

Repairers of the Breach

March 5, 2017

For years I had a print hanging over my desk at home. It had a sultry looking woman with a mischievous grin on her face looking straight out and the text said, “She had not yet decided whether to use her powers for good or for evil.” It was a reminder to me that from those to whom much has been given much is required. It was a reminder that using my gifts and skills – my power, if you will – to inspire, to build up, for the glory of God is a constant choice.

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we read the story of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. We read different versions of how, after his baptism, Jesus spent 40 days in the desert, and at the end of those 40 days, was tempted to use his power and privilege. We read this passage every year, but we all need to be keenly aware of our context as we read this passage at the beginning of Lent this year.

As we begin the church’s 40-day season of preparation for Easter this year, we are conscious that over 130 Jewish community centers and preschools have received bomb threats in recent weeks. We’re conscious that four black transgender women were killed in the south over a one-week period at the end of February and seven have been killed in 2017, setting us to outpace 2016 as the deadliest year for trans people in America. Refugees, Muslims, immigrants, older people, women, gender-fluid people are all living in a state of fear. And this is after a year in which people of color suffered very real, very public attacks. It’s also in our post-911, post-Al Queda world.

Usually we read Jesus’ temptations at the beginning of Lent as a call to personal spiritual renewal. But this year, given our context, the call to societal transformation cannot be ignored. One of the things that I am keenly aware of this year as I pray Jesus being tempted in the desert is his use of his privilege. As the story goes, Satan approaches Jesus in the wilderness to turn stones into bread, to throw himself off the parapet of the temple, to have power over all that he surveyed. In each of these, Jesus is being tempted to use his privilege for personal gain.

Dr. Karen Wiseman, a professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, says that by resisting the temptations, Jesus’ behavior is that of “not ‘pulling rank.’ It means that he can live in to the Son of God status while trusting that God will take care of his needs.” She goes on to ponder:

“How hard it must have been to resist those tests in the wilderness. Jesus was fasting and was hungry, but he refused to turn stones into bread. He was likely worried about his future suffering, but he did not ask for special treatment or protection from God. He was aware of the role to come, but he resisted grabbing power before his time. He was subjected to human suffering, pain, and testing, but he resisted giving up or giving in. He did not react or overreact to his circumstances. He relied on his faith, God, and his training.”

It’s tempting to use our power for our own personal gain, but one of the things that is clear every year when we read this Gospel text is that Jesus is tempted to use his power and privilege for his own personal gain and he does not. He would later come to create bread to feed a hungry multitude. He would later, from the cross, trust God’s ultimate power and plan. He would later

have the adoration of millions, but it came after working with people, helping them to see their inherent self worth, creating communities of inclusion and dignity, establishing a reign in which compassion and mercy are our transformational currency.

Today our Gospel passage in the beginning of Lent intersects with that second Old Testament passage that I read, Isaiah 58, in which we read of God telling us, “The fast that I choose is this: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yolk, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yolk, to share your bread with the hungry, to let the oppressed go free, to bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover them.” Friends, as important as personal spiritual renewal is, the prophet reminds us that what will serve the Lord is a societal transformation. Feeding the hungry welcoming the stranger breaking the yoke of injustice is what we are told serves God.

Isaiah goes on to say that if we do these things, the glory of God will shine on us like the sun and we will be called repairers of the breach. Repairers of the breach. What does that mean, to be a repairer of the breach? You see our temptations today are to take care of ourselves, to do what it takes to help ourselves feel secure, to feed our own safety and security. But what we see in Jesus’ witness and the prophet’s mandate is to repair the social structure, to repair the brokenness of our world.

I’ll admit, I’m someone who would like to just ignore things and hope that they’ll go away: shove the mess into the closet, turn the radio up over the noise that the car is making. But the reality is that the mess is still there and the car still needs attention.

Banning Muslims from entering this country does not make the Syrian refugee crisis go away. It just defers it and I suspect that it exacerbates how it will manifest itself in the future. Building a wall across the Mexican border does not diminish the abject poverty that billions of people living across the world over are living in and what motivates them to risk not only their lives and their limbs, but that of their precious children just in the glimmering hope of possibly making a better life. Barring transgender people from our bathrooms, the bathroom that best fits their gender expression, does not keep us any safer, but it does imperil their safety.

Friends, we are God’s beloved. We have been claimed by the God of Justice and Grace. And, having been claimed by God, like Jesus, we have a responsibility to be agents of healing in this broken and troubled world. Many of you have already picked out a spiritual discipline for Lent. Many of you have committed to something that you would like to do. But if you haven’t, I would encourage you to pray about how it is that you are being called to be a repairer of the breach. How is it that God can use you to heal some of the injustice in the world.

Last year when the bathroom bill was passed in North Carolina, there was a movement called, “I’ll go with you.” The principal was simple. Allies of the transgender community would wear buttons that said “I will go with you” as a sign that if a transperson didn’t feel safe going into a bathroom alone, they could ask someone wearing that button to accompany them. They could ask that person to go to watch their back, to serve as a corroborating witness, simply in solidarity.

Maybe Googling the “I’ll go with you” project and ordering a button is part of your Lenten discipline of being a repairer of the breach. Or maybe if your Lenten discipline of becoming a

repairer of the breach would follow the lines of something that Barbara McClure-Lukens and Sylvia Garrido did a couple of weeks ago. They, with several other members of the community, met with Congressman Mike Gallagher to talk about the plight of refugees and immigrants in our community. They knew that he had substantially different views than they did, but they also understood how important it was that he knew that he also had constituents that thought differently than he did. It took quite a bit of work to set up the meeting. He resisted, but they persisted. In fact the way that they were able to finally get a meeting with him was that their group figured out that Father Ken DeGroot was a family friend of the Gallaghers and so they asked Father Ken to use some pull. They found a way to use power and privilege for the building up of the world, as repairers of the breach rather than for personal gain.

Maybe you'll commit to being a repairer of the breach this Lent by committing to our Lenten study of becoming a welcoming community, the study of the Wisconsin Council of Churches study on immigration. Where ever your current politics lie on the issue of immigration, study and engagement of hard issues is a faithful, humble means of addressing them.

Friends, there are literally millions of ways that we can address the temptations to use our power and privilege only for personal gain and instead put them to God's service, committing ourselves to be repairers of the breach. Whatever your Lenten discipline, my prayer is that we will all band together to use our powers for good instead of for evil. May it be so.

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Lent 1A Matthew 4:1-11; Isaiah 58:1-12
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