

Minnesota Conference Annual Meeting
Worship Resources for Sunday, June 12, 2016
Scripture: Matthew 14:28-32
Theme: Diving Deeper: Race, Class and Faith¹

Sermon ideas for the Preacher:

Exegesis of the Text and Possible Points to be made:²

- Peter asks Jesus to have him step out onto the water (amidst strong winds that have already pushed the boat far from sea) because Peter recognizes that it is Jesus and what Jesus commands, Jesus makes possible. In the midst of “diving deeper” into questions of race, class and faith—Jesus has commanded us to enter into the strong winds and seemingly-dangerous waters of systemic racism and classism and proceed with deep faith that Jesus can lead us to make justice and transformative love possible.
- When the command is spoken, Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk toward Jesus. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes in *The Cost of Discipleship*,
Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith... The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if [people] imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics.

Bonhoeffer draws the theological paradox: only the one who believes is obedient and only the one who is obedient believes.

This paradox is evident in our work against racism and classism and in favor of helping create the Realm of God here on earth. We must believe God’s power to call us to transformation in order to obey and do the work of radical systemic transformation and we must obey and do the work of radical systemic transformation in order to believe.

- In our work around questions of race and class, it is important to note our current “social location.” How much power do we hold due to our race and class? What about our gender, gender identity, physical ability or sexual orientation? As Jennifer Harvey suggested during the 2015 Minnesota Conference Annual meeting, working on questions of racism and classism, requires of us a clear sense of our own power—as individuals and as communities. Do we hold white racial privilege? Do we hold class privilege?

When we hold racial and class privilege, Jesus’ command to us includes confession, repentance and repair work before we can get to reconciliation. Racism and classism have deeply damaged

¹ This resource was created by Rev. Rebecca Voelkel in collaboration with Rev. Lisa Bodenheim and Rev. Elaine Kirkland, the Worship Planning Team for the 2016 Minnesota Conference Annual Meeting.

² Some of the exegetical insights are drawn from *Texts for Preaching* by Walter Brueggemann, Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa and James Newsome published by Westminster John Knox Press, 1995. Others are drawn from *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine published by Pilgrim Press, 2004.

God's creation and perpetrated violence upon our kindred human beings and the earth. Stepping out onto the windy, stormy seas to follow Jesus requires of us faith to believe in our belovedness enough to confess the reality that we have benefitted from systems of injustice, to repent of these benefits which have come from others' violation and begin the work of repairing the world through actions of restorative and transformative justice.

Possible Illustrations:

Story #1: An Hassidic story.

The Kaiser of Austria came to visit the Czar of Russia. A state dinner with all the trimmings was being served. One of the items on the menu was kishke. Real kishke is nothing like the "kishke" that is available at your local delicatessen. Real kishke is actually the intestines of the animal stuffed with flour and oil and all sorts of spices.

The kishke was served and the Kaiser loved it. He asked the Czar to send his cooks the recipe. The Czar graciously promised to do so. After the Kaiser's departure the Russian (Jewish) cooks wrote down the recipe and sent it via diplomatic mail to the Kaiser's chefs.

The day finally came when the Kaiser was informed that he would be served kishke. He sat down hungrily. Out came a tray. Phew! Did it stink! The Kaiser took off the cover from his plate and took a bite. He immediately spat out the piece and ordered the tray removed and the kishke thrown away.

A letter of official protest was immediately dispatched to the Czar. How dare he send a recipe for such a vile concoction! The Czar received the protest letter and summoned his cooking staff and demanded an explanation. Initially, the imperial kitchen staff was perplexed & scared. They did not want to incur the Czar's wrath. They went over the recipe and could not find the problem. After quite some time and in a moment of inspiration, one of the staff exclaimed incredulously, "Of course! We told him how to stuff and spice the kishke, but we never realized that we needed to tell him to clean it out before he stuffs it!"³

As Beth Zemsky, a Jewish scholar and activist writes, "this story is a parable for teshuvah, the repentance, turning, and returning which is key to cleaning oneself out in order to move into a new way of being. The story also highlights while good intentions are important, they are not sufficient."

Story #2 The Bakken Museum

On a recent trip to the Bakken Museum of electrical engineering, one mother who chaperoned described it as the coolest field trip ever! Before the "awesomest" part in the Ben Franklin party room with its hair-raising experiments with static electricity, everyone heard a bit about the history of the mansion in which the museum is housed.

Apparently, it was built by a Mr. Goodfellow for his fiancée. But before their marriage, she broke up with him and he lived in the palatial mansion by himself. Even more saddening, he had it built so that every room had six or seven exits. When the kids asked why, they were told because it was finished during the

³ Yossi Gordon http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/562656/jewish/Stuffed-Derma.htm

Depression and Mr. Goodfellow didn't want to be trapped in any room if a thief or desperate person broke into his home. He wanted to be able to escape an attack.

When she retold this story, the chaperone wondered aloud at the language of possession. She wondered who owned what and what owned whom in Mr. Goodfellow's life.

Story #3 Lorelle Saxena's wisdom⁴

Many of us have been raised in the midst of unfettered capitalism and its unholy theology of racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism. And in this context, the prayers of thanksgiving that are raised too often sound a lot like prosperity gospel.... Thank you God, for all this stuff I have.... Thank you God for all these clothes, this big house, this ability to consume all I want. Thank you God that my life isn't like that person who doesn't have a job.

It seems to me that we've been taught to confuse privilege that comes from systems of injustice with gifts from God. Lorelle Saxena's words express some of my distress with this kind of thanksgiving. She writes in a blog in response to the Syrian Refugee crisis:

There is no reason, not one single reason, why I deserve shelter, food, stability, safety, health, or your regard any more than any given Syrian refugee. Not one reason. My home, my education, my business; the way I look, the way I talk; the fact that I come home to a safe, whole, healthy family every day--every one of those things is a privilege that I fell into by the random circumstance of being born in this country to parents who valued academic achievement. I, or you, could have just as easily been born in Syria, or Burkina Faso, or Afghanistan. Do you really think that you're a different kind of human being than the refugees? Do you think your privilege is earned?

[She continues], compared to most people in the world, you and I are rich with privilege, much of it just because we were lucky enough to be born in a country fat with it. I woke up early this morning and made organic, whole-grain muffins for my son, then dressed him in warm clothes, put sunscreen on his little face, strapped and buckled him into his bike seat and rode along peaceful streets to deliver him at his warm, nurturing preschool. There were so many levels on which I was able to protect him. Every breath of this morning was a privilege. Meanwhile millions of children who months ago had bedrooms and dinner tables and doctors and schools are sleeping directly on the ground, their parents unable to secure shelter or food for them, much less healthcare or education.

And no, that is not your fault. But that's not the same as it not being our responsibility. We have everything we need and then so much on top of that, and we can choose to exemplify to our own children one of two courses of action: we can open our clutched fists and share with our fellow humans all the abundance that exists here--or we can hoard it, greedy and bloated and fearful.

⁴ This section of theological wisdom originally appeared in *Thanksgiving: The Promise and Challenge of Gratitude* preached by Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel at Lyndale United Church of Christ on November 22, 2015.

... there is no such thing as "our own." Every human is our own. Every hungry child, grieving mother, frightened husband, weary grandmother is our own. Nobody gets to pretend our world is a different world from the world that creates civil wars and bombs and hunger. We are all toeing this same precarious, shifting tightrope of a life. Anyone can fall at any time. All there is to catch us is each other.