

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

June 28, 2020  
13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Matthew 10:40-42

### When Hospitality Yields Justice

I'd like to begin with a story I've told before, three years ago, when this same portion of scripture was the lectionary's gospel lesson for that day. It's not my own story, it's one that Dr. Anna Case-Winters, professor of theology at McCormick Theological Seminary and a personal friend, tells in her theological commentary on Matthew. (2015, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, pp. 161-163)

As a representative of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Anna was in the west African nation of Ghana in 2004 at a meeting of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. The meeting resulted in a strong statement regarding the church and global economics. The delegates of the churches agreed that if the church does not address the issue of systemic poverty, we call into question the integrity of our proclamation of the gospel. We are to preach—and make real in the world—good news to the poor.

At the meeting, the host churches took the international visitors to see what are known as the "slave castles," fortresses built on the coast by European merchants in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. At first, the cargo holds below the castles held rum, sugar, and spice. But when slave trading became a more profitable business, the cargo holds became, you guessed it, dungeons for humans. For up to three months, men, women, and children were held captive there awaiting the arrival of the ships on which they would be loaded and transported across the ocean. Food was delivered to them down a chute from a window above. The doors of the hold were not opened even when people within died.

And in the castle, right above the cargo hold, was a lovely room with big airy windows. It was the sanctuary where the colonialists worshiped.

It's easy to imagine the reaction of the church leaders on the tour. They were horrified and shamed by this legacy. Couldn't the Christians worshiping above hear the cries of people right below them? Where was their heart? Where was the compassion of Christ? But the critical moment came when one person asked the hardest question of all: Where are we not making the connections between faith and life? Where are we not hearing the cries from below?

In this past month, Christians and others across our nation and around the world have been waking up to cries from below. The dying words of George Floyd, "I can't breathe," and "Mama," have been heard by millions, recorded on a cell phone by a teenager and spread throughout the world. One man brutally murdered, who has come to represent the brutality and injustice of structural racism. Can we connect faith and life in this moment of awakening, can we hear those cries interrupting our worship, can we recognize the presence of Christ in our midst asking for a cup of cold water?

The words of Jesus to his disciples acknowledge the resistance of the world to the good news of the kingdom. In addition to good news to the poor, the kingdom announces release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the forgiveness of financial debts. The kingdom, or reign of God, is for those who mourn, those who are meek, those who are merciful, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The kingdom of God overturns the idea that some people deserve higher status and privilege than others, for in the reign of God which Jesus announces—and calls his disciples to make real—there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male and female, no black and brown and white, no rich and poor, no "others" left out of God's promise.

The world resists this message and rejects its messengers. Jesus warns his disciples of this resistance. And he assures them that those who do not resist, but welcome this message and its messengers, will have their reward. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, Jesus says. (Matthew 5:3, 10, 12)

Throughout the gospel of Matthew, we hear Jesus' concern for the least of these, the little ones, the poor in spirit, the meek. In today's three little verses, we hear him telling us to become the little ones who risk rejection for our counter-cultural message and ministry. He tells us to receive hospitality when it is provided, and he blesses those who offer it. For their hospitality is part of the growing reign of justice and peace, God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

So as we are waking up, connecting faith and life, and hearing the cries from below in our world, I'd like to address three myths about racism in Montana.

The first one I've heard is this: *We don't have a problem with racism here because we don't have many black people.* I think the truth is more like this: We don't have many black people here in Montana because we do have a problem with racism here.

It's hard to feel at home here when, simply because of your skin color, you are told, "You're not from around here," or asked, "What are you doing here?" This happens to African Americans in Montana with great frequency. But racism isn't only directed against Black people here. Our Native peoples can tell story after story of having their full humanity denied by the dominant culture. White Americans took their land, slaughtered their people, and tried to eradicate their languages and cultures. And still, white supremacy colors our relationships. We have a problem with racism in Montana.

The second myth is about Bozeman. *We are educated and enlightened here, and everyone is treated equally.* If you tend to believe that, just listen as a person of color dares to reveal to you how many times they have been called a hate-filled name here in Bozeman. That is just the ugly tip of the iceberg of systemic racism underneath. Listen to how their experience is repeatedly denied by people who claim to be "colorblind." This myth is what author Kerry Connelly calls "good white racism." She defines "good white racists" as those who have been assigned the racial identity of whiteness and benefitted from a social system that privileges whiteness, who intellectually reject racist behaviors but still practice them, usually because they are not aware of their privileges, and who usually will respond defensively when they are confronted with the racism of the systems we live within. (2020, *Good White Racists?*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 14) Connelly includes herself in this broad group of people she is calling out. Her challenge is to look within ourselves with great honesty and to repent, which means not just saying "I'm sorry" but actually doing something to change. (page 140)

The third myth is the one I find myself most tempted to believe. *I'm just one person, there's not much I can do about it all.* But oh, my friends, when we slip into that one we are giving up on our faith in a living God. We are giving up on the call of Jesus Christ. We are giving up on the power of the Holy Spirit to work in and through us. If racism, both personal and systemic, is the great sin we call it, and I believe it is, then allowing it to persist within us and around us is capitulation to sin. Instead, together we can commit to change. No matter where we are on this road, we can join hands and encourage one another. When our denominational church declared in 1967 that "life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage," it also proclaimed that the purpose of God includes working for justice and peace in society. (Confession of 1967, PC(USA)) If we can't do that together, then why call ourselves the church of Jesus Christ?

But we do call ourselves Christ's church, and we do call ourselves his disciples. Christ's disciples are sent into a broken and fearful world, which won't always receive what we have to say with a readiness to change. We are still called to go. We are still called to be his missionaries. We are still called to speak his prophetic word and live the way of his righteousness. And Christ promises us what he promised his first disciples—that there will be some who will welcome us as his representatives, welcoming him and welcoming God all in the same action. There will be some who will recognize the word of truth and welcome it. There will be some who will see the way to right the wrongs of the world and be blessed by doing so. They will be the people who unstop their ears to hear the cries from below, and will offer their own cup of cold water. Jesus says they will receive their heavenly reward.

Do we dare to be the little ones who will ask? Do we dare to be Christs to one another? Jesus said, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matthew 5:6) Amen.