

Sermon for 12 February 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Palm 119:1-8 (UM 840:Response 3); 1 Corinthians 3 :1-9 ;
Matthew 5 :21-37

« ***The real thing*** «

No More Police. That's the name of a book I bought this week @ Red Emma's Bookstore. I couldn't put it down. This sermon got in the way of my reading it.

I know it'll get me into arguments this week.... With my sons; with other people I love.

It's written by two Black women who've been crucially involved in Black feminist freedom-making for decades. They say things like, "Because many states spend more on prisons than education, we have to change funding priorities. Why not shift budgets from cops in schools to counselors, from building prisons to opening up additional spaces in free public colleges and universities? Instead of more militarized borders, why not ensure that all youth have access to meaningful, discipline-building co-curricular activities such as music, drama, art, and sports?"

And this: "The prison industrial complex represents one of the most concentrated forms of violence in the world, creating untold suffering. Black feminism therefore requires us to reject and dismantle it, and to create new forms of accountability, governance, and sociality that create the world we want."

I know next Tuesday is Valentine's Daybut February is Black History Month. If we're going to listen to Jesus the way Matthew has him talking in today's Gospel reading, we must do a better job of seeing the force for good that being an interracial society offers us.

I'm going to ask Charles to start placing in the bulletin the scripture readings for the week ahead, like we used to do in my first incarnation as your pastor. That will give us all the chance to pray over what I'm scheduled to preach the next week. I can't think of a better way to spend our daily prayer time than using a part of it on what we're going to hear next Sunday. After all, the daily news and our personal lives cry out for Bible study, don't you agree? This little engine of Bethesda's Sunday morning worship can use Bible fuel daily. One hour a week of Jesus and me isn't good enough for folks with our gifts!

In my retired clergy group, we're reading On Gold Mountain, by Lisa See. It's the story of a Chinese American family over many generations in California, and it's already fascinating in the same way the first book I described is. Listen to Leland Stanford, in 1862, the year he became governor of California, in his inaugural address: "To my mind it is clear, that the settlement among us of an inferior race is to be discouraged by every legitimate means. Asia, with her numberless millions, sends to our shores the dregs of her population." And that same year he became president of the Central Pacific Railroad. Discrimination of Chinese emigrants is fundamental to U.S. history Even as we know they were crucial in building our

transcontinental railroad ... and we all remember how we treated our Japanese-American citizens during World War II.

There is nothing more generous we can do with our religious commitment than to learn, and teach, our own families and towns and state what integrity means across national and sexual and economic and every other border. Our scripture gives us a good starting point, with its tale of a Creator who doesn't give up on us; who wants us as friends; and who insists that friends make friends as their basic nature.

That, in all the texts for today, is the real thing we're supposed to see and think about. If Jesus is alive and among us ... if we, as Paul says, are his very body, living and expanding in awesomely beautiful and constantly surprising ways, then it's high time we start re-making some of these systems like police and prisons and ... I'll say it ... politics, the business of working together on problems and challenges as they develop. Along with all the beautiful and creative applications we come up with, we know in our hearts that right now things are about to blow us all up if we don't get better at cooperating.

Let us pray: Lord, we know you're the real thing. We wouldn't be part of the minority that gathers to focus on that, if we didn't believe that. We're committed to you. We claim you. We spend lots of time thinking about you. Forgive us for missing the clues for loving that you send us; for running scared in lots of the situations you keep us in; for bad-mouthing what people who have power over us say and do. On the other hand, don't let us give up on our abilities. We can see straight with your gifts, and put them to good use even if it means an argument and a new start to the day or the task or color or budget we have to deal with. The real thing is you and us together. The ancient people and words we study here are good prods for what's just coming over the hill now, that we haven't seen clearly yet. Help us apply our gifts, and do better, this week, and forever, in Jesus' name. Amen.