

Stronger and More Tender *Matthew 5:6 and Acts 10:1-17, 34-35*

Shannon J. Kershner
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois

Have you ever had a surprising experience—good or bad—that caused your whole worldview to change or perhaps caused even your whole life to change directions—an experience that made your heart grow stronger and more tender at the same time? Perhaps one that made you realize just how hungry and thirsty you were for the righteousness Jesus promised?

That is exactly what Coach Bob McKillop hopes is happening right now to the young men on his team. McKillop is the head coach of the Davidson College men's basketball team. Davidson is a Presbyterian-affiliated liberal arts college with an enrollment of around 1,800, located right outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. Those of you who enjoy college basketball would know it due to one of its famous alumni—Stephen Curry. Curry led the team to the edge of making it into the Final Four back in 2008, when he was a college sophomore. During this week in 2018, however, what happened ten years ago is not the focus for either the coach or the current team. Rather, what matters to them right now is what happened beginning in 1940 and lasting until 1945. You see, Coach McKillop took his entire basketball team from Davidson College to Auschwitz.

In his own words, here is why he believed the pilgrimage was critical: “The volatility of our world right now requires a response informed by both a respect for human dignity and an understanding of what happens in its absence.... We are stepping into a moment in time when, for millions, evil seemed to have triumphed and humanity [had] vanished.... I want them to understand this experience, for life, and to bring it back here, not just as a lesson but to live what they learned. Our world needs leaders who aim to lead and to serve,... guided by human instincts and creative and disciplined minds. We need advocates for, and defenders of, human dignity.... That is why we are going.”¹ We could add the words from Matthew: We need leaders who hunger and thirst for righteousness and will not be satisfied until they are full.

Over the four days they were there, I would imagine the Davidson College men's basketball team undoubtedly had some experiences that caused their whole worldview to change. Perhaps as a result of what they learned, what they saw, what they heard from their guide who is a survivor of that very concentration camp, some of those young men might even decide to study something else or to go into law or advocacy or ministry or please—politics.

My prayer is that God is using that moment in their young lives to make their hearts stronger and more tender at the same time. That God is expanding their vision about who is family and why that matters. That they are being immersed into the profound importance of both recognizing the dignity of every person and fighting for that dignity to be seen *by* every person. And now that their journey is over and after they have had time to debrief with each other and with their families, I hope they will write about their experiences. Because, as their coach stated, quoting General Eisenhower, “the lessons of ‘indescribable horror’ [they are learning] remain as urgent

and timely as ever.”

The experience of serving in our nation’s armed forces during WWII had a similar kind of effect on my theological hero, the late Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin. As he reflected in a sermon entitled “Why I Became a Minister,” Coffin claimed that the hellish experience of war, especially *that* war, the daily experience of seeing brutality up close and personal, of becoming immersed in, as he put it, “the sullied stream of human life,” is ultimately what made him ready for a religious experience. All of what he saw and did led him to begin asking the right kinds of questions—questions that helped him become more open to learn of a deeper reality. And yet, as he preached, it still took him a while, even after all of that to be open to the work of the church.

“For one thing I hadn’t realized is that Christians are always the best argument against Christianity...”(he had a way with words). “I allowed myself to be put off by the churches....It offended my understanding of the Gospel to see the churches become protected and withdrawn islands of piety in a sea of social ills.”² But, over time, due to the teaching of bright lights like Reinhold Niebuhr and James Muilenburg, Coffin discovered that even through all of those difficult, demanding, and often awful experiences, God had still managed to make his heart more tender and make it stronger. And as a result, Coffin felt drawn deeper and deeper into the vocation of ministry, into being one of God’s hard hats for hope.

I believe Peter had a world-shaking, worldview changing experience like the basketball players just had, like Coffin had beginning with WWII. His experience started that day on the rooftop in Joppa and continued when he showed up in Ceasarea at the home of the Gentile soldier named Cornelius. For like Auschwitz is not the normal destination of a college basketball team and ministering within the Christian church was not how a young William Sloane Coffin pictured spending his one wild and precious life, that Gentile soldier’s home was not at all where Peter had ever expected to travel. It did not fit with the way he was raised. It did not make sense with all that he had been taught about how the world worked. He never would have conceived of making that kind of journey until he had that strange, strange vision.

Listen to how he tried to explain it to the church leadership after the fact, when he found himself in trouble for following it. This passage is later in Acts 11: “I was praying and saw a vision,” he told them.

The heavens opened and something like a large sheet came down, lowered to the ground by its four corners. When I looked inside it, I saw every kind of forbidden creature—camels, badgers, buzzards, bats, crocodiles, lizards, a pig—all the things on the “don’t eat” list in Leviticus 11, part of our holy law. And then I heard a voice that said, “Get up Peter: Kill and eat.” I knew it was God’s voice. I recognized it. But I just could not do what God was telling me to do. It went against everything I had heard before. It went against everything I was taught, against all the Torah I had memorized and applied to my life, against everything my parents had ever said about faithful living. And then God said, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times and then the sheet went back into heaven.³

That is roughly how Peter himself summed up that strange visual experience. But

then, as if that were not enough, after he had that startling vision—he came back to himself only to encounter strangers who had been sent by a soldier named Cornelius to take him, a leader in the Jewish Christian church, to Cornelius’s house, someone who was a Gentile, an outsider to the covenant. The whole thought of it made Peter’s knees shake and his stomach upset, and yet he went with them anyway.

Now unfortunately, we did not have enough time to read the rest of the story today, but know this—even until the very moment Peter walked into Cornelius’ house, he still felt incredibly uneasy and scared about what he was doing, so much so that some of the first words out of his mouth to Cornelius and his family were words of judgment and fear: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile...” And yet, something suddenly clicked in Peter. For immediately after he made that claim, the purpose of the vision became clearer. Standing there in Cornelius’s living room, surrounded by those he did not believe he was even supposed to be around, it was as if his heart grew more tender and stronger at the same time. His vision was not about food, he realized. His vision, his revelation, was about people. It was about those he could consider a part of the family.

And with that new clarity in mind, Peter followed up his statement of distaste with the important Gospel word *but*. Barbara Brown Taylor thinks the whole gospel might swing on that word, that conjunction *but*. I was lost but now I’m found. I was blind but now I see. That one word means that “things can change. [That one word] means we do not always know everything there is to know. [That one word implies] God can still teach us something.”⁴

In the African American preaching tradition, we would add one more thing, though, to that one word. We would add the name of the Holy One so that the conjunction signaling change also might become a phrase of holy defiance. “But God” would be how we would put it, which is exactly what Peter said. “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile. *But God* has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” No, “what God has made clean, who God has made clean through the self-giving inclusive love of Jesus Christ, I must never call profane.” I must never treat them in a way that makes them feel they are unclean. I must never forget their dignity as people created in God’s image. And then do you know what Peter did? He baptized all of them and said—welcome into the family. And he stayed with them for several days. What a huge worldview shift!

Later, he went even a step further. When all of those other church leaders forced Peter to defend his actions, Peter just shouted out, “Who was I that I could hinder God?” Those words illustrate just how strong and how tender Peter’s heart had become, how much he had really started to be famished and thirsty for righteousness, through that world-shaking, worldview changing experience. And Scripture says when they (the good church folk who were upset with him) heard him say that, they were silenced. I’d like to think, and Scripture bears some witness to it, that because of Peter’s courageous actions, some of his adversaries might have also had a completely unexpected, world-shaking, worldview changing experience too. One that made their hearts more tender and stronger at the same time. One that made them even more hungry and thirsty for what might be. An experience that made them change their understanding of what was faithful, that helped give them clarity that what we say about people really does affect the way we think of them and treat them.

Today, as you know, is July 8th. I spent July 4th with my family down in Texas, but I

have to confess to you, celebration was not my focus. Now please hear me out before you decide you already know what I am going to say. I promise you I have been trying hard to fight the temptation of viewing the Gospel through the lens of my politics in the hope that I can do a better job of viewing my politics through the lens of the Gospel. I would invite all of you to join me in that spiritual discipline. It's harder than it sounds. But friends, as I fought that internal temptation, one thing that kept coming up time and time again in my soul was a deep grief over all the evidence that we, as a nation, are dangerously close to losing our dream of who we can be together. We might even use Coffin's words that we are becoming both more immersed and more used to being immersed into a sullied stream of human life.

Down there in Texas I would study and pray over this passage from Acts and then turn on the news to learn just how many migrant children have not yet been reunited with their families. And, as the PBS News Hour put it, many of those who have been reunited are so traumatized by their experience, they seem like different kids.⁵ And with that going across the screen, I kept looking to this passage from Acts and back up to the news dumfounded. What in us, in our national ethos, is making it okay to see these little ones as profane enough that we can treat them that way. I understand that we have to keep our borders safe and strong, *but God* has told us, Jesus people, what God has made clean, we must never call or treat as profane.

Furthermore, and now I know our track record is spotty on this one, but as people who follow Jesus, we must stop making it okay for anyone to refer to another human being, who is also created in God's image, in a derogatory way as an animal or as an infestation, or as somehow less than. If we let that become normal, we forget the lessons that Coach McKillop is trying to teach his basketball players about the critical necessity of advocating for and defending human dignity. And I hope you can hear this—that is not viewing the Gospel through the lens of anyone's politics. That is viewing our politics through the lens of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. For the lens of the Gospel declares to us that all the name-calling, all the meanness, all the outright demonization of each other is antithetical to how we have been made and who we are called to be. Because what God has made clean, which we Presbyterian Christians typically believe means everyone, we must never call or treat as profane, as unclean, as less than. That is the Gospel truth. For Jesus went to great lengths to make sure that after he told us we are to love each other as siblings, that we knew that commandment meant everyone — “including those most unlike us, those who do not fit, those who upset us and make us uncomfortable.”⁶

Perhaps we need to start praying for some Peter-like visions these days. Visions that will shake us out of our stupor of normalized apathy. Visions that could possibly change our entire worldview as to who is worthy of being included. Visions that would open up enough space in us for God to make all of our hearts stronger and more tender, more compassionate, more loving—all at the same time.

And in the meantime, I think I will send a note to Coach McKillop at Davidson College and ask him if his players would please write up what they learned on their trip to Auschwitz so we might learn from their surprising experience and remember again what it means to advocate for and defend the human dignity of all. And the danger that could come if we stop thinking that it matters. For in Christ, God was reconciling the world to God's self. That is *not* fake news. That's the Gospel truth.

So be of courage, Church. And step up.

Notes

1 Bob McKillop, "Grade Point Perspective," *The Washington Post* (July 3, 2018).

2 William Sloane Coffin, "Why I Became a Minister," A sermon preached at Riverside Church NY on Oct. 5, 1986.

3 Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Bread of Angels* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), 77.

4 Ibid, 78.

5 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/my-son-is-not-the-same-new-testimony-paints-bleak-picture-of-family-separation>.

6 Walter Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope* (Louisville: WJKP, 2017), 86.