

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Mission: The Call
June 21, 2020
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Exodus 3:1-12; Matthew 9:9-13

He was comfortable. Though his life was not as exciting as it had been growing up in Pharaoh's house, it was comfortable. He had escaped a murder rap in Egypt, traveled to the wilderness where he met his desert princess, got married, had a family, found a new career as a shepherd and all was well. But then this God showed up. This God who had no name and set bushes on fire so that they did not burn. This annoying God who wanted him to give up his comfortable life and go free some slaves. Who did this God think Moses was? Moses was not a good speaker. He had no army. He had no real wealth. And besides, he was comfortable. Why would this God want him to give up all of this?

He was comfortable. His route there had not been easy but now he had the perfect life. He had begun life as an ordinary Jew, living under the oppression of the Romans and their puppet government in Judaea. There was no real hope of achieving anything, but he had been industrious, cunning and crafty. He had probably begun work as a gofer for a local tax collector, and then worked his way up the tax food chain by cheating and bribing others until he had his own tax booth. Sure, most of the locals disliked him, but he was rich and comfortable. But then this Jesus fellow showed up. This Jesus fellow who had no money, few followers, no influence and certainly no connections and asked Matthew, the tax collector, to give up everything and follow. Why should he give up his comfortable life? Why would God want him to give up all of this?

Why indeed? Why indeed would God want Moses and Matthew to give up their comfortable lives and go on some sort of a dangerous and difficult journey? Why would this God interrupt their lives and make them do uncomfortable things? Why? The answer is actually rather simple. God heard the cry of God's people. In Exodus 7, we hear God saying, "I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver them." Though the Gospel of Matthew never says that God has heard the cry of God's people, we understand that in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is seen as the new Moses who has been called not just to set the Jewish people free, but to set free all humanity. Jesus, along with his followers like Matthew had, been called to leave their comfortable lives to do the work of transforming the world. And this morning, I believe that God is once again hearing the cries of God's people. Not that God has not been hearing the cries of people of color and indigenous people for the last four-hundred years, but perhaps it is now that we are hearing them as well; that God is calling us to step out of our comfortable lives and to do some uncomfortable things. The question then becomes, what are the cries of God's people?

Over the past couple of weeks I have participated in two marches. One in Detroit with pastors, imams, rabbis and others. We walked with people of all colors and religions. We walked with members of law enforcement who watched over us, supported us and shared the journey. We walked with the governor and the mayor of Detroit. The other walk was here in Bloomfield Township where Cindy and I live. It was organized by one of our regular attenders, Dawn Campbell. And again, it was a multi-racial gathering supported by our Township police force. But at each rally and walk people shared their experiences and they cried out. And one of the things for which they cried out was for justice. The call and response went, "What do we want? Justice. When do we want it? Now!" The marchers with whom I walked and spoke with made it clear that one of their primary aims is justice. I want to pause here for a moment. I want to pause because over the course of my 35 year ministry, every time I have spoken about justice I have had people ask me, "Why are we talking about justice? This is not Biblical. We Christians are supposed to be talking about sin and salvation. About spiritual things. And besides, your task is to comfort me...not discomfort me." So if that is what you are thinking, here is my response. If love is the beating heart of God, then justice is the red blood cells that take God's love to

humanity and give life to the body; give life in all its fullness to human beings. I say this because justice runs throughout the Bible. It runs from the Torah, through the prophets, is intertwined in Jesus' teachings and is contained in the letters of the New Testament. Justice then is not only in the heart of God but it is to be at the heart of the work of God's people here on earth. But that leads to a second question, which is, what is justice? What is Biblical justice? It is true equality in every sense of the word. But to understand that I want to offer you what I consider to be the core tenets of justice, or what I call, the holy trinity of justice.

The first part of the holy trinity of justice begins by seeing every human being as being equal to every other human being. This sense of equality is based on the Genesis story of God's creation of all human beings in God's image. It continues in Paul's statement that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. All are one in Christ Jesus. I realize that most of us here this morning believe that we see all people as equal. Unfortunately, we live in what Bryan Stevenson, the author of the book Just Mercy, calls the smog of white superiority. He says that even when slavery was abolished, the smog of white superiority remained. One of my favorite examples comes from Stevenson, who is a black attorney. He tells the story of showing up early in a courtroom, making his way to the defense table and then being told by the judge to leave, because the judge didn't want any defendants in the courtroom without their lawyers. Stevenson calmly explained to the judge that he, Stevenson was the attorney. The judge's response was not an apology. It was to laugh, as if he was thinking, "What has this world come to that you could have a black man as an attorney." This judge was living in the smog of white superiority and could only see a black man as a defendant, and not an attorney. For there to be justice, we must see all people as our equals.

The second part of the holy trinity of justice is that all people are to be treated as equal. In the Torah this can be seen when it states that refugees and aliens are to be treated the same as native born people. The Torah also makes clear that when it comes to judgments, the poor are to be treated the same as the wealthy and that it is forbidden for the wealthy to bribe judges in order to get preferential treatment. This call for treating people equally continues in the New Testament when in the book of James, the writer decries the actions of the church that favor the rich over the poor; that give preferential treatment to one person over another. Again, we may say, well John I never do that. But our society does. We have a world in which people of color are not treated the same when it comes to housing, education, health care or within the justice system. I will offer you one example from this past week's news. A black woman and her family were excited because the pool in their apartment complex had finally opened. As they walked toward the pool, a woman who worked for the complex was waiting by the gate. White person after white person walked right past the gate watcher. When the black family walked up the gate watcher told them they could not come in because the family didn't live there. When the mother insisted that they did live and gave their apartment number, the gate watcher said she knew everyone who lived in the complex and the family should leave before the police were called. For there to be justice all people have to be treated equally.

The final piece of the holy trinity of justice is that all people are to have equal access to the benefits of society. At this moment I know I am going to get myself in trouble. Biblically this idea is rooted and grounded in the concept of the Year of Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee was to occur every 50th year. In that year all debts were forgiven, land returned to its original owners, the land was to rest from cultivation and slaves were to be freed. In other words, everyone got a chance to start fresh and enjoy the benefits of society. It made sure that no one person, family or tribe accumulated so much that they dominated society and left others behind. Again, let me be clear, I am not talking about any particular form of government or any particular government program that will achieve a year of jubilee. I am talking about the scriptures that make it clear that God's desire is that all people share in the benefits of society and that no one is to get left behind. And unfortunately, people of color, over the history of our nation have been left out and left behind. One woman described the history of our nation as a monopoly game in which for the first two-hundred- and fifty-years black people were not players in this game but were cash to be traded and sold. For those of you who are unaware, just before the Civil War the largest segment of the southern GNP consisted of enslaved people. Following emancipation when blacks were

freed what little they were given was eventually taken from them after reconstruction ended. This included their freedom when white southerners created new laws that could imprison blacks for gathering together or for black men talking to white women. And whenever they actually began to accumulate wealth and could play the game, such as in Tulsa, jealous whites rioted, burning down their community leaving more than 300 black citizens dead and more than 8,000 homeless. This continued when blacks moved north and laws were passed that did not allow for FHA or VA backed loans for black families or neighborhoods...and so it was a game in which people of color always lost. Which is why the average white family has net assets of \$146,000 and the average black family has net assets of only \$36,000 and black unemployment in this moment has once again exceeded that of Hispanics and whites. For there to be justice, all persons have to equal access to the benefits of society.

I believe that God is calling us to be discomfited, to hear the cries of God's people and to act. What does that action look like? I am not sure. What exactly will it call us to do? I am not sure. In some ways we are like Moses setting off for Egypt or Matthew beginning to follow Jesus. We are not sure of the way ahead, but we know that we are called. And this call can be summed up in these words from the Belhar confession. "That the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." My friends, my challenge for you on this day is that you will ask yourselves, how can I, in my sphere of influence let justice roll down like waters and help create God's justice for those I encounter?