

Lent Is Where We Live

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Last fall, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) activist DeRay McKesson was a guest at Yale Divinity School. I'd invited him to talk about the emergence of what is perhaps the most significant movement for social justice in America in decades, about the challenges of addressing racism in twenty-first century America, and about the kinds of leadership that are needed if people of faith are to prompt a new set of values in a society that has never fully honored Black lives in our midst. McKesson and others in the BLM effort are redefining what community looks like, building a virtual, activist community through social networks. And in profoundly interpersonal ways, they are building the kinds of relationships with leaders in every arena, insisting that the systemic violence that Black Americans have suffered for centuries must at last come to an end.

The class began with introductions. Students talked about what they were studying, their hopes for life and for ministry, and about how they were affected by the racism that is so prevalent in church and community. Some were funny and engaging. Some simply had hard stories to tell. McKesson went last. He described himself, defined himself, as a *protestor*. He was a protestor, willing to stand with the suffering, and against a society that has failed to value the lives of African American citizens; a protestor, joining with others in lifting voices in anger, in declaration, in hope. Moral voices raised in protest are necessary, he said, because the society has grown silent; even the churches have failed to demand justice in the streets of our nation, and clergy have too seldom been in solidarity at the side of people continually harassed by the violence that has become the norm in nearly every American city and town.

McKesson said that in August of 2014, he was working as an educational administrator several states away when the news reports came of the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, on the streets outside of St. Louis, Missouri. He traveled to Ferguson and soon found himself in the midst of a new movement that was spreading across the nation. Using social media and public gatherings, democratizing the news in dynamic and untested ways, the Black Lives Matter movement rendered the invisible visible, made evident the unseen, and made heard that which had been largely unheard. "We've reconfigured the public space to be broader. Rendering injustice visible is the proudest tradition of protest." That effort did not end in Ferguson. It has grown into a national movement, fueled by the new technologies that inform our lives and by the deep commitments of the young people who refuse to stay silent any longer. The seminary students who gathered at Yale to consider the implications of the BLM movement had no trouble connecting the effort to speak justice in the public square to the story of faith. Harder was envisioning just how the church would respond to such an effort to make the invisible, visible.

As the season of Lent draws near, I find that the witness of DeRay McKesson and others in the Black Lives Matter movement is still ringing in my ears, challenging people of faith to find the space where the incomprehensible becomes comprehensible, the unseen stories are seen anew. At stake is nothing less than recovering the sort of Lenten practice that has been at the center of Christian formation since perhaps Irenaeus

of Lyons. The second century church theologian understood the need for a season for self-reflection and confession in preparation for Easter. Lent was more fully defined by the Council of Nicea in 325 as a forty day period of preparation in the liturgical year, just before Easter, when those who wished to be baptized, and eventually the whole Christian community, might turn again to God and seek to come to terms with their own sinfulness, and to anticipate the assurance of God's life changing grace in the news of Christ's resurrection.

For Christians in a North American context, these forty days that begin with the final blows of winter and end as we approach the earliest days of spring move us to consider anew just what it means to preach into and live into a holy season of preparation. We will hear and proclaim the story of Holy Week and finally tell the good news of Easter in light of our ever sharpening awareness of the struggles of the human condition. The question is, in what ways are we willing to engage those struggles and the brokenness of our own society as a necessary part of that holy preparation.

Irenaeus of Lyon, most likely thinking about Colossians 1:15 (on Christ as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation") wrote that Christ reinterpreted all things through his own being, "making the invisible visible, the incomprehensible comprehensible, and the impassible passible."¹ I asked McKesson about that and was assured that the BLM protestor has not read much Irenaeus. But clearly they shared an important understanding about the necessity of recognizing the presence and activity of God in the present moment, the Spirit living in the actions of real people in the present moment.

For three decades, I've led congregations through the season of Lent. We've prayed into Lent, and we've developed disciplines for reading the Biblical text. We've composed Lenten devotional books together, read John Calvin every day for forty days, and explored the use of some of the ancient rituals of Christian practice. We've given up practices that have been harmful, designing a carbon fast that caused us daily to consider the earth on which we live. And we've taken on new responsibilities for stewardship, challenging one another to give of ourselves in new ways, that we might live more fully in this holy season. I've donned purple vestments, led Taize chants, and preached on the seven last words of Christ. I wouldn't dare to say I've tried it all, but certainly I have tried a good bit of it.

Too often, I will confess, I've been aware during the weeks of Lent of the profound difference between leading a people in the exercise of faith and truly participating in that life of faith. I'm aware of the chasm between inviting others to consider anew the meaning of a suffering God and actually engaging in that exercise myself. Like my rabbi friend who must work on every Shabbat, I've long wondered about what is lost in my own faith by my professional responsibility to lead other people into a meaningful expression of their own faith. As much as I listen to the yearnings of a congregation and respond with sermons and studies that seek to invite a depth of belief and an assurance of the grace of God, I've grown aware as well that there isn't much room for my own Lenten practice. I've neglected my own season of wilderness wandering, the sort of meaningful practice that makes faith the center of our being.

One of the books I asked students to read for the DeRay McKesson class was the Eden Seminary Professor Leah Gunning Francis' *Ferguson & Faith: Sparking Leadership & Awakening Community*. There, the African Methodist Episcopal Church/United Church of Christ pastor Traci Blackmon writes about her involvement very

early in the Ferguson protests. Responding to an online plea to *do something*, on the day of Michael Brown's death, she found herself inviting other members of the faith community not just to pray in isolation and silence, but to gather at the police station in Ferguson after worship the following afternoon.

"If all we're going to do is wait and pray, can we at least do that at the police station?" I had a God moment at the police station.... I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it was a God moment.... My reach is not... great, even with 140... that is not a huge congregation in the first place. And so I had a God moment when I got to the police station and I saw all these clergy, and I saw clergy of multiple faiths.... I wish I had stayed in that God moment and paid attention really closely because the clergy part, I got. The youth part was disconnected.... They were hurting. They were in pain. I missed the opportunity to call young people to the center of worship.... I missed the opportunity to draw that pain into the healing place.... So it was a God moment that was not fully recognized because... I got caught up in the message and forgot the ministry.²

What if our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and works of love were, in this season of preparation, focused not just on the "God moment" in our own lives and experience, not just on the ways that we are open to the holy activity of the Spirit in our own lives and in the lives of those closest to us, but also on the suffering of our brothers and sisters? Rev. Blackmon's challenge to herself, and to us all, to draw pain into the healing place might just be a necessary and central theme for Lent's forty day journey.

There is surely no shortage of suffering at every turn. In a North American context, we cannot help but see Jesus Christ among the young African Americans whose lives are being taken or forever changed by the violent, unrelenting racism of our society. Simply hearing their stories would be a start for every congregation and every preacher. More significant would be opening ourselves to meaningful relationships with those who have walked the way of the cross in this culture, in our own setting, those who have borne the weight of the evil of systemic racism and been marked by the stripes of a society that despises and rejects their very being.

And we need not limit our view to this nation. Across Africa and the Middle East and Europe, as well as throughout Central America, families continue to flee the violence, unrest, and desperate poverty of their homelands and find themselves in the diaspora, refugees in a foreign land. Sometimes, they find welcome. But the morning news, and every agency working with displaced people around the world, tells the stories of the many who have been turned away at the borders. Hard though it is for us to embrace the grief and the suffering of those families, every person of faith understands that the trail of suffering that they are walking is known to Jesus the Christ, the one who was despised and rejected, a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief.

Another eloquent telling of human suffering in our day is offered by the Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich, who was awarded the Nobel prize for literature last fall. Alexievich writes about the former Soviet Union in a form that isn't quite journalism, but isn't just non-fiction either. The Swedish Academy, in announcing

the award, said that Alexievich has devised a new genre. “I don’t just record a dry history of events and facts,” she writes. “I’m writing a history of human feelings.... I compose my books out of thousands of voices, destinies, fragments of our life and being.”³

In her best known book, *The Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future*, Alexievich tells the story of a generation of suffering, capturing the lives of those who knew Chernobyl as their home. She explores as well the human condition early in the twenty-first century.

We’re afraid of everything. We’re afraid for our children, and for our grandchildren, who don’t exist yet. They don’t exist, and we’re already afraid. People smile less, they sing less at holidays. The landscape changes, because instead of fields the forest rises up again, but the national character changes too. Everyone’s depressed. It’s a feeling of doom. Chernobyl is a metaphor, a symbol. And it’s changed our everyday life, and our thinking.⁴

Do we dare to preach such stories in the season of Lent? Do we dare to speak aloud the hurt of every heart, the deep grief that touches so many human families, the reality of living in these days? We’ve always known that there was reason for prayer and for fasting, for a deeper reading of the story of scripture, and for engaging the holy narrative of the human rejection of the Christ. Such faith disciplines have long been effective in drawing believers more fully into the story of Jesus, into the denial and death of the savior of humanity, that we might finally also understand more fully his victory over death. But are we ready to risk naming such desolation in contemporary terms? Are we ready to ask the gentle folks who gather during Lent to worship and to seek the face of God if they will recognize, in the suffering that is so present in these days, the suffering too of the redeemer of humankind?

Telling such stories is risky, not only because they are unsettling, threatening to disturb the polite peace of Sunday morning worship; that we could dare, if it promised to lead to meaningful understanding and deeper expressions of faith. No, the real risk is theological. Linking the stories of human pain caused by the injustice and cold-heartedness of the human society in which we live to the story of Jesus, the Christ, reminds us that the story of life, death, and resurrection is not only to be told in the past tense. The news of Jesus Christ is also to be understood in the present moment. Irenaeus of Lyons’ call to render the invisible visible is not limited to describing the activity of God in the life of Jesus of Nazareth; it becomes an invitation to recognize the activity of God in the life of the Christ living in our midst. Thus the stories of African American men and women killed on the streets of our nation, the stories of hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking respite from violence and hoping for new possibilities in new lands, and even the stories of human despair penned by the Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich become our generation’s holy narratives.

Naming such anguish and lifting the experiences of those facing oppressive power systems will surely disturb the peace of our settled lives. More than that, it will make us into protestors. *Protestors*, willing to stand with the suffering and against a society that has failed to value the lives of God’s own, protestors, joining with others in lifting voices in anger, in declaration, and in hope.

That is the risk that we face. Why do it? Because the faithful souls who gather

during the weeks of Lent to worship the God of their lives are not unacquainted with such sadness, such injustice, such very human pain. Their lives, the lives of every person who makes a way through our church doors and who dares to join with a community of believers in the midst of a worshipping congregation, have been touched by deep and undeniable anguish, often experienced at close range. And their faith has been challenged, rocked, and disturbed by the deepest anxiety. They have had times when they've wondered if God has abandoned them, turned away from them in the hardest of life's experiences. The radical news of hurt in human life is no news at all. In naming the troubles of this world, we are not introducing church members to such hardship.

Instead, we are bearing witness to God's presence with us, God's attention to our suffering. We won't too quickly draw our congregations to the end of the story, to Easter morning on the sunlit hillside. Rather, we might confess with them that Lent is really where we reside for much of our lives. And if, even here, God is with us, if, even in the moments of our greatest fears and harshest experiences of the sinfulness and brokenness of this world, God is nearby, then perhaps Easter has a chance. The light will, in its time, overcome the gloom. The love of God will transform this creation, and God's justice will prevail, overcoming every place of hurt and despair.

Notes

- 1 Norman Russell, "The Work of Christ in Patristic Theology," in Francesca Aran Murphy, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, 2015, p. 155 on Irenaeus of Lyon, Haer.3.17.6.
- 2 Leah Gunning Francis, *Ferguson & Faith: Sparking Leadership & Awakening Community* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2015), 25.
3. Svetlana Alexievich, Personal website, 2015. <http://www.alexievich.info/indexEN.html>
4. Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernoby* (Picador, LLC, 1997, 2009).