



“AS THE WORLD RETURNS”
SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 21: 33-46
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
October 4, 2020 Live Streaming
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

It's a cautionary tale. You know the kind where you may not want to believe it is about you, but when you are honest with yourself, you know it is.

It's a true story, but it is also repeated and replicated in many, many communities of faith. It's not unique to the places that I experienced it. But, this is my story to tell so I share it with you.

(Scroll through images #1, #2, #3)

A beautiful church building--gothic architecture--breathtaking stained glass, cathedral interior, seating for 1000 people. A church built by Presbyterian explorers who literally sailed around the coast of CA to get there--and they built the venerable stone building in 1914 to the Glory of God.

The church in its heyday had boasted over 5000 members--the movers and the shakers of that city. But in the 60s as the Civil Rights movement was underway and whites left the city, the church membership dwindled, but it did not die. And it became one of the most racially diverse congregations in our very white denomination.

(back to MMS)

But just because it was diverse, didn't mean everyone had done their work on what it means to be a church that is anti-racist, to be a church that has exorcised the demons of white supremacy.

In that cathedral space, the Spirit was moving in mighty ways. And that was making some people very uncomfortable. The more powerfully the Spirit moved, the more some bodies were tightening up, generating anxiety, garnering their energy to try and make it stop.

There was a Holiness congregation that used the building for their worship on Sunday afternoons. One Sunday they came to the Presbyterian service in that cavernous sanctuary. Their sister in Christ was singing in worship that day. They brought their Amens, their faithful attention, and even their tambourines.

As the preacher that day, it was like a gift straight from heaven--engagement, support, a call and response of sharing God's good news. Their "amens" and their claps and shouts of "preach" were medicine, healing medicine.

Many people of the Presbyterian persuasion felt it. They could feel the medicine seep into their souls--they could feel the Spirit moving in the way this gathered body was saying yes to God's powerful call to us.

Still others felt offended and let the preacher know about it. One woman in particular came to me and said, "I don't have a problem if 'they' want to come to 'our' church, but they have to learn how to be respectful."

When I asked her if she wanted our church to be a place that truly welcomed people, she said she did. When I asked her if she felt it was welcoming to ask everyone who shows up to act like us, she said she would need to think about that.

And the beautiful thing is, she did think about it. And opening herself up to that inquiry of her own bodily reactions and aversions took her on a path of waking up to the grip that whiteness had on her and her reactions to things.

God used that aversive reaction to invite her, to teach her--to help her breathe through the contraction, the change.

Grace Covenant, I am grateful when any of you share your feelings with me. The invitation is to share those feelings and then listen to how they are inviting you to grow--not mistake them for a reason this work God is inviting us to do needs to stop.

Aversive bodily habituations are well documented in white dominant institutions. LOTS of research backs it up. If you don't believe me, do some research. Check it out! In white dominant spaces these aversive reactions of white bodies to Black and Brown bodies coming into white spaces directly contradicts the stated aspirations of inclusion that such white spaces may boast.

These aversive reactions are learned behaviors, often unconscious. White identified people are often oblivious to the racialized nature of these reactions that they are having.

They chalk it up to other things like manners, piety, propriety. But time and time again, these aversive behaviors are really about white discomfort and fear of losing ground, losing power, losing control of a space. And it doesn't take many Black and Brown bodies in a white space to bring this up for some white people. In fact, research suggests that white people will overstate the number of BIPOC in the make-up of a crowd, when the crowd was actually still made up of more white people.

To put it more bluntly, white people can talk a big game about how much we want our churches to be more diverse, until more Black and Brown people start to show up. And then the aversive habituations kick in.

People who otherwise have stated commitments to racial equity and had long spoken of their grief at the church being too white, can find themselves reacting against the presence of Black and Brown bodies without even realizing that is what is happening.

That's why it's important for you to notice any discomfort you are feeling and inquire within yourself. Let the discomfort speak to you about the work God is calling you to do within yourself.

You see whiteness isn't really about skin color, it's about a culture--a set of expectations for behavior. White people can unconsciously expect Black and Brown bodied people to conform, to assimilate, to adhere to standards of behavior that white identified people understand as "normal" or "polite." It's racialized without ever having to name that it is so.

The beautiful thing is that the more work we do together about whiteness, the better we are at spotting it. Then it doesn't have to be something that stops us from growing and healing--it doesn't have to be something that does harm to our Black and Brown siblings. It doesn't have to be something that diminishes the growth and courage of our beloved community.

Instead it can be a healing opportunity for white people when we begin to realize how deeply we have internalized concepts of supremacy and oppression and assimilation.

Matthew's parable is another hard hitting one that the lectionary dishes up--preachers who are following the lectionary during this pandemic pretty much have weekly come to Jesus experiences. These lessons are hard! And they so powerfully speak into our tumultuous times!

Just this morning I felt overcome by God's generosity--by the Spirit's wisdom--my gratitude is beyond something I can express. Because it's been a rough few weeks in some ways for me--I feel the anxiety level going up for many of you. And I can feel the sadness and grief--the heaviness of all that we are carrying--the pandemic, the political intensity, the relentless news of more deaths, more lies, more truths that are hard to hear. It is a lot!!

And then I come to the Bible passage for me to preach on and this is what I get. It makes me feel really vulnerable at first. And I wonder if I can really trust you all--that's one of my core issues--trust. It is hard for me to trust your love. Especially when I am tired. Especially when I am grieving. Especially when so many things are unraveling in our world.

But when I stay present. When I don't quit. When I breathe and remember that you are my siblings, my beloved community. When I lean into God's love and surrender once again to the power of that love, the passage that had seemed like insult to injury becomes a gift beyond measure.

Far from bad timing, this passage is right on time. This passage is about grasping and aversion to bodies perceived as rivals, as competitors, as those who will take something that is rightfully ours.

This is a cautionary tale about our misplaced allegiance, our misplaced solidarity.

This misplaced allegiance is eroding our country's capacity to heal--and we are getting sicker by the minute.

(display ppt slide #1) - side by side w/ Marcia on screen

Matthew may have wanted this to be a story about how the Pharisees, the religious establishment, had a mistaken object of their sense of what was most precious. And so it can easily be parsed out as an allegory.

But there are some important things to remember here from a social historical perspective as we read it from our own historical context.

The Gospel writer of Matthew was not speaking from the centers of power, from the great sanctuaries of Christendom. He was not powerful in his society. He was someone pushed to the margins by those with the power to destroy him, those with the power to silence him, those with the power to say either you stop this movement that is questioning our ways or we will stop you.

Just like the tenants of the vineyard who kept destroying God's servants who came to deploy the fruits of the vineyard, the religious establishment of many religious persuasions have continued through history to be a murderous lot. Those who fashion themselves as the keepers of order and propriety, as the arbiters of God's grace and salvation, as those entitled to have the world conform to the preferences of a white-male-god who blesses violence and authorizes oppression--those of the religious establishment have done great violence and great harm in God's name.

When Jesus walked the earth and Matthew's gospel found its voice, that religious establishment was made up of the keepers of the Abrahamic law who did not like how Jesus was challenging the institutional culture of order and propriety--not all of them, but a powerful force none the less. This allegory was a bold cautionary tale that the Gospel writers attributed to Jesus. They were calling out the powers and principalities. And if you haven't already figured it out, that's risky business.

(display ppt slide #2) - side by side w/ Marcia on screen

There is plenty of historical proof for how easily religious people can morph into the perpetrators of violence; it is Christians who have weaponized this passage into dangerous proof texting about Judaism--the kinds of biblical heresies that gave birth to the horrors of anti-semitism and genocide and the lies of supersessionism and Christian triumphalism.

This very text, and others, are still being used that way today--this text from the sacred book that we say has unique authority in our lives, has the capability to generate and justify such murderous cruelty and violent grasping at a distorted, contorted aspiration of ownership and power.

(display image #4)

But the answer is not to reject the text itself, but to trust God's amazing AMAZING capacity to gently ask us to come back to the vineyard again--

and show us time and time again what our inheritance really is.

The inheritance of God's people is not the vineyard, or even the fruits of the vineyard. It is love. Love is our inheritance.

Love is not a scarce resource. It can't be hoarded, but it can be distorted--and it can be violated.

Our Inheritance is love-- the love that makes violence a distant memory, a nightmare of a time gone by.

Our inheritance is the love that quiets the drum beat of oppression; our inheritance is the love that calms our nervous systems and dissipates our warring madness and tells us we belong to each other, we BELONG to each other and to this planet--God's gestating womb--this is our home and our great Mother has equipped us with what we need to share its fruits--if we can just trust Her embrace--trust that Her love is enough--that there is enough to go around.

[\(back to MMS\)](#)

Today is World Communion Sunday.

Its about communities without walls, without scarcity mentalities, without assimilationist priorities. World Communion Sunday is about the Body of Christ re-membered--put back together from the ravages of betrayal and broken relationships.

World Communion Sunday is about bodies being put back together by the truth.

If you are tired of talking about white supremacy--I am so grateful that you are self-aware enough to notice that and to even let yourself say it out loud. Now the next step is to give yourself to the feelings enough to let them speak to you about what following Jesus is all about.

That's different than giving yourself to the feelings and then deploying your energy to make the conversation stop, or slow down, or stop creating discomfort.

The God who lies ever on the birthing bed lovingly invites us again and again, to breathe and trust through these painful contractions of change.

When you can't feel the contractions, the labor is probably stalled. When you can feel them, things are moving along.

In order for white dominant churches to heal and to stop doing harm because of our whiteness, we have to change, we have to be born anew.

And to change we have to do our work, we must labor and let the midwives accompany us and help us be brave when the pain feels like too much to bear.

To do this labor we have to learn how to get better at being uncomfortable. We have to learn how to reframe how we understand discomfort. When you are following Jesus, discomfort is a sign of progress, a sign that you are shaking loose of something that has constricted you, that has kept you from growing, from being reborn--like growing pains, like the grip of a contraction in transition labor.

When you feel that discomfort start to tense you up or make you feel worried or reactive. Breathe!! And I mean really take a deep breath. That's the Holy Spirit talking to you. Telling you it's time to surrender to a process of change that is already underway.

Your aversive behavior is a sign that we are doing something right--we are on the right track.

When you feel those reactions surface in you, think of the vineyard tenants--that cautionary tale about the false allegiances our human family is so given to, think about the tragedy of the institutionalization of human cruelty, and breathe. Protecting that penchant for oppression, mistrust, scarcity, and harm is not what we want to protect. We are not here to maintain an institution. We are here to follow Jesus--to listen to our Redeemer's voice support us as the world is made new.

Don't weaponize your discomfort and think that is your cue to reverse course or push others into holding back. That is your cue to say thank you to an amazingly generous Spirit who actually believes in your capacity to be healed, to be transformed.

And that's because you are loved--adored in fact, by a God who sees your potential, our potential to be part of what changes this world.

(display image #5)

As the world returns--to our roots, to our past, to our pain, to our shadows, to our missed opportunities--God responds with a surprising proposition--open your eyes to God right here in our midst--God is the one stirring your soul, pushing your buttons, hitting a nerve, asking you to breathe through another strong contraction. God is the one pricking our conscience, challenging our hallowed values, troubling our souls.

As the world returns--God is asking us to trust the promise of what this strenuous intensity means in the divine scheme of things. The world is being reborn--and God is inviting us to believe and breathe so that we may experience the joy of a world made new!

Thanks be to God.