

Jesus' Tools

October 29, 2023

Whose Fast Car?

This summer, Tracy Chapman became the first black woman to have a sole songwriting credit on a No. 1 country hit. She achieved this when country star Luke Combs covered her 1988 masterpiece, "Fast Car."

When I heard this, having been a huge fan of the original, I had to give the new version a listen. I'll admit, I was skeptical. The original is pure genius. And so, I was pleasantly surprised that the new version holds water. It's good. But in trying to put my finger on why the original is a masterpiece and the new version is merely a hit, what I landed on was the difference in the life experience of the singers.

The lyrics start:

You got a fast car
And I want a ticket to anywhere
Maybe we make a deal
Maybe together we can get somewhere

Any place is better
Starting from zero, got nothing to lose
Maybe we'll make something
Me, myself, I got nothing to prove

Hearing a young black woman sing that brings shivers up and down my spine, in a way that, I'll be frank, hearing a white guy who grew up in Asheville, North Carolina doesn't. Sometimes, who is doing something, and their context, reshapes how we hear or see or receive what they are doing.

Just War

This came to mind last weekend as I was preparing to teach our high school Faith Formation session. When I was planning this year's offering with Education Ministry, I told them, and subsequently our high schoolers and their families, that my plan was to use William Sloan Coffin's adage that preachers should approach our craft with the Bible in one hand and the New York Times in the other, and apply it to our content. Each week, I would invite the teens to explore topics in the headlines and apply their faith.

Having this as our declared content, our topic would have to be the war in Gaza. I dug up some materials on Just War theory, and we had a really meaningful discussion about when, from a faith perspective, war might be justified, and subsequently, what limits still need to be put in place. The materials I found asked participants to think about the morality of dropping the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I was impressed with our teens' nuanced processing, and how they were easily able to carry their thoughts over to modern day conflicts.

One of the differences between the current war in Gaza, however, and all of the other wars and armed struggles we discussed, is the reason for the existence of Israel to begin with. We talked about how, after the Holocaust, after the pogroms, after the eons of persecution and scapegoating of the Jewish people, Israel sits in a unique position in the world. The very existence of Israel is to say, “Never Again!”

This is a very, very important truth to hold. AND, while historical atrocities are bedrock to Israel’s existence, the truth of the matter is that the Israeli government, for decades, has been behaving immorally, denigrating, dehumanizing, terrorizing, perpetrating a simmering genocide.

Those of you who were able to participate in our adult education session this spring when one of my mentors, Dr. Bob Kramer, brought two Palestinian Christians to speak with us, heard first hand about the inhumane behavior of the Israeli government. In short, Israel’s very existence sets it apart. It is not only their right, it is their responsibility, and that of their allies, to ensure, “Never Again!” AND, for far too long now, the victim has become the perpetrator, and that behavior cannot be tolerated.

The Scriptures

In Bible Study on Tuesday, the first thing that we discussed was Verse 4 of the passage that Karen read for us today, in which the LORD shows Moses the land that is sworn to the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. But even more salient to our discussion of the war in Gaza and the morality of war is the symbolism that the people who crossed over into the Promised Land were not the same people who Moses led out of Egypt. The psycho-spiritual lesson here is that those who were enslaved in Egypt were carrying so much trauma, so much baggage, and in turn were carrying with them so much trauma-informed behavior, that achieving utopia was never going to be theirs.

In the article I wrote this month for our print newsletter, I quoted Audre Lord, who wrote that “we will never dismantle the master’s house using the master’s tools.” What she meant by that is that we will never dismantle oppression by being oppressive. We will never undo trauma by inflicting trauma. We will never end war with war. War may be necessary to stop or contain evil, but it will never be the solution and it will never bring peace.

This notion that the old ways of being that are born of slavery have no place in the Promised Land dovetails with our Gospel, the greatest commandment. Most of you can probably quote it in your sleep:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul
and with all your mind...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus even says, “On these hang the law and the prophets,” meaning this is the trunk from which all other teaching branches off of. Love of neighbor cannot be something that we put on and take off. It cannot be something that we talk about here but then take off in the boardroom or in the halls of Congress or even on the battlefield. Jesus is teaching the

ultimate truth: that love must permeate all of our relationships, our relationships with God and neighbor and self.

Application

At the intersection of needing to lay down the behaviors we learned amidst trauma, as exemplified by Moses never reaching the Promised Land, and living the greatest commandment, I found an article on the war in Gaza in New York Magazine by a Jewish playwright, Sarah Schulman.

Schulman writes:

“The most difficult challenge in our lives is to face our contributions to the systems that reproduce inequality and consequential cycles of violence. Every person has to face their own complicities, and we start this by listening to whoever is suffering, even if it is by our own hand. It is this transcendence that can lead us all to a better place.”

One of my colleagues, Jeff Spencer, who pastors Niles Discovery Church, a combined UCC and Disciples of Christ church in California, writes that he holds:

“Israel to a different higher standard of behavior than I do Hamas. There are three reasons for this. First, I expect my nation’s allies to live up to a higher standard of behavior. Second, I expect those who have suffered oppression to side with the oppressed. And third, when it comes to power in Israel/Palestine, Israel has the power, and is therefore responsible for limiting its use.”

All of this seems so overwhelming. What is one person to do? First, pray. Not for Gaza. Well, not ONLY for Gaza. Pray for Gaza, but pray first for yourself. Pray for transformation and healing and growth. Pray that Jesus’ ways of love and healing will permeate all that you are. Pray to lay down the burdens and behaviors of trauma and pain and slavery that have dogged you for decades and your people for generations. Pray like your life, and the future of the world depends on it. Because it does. Because, you see, in prayer, we invite God into our brokenness, into our hurt and struggle, and in our humility make space for things to be different.

Then, alongside our prayer, we need to personally behave differently. Transforming the world starts with transforming our own existence. With the greatest commandment as our mantra, we need to live differently. This applies to our parenting, our business dealings, our politics. It’s so easy to fall back into using what Audre Lord called “the master’s tools,” the tools of violence and domination and control. But the structures of the world aren’t going to magically become just. It is only when a critical mass of us are behaving justly and that just behavior is woven into the warp and woof of all we are and do that the systems will change.

So, we need to pray, we need to live differently, and last, we need to speak up and speak out. I started out today, talking about how the song “Fast Car” is acutely more powerful when sung by a black woman than by a white man, how who we are and our personal histories and

those of our ancestors shape how the world receives what we say and do. With that, I circle back to Sarah Schulman, whose New York Magazine article I quoted earlier. Remember, she's Jewish. In her witness against the war in Gaza, she deepens the notion that Israel's existence is a concrete proclamation of "Never again."

Shuman adds, "Never again FOR ANYONE." Never again for anyone. No genocide. No terror. Said another way by another Jewish woman, Naomi Klein, "Side with the child over the gun every single time, no matter whose gun and no matter whose child."

Call and write to Congress. Dispel myths. Join our Conference Minister, Franz Rigert, to "advocate for an immediate ceasefire, a massive humanitarian response, and a mandate from world leaders that we step back from the brink of a potentially catastrophic war."

Friends, this church loves the hymn "Let There Be Peace On Earth." Slightly less known, but still beloved is the hymn we'll sing at the end of today's worship, "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace." We are blessed with the legacy of the Bond of Union, "to make the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations." As we seek to live the greatest commandment, may our living of love become not just a ripple, but an exponent, transforming this world God loves so much.

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Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46
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