



Three stories, the Good News, and the White Moderate
Trinity Sunday A 6/7/20
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord, take our minds and think through them, take our mouths and speak through them, take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

I confess to having experienced an exhausting week.
I'm having trouble pulling it all together into a coherent whole.
Yet another occasion to lament our nation's inability to continue to face our history with race.
And this of course, amidst the already profound impact of the pandemic.

I have felt outrage, fear, sorrow, shame, helplessness, confusion, hope, encouragement, compassion, gratitude. I have experienced these feelings in meetings, on Facebook, watching television, in my house, reading the newspapers, talking on the phone, reading and writing emails and texts. I've cried.

Not to minimize my own feelings as a white person of considerable privilege: but I can hardly imagine the soul crushing effect of intense feelings like these on a whole people over the centuries, as fellow citizens of color have in our country have lived them.
I also haven't endured the deforming effects of regularly defending my psyche and body from threats small and large, and, of course, lethal.

And, also, while I can't condone the behavior of some elements of the law enforcement community, and in fact, can only condemn these elements in the strongest possible terms, I imagine that many of the so-called "rogue officers" are scared out of their minds as well. Bullies usually are, at heart, terrified of something. I'm guessing that the best law enforcement professionals have been trained to process their fear in ways that don't endanger the public, though this kind of pressure, too, I can hardly imagine.

So, as I say, I feel somewhat out of my depth here and struggling to make sense of it all, feeling vulnerable and emotionally worn out.

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I want to share two stories with you from my week.

The first is from a Zoom meeting with about a dozen clergy colleagues on Thursday. We tossed out the anticipated agenda—sharing information about how our various parishes were approaching the possibility of re-opening our buildings for worship and fellowship. Instead we both gingerly and boldly made our way through an emotionally charged extended check in about how we were processing the events of the previous week: the killing of George Floyd, as well as the earlier killings of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, the subsequent peaceful protests and violent lootings, the law enforcement response, the President's photo op in front of St. John's Episcopal Church and, ultimately and most difficult, our feelings, experiences, and abilities to



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recognize the tension between the twin poles of historical and systemic race injustice on the one hand, and historical, ingrained and unacknowledged white privilege on the other.

The convener had a tough task—He could call on us, or wait through the silence for a volunteer, or ask the first person who spoke to invite the next speaker. And so forth. So we began with a rector who is a woman, then a college chaplain who is an African American woman, an assistant rector who is a woman of Hispanic descent, an assistant rector who is a man of Hispanic origin...and when this last speaker finished, there was a pause, and he said, “I’d like to hear from a white rector of a wealthy parish.”

You could have heard a virtual pin drop.

And I began to have that heart-pounding-in-your-throat feeling that one gets when one realizes that words are going to come, whether they are bidden or not.

And I began to speak. Haltingly. Hesitantly. About my specific experiences and feelings and uncertainties, both in the last week, and more generally, as a white person who has cared about and struggled with the just and Christian response to the racist history and current conditions in our land and in our church.

I was nervous. But my colleagues trusted me enough to speak the truth in love, and to encourage all of us to lean on one another as a safe place to struggle, make mistakes, and grow in the risky, holy love that Jesus calls us to around race (as well as everything else). There was some glimmer of the Beloved Community, the Rev. Dr. MLK Jr used to preach about.

One of things I shared with my colleagues was the other story I want to share with you.

On Tuesday, I took part in a meeting with nearly 50 other people, all representing parishes who partner with St. Stephen’s in the South End to make the B-Safe program happen each summer. Part of the larger set of year-round programs for youth at St. Stephen’s, B-Safe has helped 1000s of kids over the last two decades to learn academic and life skills, and especially to know that they are loved by God. Christ Church has helped with this for years and will again this Summer. Please be in touch with me if you’re interested.

At the end of the meeting, the Rev. Liz Steinhauser, director of Youth Programs at St. Stephen’s, invited prayer requests. One of the participants who asked for prayers was a woman named Cynthia. She shared that she was on her way to Franklin Park for the planned peaceful demonstration planned for 5.30pm. She is an African American woman, a veteran who had served in Afghanistan, and a police officer in the City of Boston. She said she loved her country, she loved her city, she loved her badge, she loved her God, but she didn’t know what would happened at the demonstration, and it was hard to know if she could trust some of her fellow



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officers to do the right thing if things got heated. “So please pray for me, and for us at the demonstration.” So, she’s in our prayers this morning.
I have been thinking and praying for Cynthia ever since.

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I don’t know what all of this means. And when I don’t have anywhere else to go, I’ll finally come to my senses and lean into the Gospel—the Good News of God.

Good News comes to me this morning in the Creation Story from the Book of Genesis.

I remember the truth that God created the world and the universe, through whatever miraculous and spell-binding processes that science can attempt to explain, with mind-blowing diversity.

And God created humankind in God’s image. Male and female God created us, and perhaps created even more diversities of humanity than even the writer of Genesis could fathom. And God saw that it was good. Very good.

When I’m confused and overwhelmed, I remember this.

The diversity of humans is astounding. The image of God is imprinted in the DNA of every human being. Sacred. Holy.

The beginning of the Gospel of John echoes the beginning of Genesis. It tells us that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

And of course, Jesus is the Word. All things came into being through him.

I hold up in front of you this morning the picture of the many faces of Jesus that is hanging up in the parish hall. Representing a tiny sliver of the ways that Jesus has come, is coming, is present, in every race and nation.

When I’m confused and overwhelmed, I lean into this.

And the Good News comes to me in the Gospel of Matthew this morning.



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Jesus tells his formerly frightened, and currently mystified disciples, “to go into the world, to baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit and to teach them everything that I have taught you—and remember *I am with you always*, even to the end of the age.”

Last week we reaffirmed our Baptismal Covenant. With God’s help, we made promises to guide us in walking in the Jesus way of love. *And Jesus promises to be with us always.*

When I’m confused and jumbled up and overwhelmed, I can lean into this: that Jesus is with us, always.

Now I finish with a third story, which is appropriate, since it’s Trinity Sunday. Three stories for Trinity Sunday. It’s the story of me looking up The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” It’s not the first time I’ve read it, but it reached out to me again. King wrote the letter in the spring of 1963, after being arrested for leading a non-violent protest. He’s responding to a letter sent to him by eight, religious leaders who claimed to agree with the aims of King and the Civil Rights Movement but took him to task for his tactics. By the way, one of the signatories of that letter was the Bishop Coadjutor of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama.

Part of King’s response was this:

“First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate....Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection....We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.”

And so, when I lean into the Good News of the Gospel when I feel overwhelmed and can’t pull it all together, I’m so grateful.

AND I’m also led by the Spirit to this question—When I get grateful, what will I do? How will I avoid being simply another white moderate of good will?