



“EVEN MORE LOUDLY”
SCRIPTURE: JOB 42: 1-6, 10-17; MARK 10: 46-52
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
October 28, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

He was born on the day of the Battle of Bull Run—the battle that really put the Civil War into full throttle, just outside of Washington DC.

He was born deep in Mississippi to a prominent family. Both of his grandfathers fought for the Confederacy—known by all as valiant soldiers.

That day he was born, July 21, 1861 a country divided against itself fought a chaotic, disorganized battle by all accounts—no doubt trying to convince themselves that they must commit to this fight for the soul of their country—a collective soul that perhaps was sold long before brothers took up arms against each other.

The boy, who was born on that fateful day in our country’s history, when almost 5000 people died at the hands of their own countrymen, grew up to be known as a trusted jurist, a clear thinking lawyer, an upstanding citizen. He served in the Mississippi House of Representatives beginning in 1886, as a circuit judge, and was appointed by the Governor of Mississippi to the State Supreme Court in 1903. He ran for Governor of Mississippi in 1907.

That man was my great grandfather, Judge Jeff Truly. The stories I grew up hearing about him helped to shape me as an anti-racist, as a person compelled to work for justice for all people.

My grandmother, his youngest daughter, Thelma, loved to tell us about her father—that his gubernatorial platform was based on his assertion that the “Negro” should be afforded a quality public education, that he publically chastised and exposed his cousin when he found out he was in the Ku Klux Klan, that people came to him during the chaos of post-reconstruction Mississippi to settle disputes.

As I have gotten wiser about the realities of white supremacy, I have wondered more and more about the stories I don’t know about my great grandfather—and all of my people—good Presbyterians, lawyers, bankers, preachers. What are the stories my family has forgotten? What are the stories my family has concealed?

My great grandfather was a banker, a lawyer, and a politician in the American South at the turn of the 19th century. The exploitive practices of the Southern economy helped my family accumulate wealth. What did he think about the poll taxes and literacy tests established in 1890 when Mississippi rewrote its state constitution to keep black people “in their place”? He served in the legislature in the years leading

up to that change. He was serving in the legislature when Jim Crow laws were passed.

During Jim Crow when immigrants were moving into Mississippi to look for work, there were many theories about how this influx could or could not solve “the problem” of emancipated slaves. I found a small segment of a speech Judge Truly made when running for governor warning against the danger of foreigners, especially Italian immigrants, coming into the state—he boasts that he is against “any inferior race.”

I cannot erase the ambiguity of my heritage even when I’ve only been told part of it—and neither can our country. I must reckon with this complicated part of who I am if I want to see the truth—the truth about what it will take to heal us as a country.

The violent hatred that Robert Bowers unleashed on The Tree of Life synagogue yesterday in Pittsburgh; the hate-filled paranoia that fueled the meticulous dissemination of the pipe bombs sent by Cesar Sayoc to prominent political opponents of the current president of the United States; the murderous hate that motivated Gregory Bush, a white man, to try and force his way into a predominately black church near Louisville and then kill two African Americans in a near by Kroger—this violent hatred is part of who we are.

So many of the condemnations from leaders in response to these violent acts include the language of “this is not America.” Siblings in Christ, we must confess, we must repent. This is America—this violence, this brainwashing of white supremacy, this hatred of the other, this willful ignorance around the moral bankruptcy of our systems of justice and our economy.

How can we heal if we still are in denial about our disease?

Job hit rock bottom—literally he sat on the ashes, the ruins of his life. Last week we heard God’s voice call Job to reckon with the truth and the ambiguity of his home—this world, this planet. And this week, Job responds to God’s chaotic speech.

A cursory reading of our passage today may leave you thinking everything got buttoned up really nicely for Job. He says he’s sorry and then he gets all this new stuff and new kids and a new life, and he lives for a really long time.

A closer look reveals a much less tidy ending. The Hebrew is messy here—verse 6 alone could be translated at least 5 ways. Job could be saying he repents in ashes for ever questioning God or that he has a new perspective on the human condition or that he is now comforted by the human condition or that he gives up because he is just dust and ashes.

Our first impulse may be to choose a translation—one that fits our view of the world and how God works in human life; but perhaps the ambiguity of Job’s words is the point.

And the ways Job’s story ends leaves us with an uneasy tension. Were Job’s friends right: if he just prayed, then God would fix everything? Is God’s act of reparation actually likening God to a criminal in Israeli law—laws that mandated a thief repay those he harmed by giving back double what he steals or damages? There are no easy answers—no comfortable places to stay and scoff at those who “don’t get it.”

The only clear picture we get in this passage is the one of Job’s friends and family—coming to him with food, with grief, with companionship, and with their financial resources. It is a community—who struggled to make sense of tragedy and loss, together in the aftermath looking for a way to make life from there. And it seems to start with sharing—sharing stories, sharing resources, sharing pain, sharing a new beginning.

Blind Bartimaeus was told to shut up about his pain—the crowd didn’t want to hear it. But Bartimaeus wouldn’t be silenced. Instead he shouted to Jesus even more loudly. “Have mercy on me!”

He knew he needed Jesus and he was willing to leave everything behind to follow him. “Let me see again.”

“Your faith has made you well,” Jesus says. And Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way.

The blind man could see clearly.

The sighted disciples couldn’t see who was right in front of their face.

Right before this passage in Mark, Jesus asks James and John the same question he asked Bartimaeus, “what do you want me to do for you?” James and John said, we want to sit on your right and left in divine honor.

The one who knows he can’t see, gets healed. The ones who think they are entitled to more and more power, remain mired in delusion.

There is no such thing as happiness built on the backs of the suffering of others. We cannot extract ourselves from the pain of the world or from our own culpability or from our own responsibility or from our own need for each other.

No matter how many walls we build, or gates we construct, or locks we put on our doors, or judgments we make about “them,” and blind spots we willfully maintain about “us,” we breathe in the same oxygen, we are poisoned by the same toxic anger, we are diminished by anyone’s dehumanization.

No matter how many ways we try to sequester ourselves, this violent world is ours. And we must confess our brokenness and our blindness to truly be healed.

I invite you today to erase the phrase from your vocabulary that Mr. Bowers and Mr. Sayok and Mr. Bush “acted alone.” They acted out of the world we helped to create—a world in denial about the impact of our collective blindness.

They did not act alone and those killed and those harmed by their actions are not alone either.

Have mercy on us, Jesus.

My great grandfather passed down a lot of who I am and a lot of what I have to reckon with. At least two of my great great great grandfathers fought for the Confederacy—they risked their lives to protect slavery. Were they traitors to the country I want to think America is? Were they valiant soldiers for the country so many want America to be?

My great grandfather passes down ambiguity—just like the world he was born into—when a country divided dedicated itself to its own self-destruction. We are living that legacy of self-destruction today in America.

When my grandmother was in her last years on this earth, her mind got so tangled up that she was often living as if she was back deep in her past.

A couple of years before she died she called me over to her bed and asked, “Did Papa do the right thing?”

“About what, Ganny? Did Papa do the right thing about what?” I asked her.

“I remember them coming up to the house—these men,” she said. “They came to get Papa to settle something outside of town. They said, ‘we want Judge Truly to tell us what to do.’ They took him with them in the carriage. Seems two black men had been killed by two white men and people had seen them do it. They called Papa out there to settle what they should do. And he told them, ‘the penalty for murder in the state of Mississippi is hanging. And these men killed two men.’”

And so they hung the two white men, my grandmother told me. “Did Papa do the right thing?” she asked me.

We don't know if this story is true—my mother says she never heard it before. But, my grandmother told it to me like it was yesterday. I could see the fear and sadness and confusion in her eyes. She needed to know. "Did Papa do the right thing?"

The violence of the story repulses me. And the moral courage of my great grandfather saying no to the dehumanizing of black bodies by saying their deaths deserved the same punishment as a white man's inspires me.

And the ambiguity of this part of my heritage is a troubling in my soul that tells me to ask for God's mercy even more loudly.

Jesus, have mercy on us—Americans, Democrats, Republicans, murderers, victims. Jesus, have mercy on us—the passive, the deniers, the truth tellers, the wounded, the harmful, the healers.

Have mercy on us in our conflicted, confused, and grief-stricken state. Have mercy on our disease, on our self-destruction. Have mercy on our country's blood stained soul.

We are a community, Grace Covenant, together trying to make sense out of tragedy, sharing our resources, sharing stories, sharing hopes and fears, seeking God's guidance on how to make life from here.

If we are serious about following Jesus on the way, then we have to be serious about the healing we need from Him to keep going.

Teacher, make us see again! Can you help me say it, even more loudly, church: "Teacher, make us see again!" "Teacher, make us see again!"

Thanks be to God.