

LISTENING TO JESUS

(Matthew 17: 1-8)

I am returning from a social justice conference in Richmond, VA that gathered pastors, teachers, theologians, activists, scholars, seminarians, lay people, and others from the vast network of the black Christian church—including its interfaith connections and partnerships—as well as others from other social justice organizations that are fighting the good fight of the faith all over the world, but especially *right here* and *right now*;

And together we lifted up our *ecstatic praise as non-violent protest* against the evil found in the discrimination and hate that is heating up in our world—and especially in the spaces and places of our world where gender, ethnicity, religion, immigrant rights, ability to travel, free speech, a free press, and *actual facts themselves* are under attack, being maliciously challenged and devalued in discriminatory ways by supremacist belief and action;

And together we held on to each other and proclaimed our ONE FAITH in the ONE GOD of Life, Love, Salvation and Justice—the God that THIS gathered community of Lake Edge recognizes through our Christian scriptures as the God who “*was pleased to dwell*” in the one whom we know as Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One of the Living God.

It was *necessary and good* for me to be gathered with those who seek the embodiment of the values and possibilities of their religion and their faith; in our Christian case, it would be the *embodiment of the love of God shown through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*.

It was *necessary and good* for me to be with those proclaimers and prophets of God who reminded me in *their* preaching and in *their* teaching, the real-life context in which Jesus did HIS ministry in HIS 1st century world—a context which was in the midst of the oppression of empire;

Also being reminded of the real-life context in which those to whom the scriptures were first written—like Matthew’s community—were doing THEIR Christian ministry in THEIR 1st century world—a context which was also in the midst of the oppression of empire;

As well as being reminded of comparisons to the real-life context in which WE are doing OUR Christian ministry in OUR 21st century world—a context which is also in the midst of the oppression of empire.

II.

Let me tell you some OTHER reasons why it was not only necessary, good and important for ME that I was with that gathered community in Virginia this week, but also why it was necessary, good and important for YOU that I was there . . .

On this last Sunday of Black History Month, I am called to remind us of what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King—that Drum Major for Justice—observed about the white mainline church of his day; specifically the church of the 1950’s and the 1960’s:

In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched (leaders of) the white churches stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular...

There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators... By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are. (Letter From a Birmingham Jail).

Dr. King is talking about some of the churches you and I grew up in, the churches from which many of us have taken our disembodied theology about Jesus, and our passive approach to applying the love of God the gospel proclaims to the real-life context in which WE live—a divisive context, mind you, brought about by the result of historical and on-going injustice done to others; as well as the real-life context into which we FORCE OTHERS to live—brought about by our greed, and our refusal to see others as true equals in God’s sight; as well as the real-life context in which we ALLOW OTHERS to live—by our lack of compassion and love, and our insistence on keeping an unjust status-quo.

I don’t believe Dr. King’s critique of the white mainline church would change all that much if he were here critiquing it 70 years later. Since his original critique, and up to the present, the white mainline church by and large is usually quietly preserving the status quo; often passive-aggressively defending the racism, sexism and nationalism that are the roots of the Christian church in this country as well as around the

world; and pretty much continues to see Jesus in socially, economically and politically disembodied ways, especially as it impacts those who are socially, economically and politically disempowered and disenfranchised. By and large the white mainline church continues to sing hymns and pray prayers that keep it far removed from the suffering of God's people at the margins of our society. It usually continues to use creeds that spiritualize the life and ministry of Jesus, and detach him from the reality of the suffering of God's people, and our complicity in that suffering. It usually continues to push back hard against any attempt to see the church as the bearer of the justice of Jesus to the world, as opposed to using Jesus solely for its own individual piety and salvation.

When I was in Ghana, in West Africa, we visited two of the many structures that dot the West African Atlantic coastline that were built to be or were used as slave castles—dungeons where captured and enslaved Africans were held before being forced and packed like

sardines in a can aboard European slave ships that would take them to a new life of forced slavery somewhere in the Americas. West Africa was the beginning point for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, where tens of millions of Africans were transported and tens of millions of Africans were killed in one of the most brutal and extensive holocausts the world has ever seen.

The Cape Coast slave castle, built by the British in 1655, had a dungeon for kidnapped and enslaved African males that British Anglicans had the unmitigated gall to build a church on top of; and for many years in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, that church was pastored by the first African to be ordained as an Anglican priest in England, whose name was Rev. Phillip Quaque. Rev. Quaque led that mostly British congregation in Christian worship while the suffering of humanity was right below their feet; while the congregation could hear the shouts and cries for mercy from some of God's most mistreated and enslaved people; while the congregation could smell the stench of some of God's

most oppressed and depressed children who were forced to wallow in their own vomit and feces, in their own urine and menses, in the spit and the snot of their own human misery and feelings of ultimate abandonment.

How the Rev. Phillip Quaque could preach the gospel of Jesus Christ—a gospel which embodies God’s love for ALL—to his mostly white congregation while they were worshipping on top of a slave dungeon, endorsing a way of life which completely discounted the humanity of others—including his own African brothers—I do not know.

But in this regard there is one thing I DO know: neither my name nor my motivations for preaching the gospel are the same as the Rev.

Phillip Quaque. I am not seeking to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to this mostly white congregation which I co-pastor to help them maintain the status quo; or to allow them to believe that racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, religious intolerance, cultural discrimination,

nationalism, or oppression of any sort are alright with Jesus, or are in line with the gospel of God's love!

Because the simple fact of the matter is that there are things that the gospel of Jesus Christ DOES stand for, and things that the gospel of Jesus Christ DOESN'T stand for, and Pastor Katya and myself have been called to this ministry to be the main preachers and teachers that would assist us all to be able to faithfully discern the difference.

How?

By learning to *listen to Jesus*.

III.

Because you see, what is central to our gospel story of the Transfiguration this morning is *God's declaration to the community that has committed itself to Jesus that Jesus is indeed God's son, and the preaching and teaching and praying and activism of Jesus is God's will*

and God's way for the world, and is to be listened to; heard; imitated; put into action, by those who consider themselves children of God and followers of Jesus.

What are we listening for? What are we trying to hear? How are we seeking to open up and use it in our lives if we were to hear it?

We are taught today that God wants us to hear through Jesus the *way of the cross*. In the gospel story right before this one in Matthew 16:21-28, Jesus is teaching his disciples the way of the cross: how he must go to Jerusalem and be killed by the forces of evil for the sake of God's love for the world, and be raised from death in victory and vindication over those same powers who thought they had already won! Peter couldn't hear of it, and ended up inadvertently trying to stand in the way of the way of the cross.

The way of the cross is the hard way; the way that stands for God's love for everyone; the way that devalues every project or plan that seeks to devalue even one of God's children, even one of our own sisters or

brothers, even one of the many equal parts of the human family under the parenthood of God.

We are to take up our crosses—our crosses of *love for others* that could lead to our suffering at the hands of an unloving empire; our crosses of *light that shine brightly* in the darkness and death of an imperially controlled world; our crosses of *power* that will always stand for and stand UP for God's people in the midst of their exploitation and unequal treatment, and remind the perpetrators of that treatment that their authority has already been defeated!

God commands us from the mountain top this morning, out of a cloud that shines with God's presence, to *listen to Jesus* as Jesus teaches us about the way of the cross. It's not the ordinary way. It's not the popular way. It's not the easy way. It's not always even the logical way.

But it's God's way.

And it needs to be OUR way.

So—like the early church before us—let us be disturbers of the peace of the status quo!

Like the early church before us, let us be outside agitators against that which settles for injustice in our midst!

Let us listen to God's Beloved, God's Anointed, God's Servant, God's Chosen One whose name is Jesus

As he leads us and guides us in the way of the cross.

Amen.