragement born out of years of oppression and fighting will one day be glorified as Jesus is glorified.

In today's scripture, Isaiah also tells us what stands in the way of transformation: people keeping silence. Silence is and always has been a means to keep people from realizing and reaching their potential. It's been used to enslave people, to discriminate against people, and to allow atrocities against humanity.

Frederick Douglass, born a slave in Maryland in 1818, escaped slavery at the age of 20 and became a celebrated abolitionist, feminist, and editor. He tells the story of how he began his ascent to freedom and how it started when he was a boy and his master's wife, not knowing any better, taught him to read. When his master found out, he berated his wife and told her that not only was it unlawful to teach a slave to read, but it was dangerous. In response, Douglass later wrote, “Very well,"thought I; "knowledge unfits a child to be a slave." I instinctively assented to the proposition; and from that moment I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom.”

That's a powerful truth: knowledge unfits a child to be a slave. During Douglass' time black people were systematically deprived of knowledge so that they could not advocate for themselves, so they could not organize themselves, so they could not *become* themselves; they were denied the opportunity to see who God created them to be; to discover their gifts and share them with the world.

I feel glad we don't live in a society that systematically deprives black people and minorities from knowledge anymore. At least, I used to feel glad about that until I recently discovered that I am, in fact, racist. The fact that I believed there were no systems in place to deprive people of knowledge is part of my racism.

I came to this discovery with the help of friends who teach me and by exposing myself to lectures and education about white privilege. I suppose it all sank in because one day, after watching my young son playing, I had the fleeting thought that I was glad he was white and therefore I would not have to worry about him being mistrusted by the police or harassed by a sales clerk and when he walks into a job interview, he will likely "fit in with the culture." It was a fleeting thought but it stabbed me like a knife. I realized that I am complicit in a racist system because, either unconsciously or consciously, I benefit from that system.

Now that I can see my own racism, I can see it in the system too and I know that we are not that far off from Frederick Douglass being told he's not allowed to read. More specifically, only 35% of Georgia's children are

proficient readers, with just 21% of children receiving free or reduced lunch having this ability.

Part of the problem is that there is a generational lack of access to education. In other words, the effects of slaves not being allowed to read still affect our society today. If a person can't read, it's hard to communicate. Essentially, they are silenced. 79% of the children in Georgia who come from poor neighborhoods, the neighborhoods that are made up of generations of disenfranchised people, do not have the ability to use their voice. The system, 198 years after Frederick Douglass earned his freedom, is still designed to silence people who are not white. I do not believe this design is conscience but I am now very clear that it is true.

“For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest.” The prophet Isaiah is envisioning a new world for God's children where those who are oppressed are glorified. Isaiah is speaking to those that have just returned from exile. Those that are re-entering Jerusalem after years of being outcast and enslaved.

It is a complete transformation for the society and one that, to the Israelites I'm sure, seems too complex to achieve. Isaiah is speaking of something that many have given up hoping for on account of it requiring a complete overhaul of society as they know it.

I understand this predicament. The entire time I was writing this sermon I kept thinking, “I wonder what all the black people are going to think about what I'm saying.” And then I thought, even that is racist! And I began to get

hopeless about how to stop being racist. It seems too complicated. I can't possibly ever understand what it's like to be black and if I can't understand, how can I fix anything? But that's what Isaiah is talking about today. Isaiah is saying that God has the power to turn even the most intricate, seemingly nuanced cultural ills into a beautiful communion.

Dr. Kathleen O'Connor from Columbia seminary writes, "For Zion to be vindicated means, at the least, that the reality of the past horrors be acknowledged for what they have been, that the experience of the divine abandonment be recognized as true." We can see in the text that the way God vindicates the people and breaks the systematic oppression of people is to speak--and not only to speak, but to acknowledge what has already been happening.

Our task today, coincidentally on the eve of Martin Luther King Jr. Day is to Lift Every Voice and Sing. In order to do that we need to be clear about what keeps some of our brothers and sisters from being able to do just that. It is not enough to say we love them. It is not enough to say, "I have a black friend and I'm color blind." We must recognize that our system keeps specific people from being able to be fully self actualized in our society and that has nothing to do with whether or not we are color blind and love "all" people. We are to model ourselves after God and look for what is true in the world but is not easily seen.

That is the task of the Christian. You who are sitting in these pews came into church today because you know the love of God and have therefore committed yourself to be part of the community of God. We are the

beloveds of God and therefore have a great responsibility. We have a great responsibility because God opens the eyes of the blind who believe. We, this beautiful community of God's children, have the ability to see what is too complex to understand. That is our promise; that God can bring about salvation like a burning torch for all to see.

We, the disciples of Christ, the ones who will come to this altar and become united one to another through the body and blood of Christ, are to see with holy eyes, the path toward transformation, toward Zion's vindication. Today, when we sing the song that we traditionally sing every year on this Sunday, Lift Every Voice and Sing, let us pay attention to the prayer that will be on our lips:

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.