

Sermon

July 10, 2016 | The 8th Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Deuteronomy 30:9-14 | Preacher: Peter Lane

Philando Castile was a 32-year-old cafeteria supervisor at a St. Paul school, a respected member of his union. He was killed by the police for being black. Alton Sterling was a 37-year old roving CD salesman with 5 children. He had criminal convictions, perhaps forcing him into the informal economy used by so many whom employers turn aside. He was killed by the police for being black. The videos of both incidents show the depravity of which a human is capable. The images are shocking and deeply saddening. But the shock and the sadness turn to outrage upon the quick realization that those shootings are like a vein of quartz sticking out of the surrounding rock, a vein you know goes kilometers down into the bedrock of anti-black racism on which our country sits. To paraphrase Kahlil Muhammad, these shootings must end the comfortable vanity of our self-deception. The Minnesota Governor is right when he says that Castile would be alive if he were white. Our historical illiteracy must somehow come to an end. We must be in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

Brent Thompson was a 43-year old father and grandfather, who had gotten married in the last two weeks. He was one of the five Dallas police officers killed by a sniper with an assault rifle. He was doing one of the most American things a police officer can do: protecting those peacefully protesting police violence. Reading about the killed and wounded officers is deeply saddening. But the sadness is eclipsed by outrage upon realization that the killings are deeply rooted in America's culture of fear that uses guns as a salve.

In the days since there has been a strong desire for the system to change. And yet faith in the system is waning. Enough Brits agreed with Boris Johnson, who called the EU "a bit mad and idealistic," to break a fundamental post WWII peace-keeping institution. Mistrust of the system spans the Atlantic. For a time, Americans learned to turn to the large governmental systems for redress in times of need. Thurgood Marshall and *Board of Education in 1954*. *Lambda Legal and Varnum v. Brien*, the Iowa marriage equality case in 2009. But faith in the system is eroding precipitously. The FBI deemed the ultimate insider, Hillary Clinton, "extremely careless." Bernie Sanders loudly proclaimed how the primary process is "rigged" and how the "average citizen is disenfranchised." Donald Trump screams out, "We have a rigged system, folks." We have grown used to turning to the system, and yet the system is creaking under its own weight.

There is reason for pessimism. It is almost like we can't go on.

Moses has something to say when facing the prospect of not going on. When Moses couldn't go on because of his failings, he gave a speech to inspire a people towards justice.

Moses was born when the Israelites were in captivity in Egypt. Through some craftiness by his mother, he was raised as an Egyptian prince. Much later, God called him into service and he became the famed leader who told old Pharaoh to "let my people go." Moses did good work after the Red Sea, too: ten commandments, covenant with God... But Moses was all to human-fallen I mean. At one point, the people were without water. God tells Moses to *speak* to a rock to bring water. Moses, having gotten too full of himself, *knocks* twice on the rock. Moses thought *he* was the one bringing water. God tells him that because "you disobeyed my command" in the desert, you can't go with the people into the promised land. That is a reason for pessimism. Moses can't go with the people. But he overcomes any pessimism to give a wonderful pep-talk. I think we too can use his encouragement.

The Deuteronomy reading we had this morning is towards the end of Moses' long valedictory address. And its main message is, "You can do it." Moses makes three points. First, "the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous." What is Moses' proof? God prospered the Israelites' ancestors. Second, Moses tells the people what to do. "Obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments." When you do that, God will prosper you! But it is the third point that is the most powerful. For to be honest, hearing about observing commandments can sound daunting. And I know that the people who prosper materially in our world don't necessarily observe the commandments and vice versa. It is why the third part of this reading is so important. Moses says: The commandment is not too hard for you. The commandment is not too far from you. The commandment can be found in your heart. Moses has an amazing confidence in human capacity to do what we ought. It is why Moses doesn't say that they will prosper *if* they obey the law but rather *when*. Moses can't go on, but he has faith that the people know what is right, can do what is right, and will do what is right.

This past week has brought focus onto the bedrock racism that underlies our country and the roots of fear that support our culture. And faith in the system is waning. Moses knew about fear and failings, murder and selfishness. But Moses also knew a God who would be faithful and knew a people who could do what is right. It is a message we need to hear because we need motivation to do what is right. Surely, the commandment to turn away from systemic racism is not too hard for us, the commandment to not be driven by fear nor too far away. Justice is on our mouths and in our hearts. We can do it.

Dr. Khalil Muhammad spoke recently of a pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will. It is good to be clear eyed about the failings of our culture and our church. And yet, the past is not destiny. He says, "We always have a choice. And the choice is not to be prisoner to the past, not to be prisoner to the existing myths that shroud us, but to make different choices."

We can do what is right. Then why do we not? Why did those individual policemen and that individual sniper do such dastardly deeds? And why do we live so comfortably with the cruel contradictions of our culture?

Justice is in our mouths and in our hearts. But it needs cultivation. Our hearts and our mouths are malleable, formed by the patterns of our lives and by the communities that form us. We are what we love. And so we must take care in the patterns of our lives, in where we place our loves. If we don't take care, the racist and fearful status quo will choose for us. Justice is on our mouths and in our hearts, but so is racism and fear. We must cultivate justice.

I am aware that puts pressure on this very institution. St. Paul & the Redeemer must be a place that helps forms us into people who are in solidarity with the vulnerable of the world. That won't be easy because St. Paul & the Redeemer itself was formed these last 156 years in a culture that had racism as part of its bedrock and fear as part of its roots. But I am with Moses. "Surely, this commandment is not too hard for us, nor is it too far away. ... No, the word is very near to us; it is in our mouths and in our hearts for us to observe. A clear eyed pessimism about the present does not mean one can not have an optimism about the future.

Moses gave his pep-talk having seen the promised land. He would not get there himself, but his encouragement would take the people there. Let us provoke one another to love and good deeds, encouraging one another, and cultivating the justice that is on our mouths and in our hearts. Let us make this a community that molds people of justice and love. God will be faithful in the process. And with God's grace, the people that come after us will live in a society in which fear is not coddled by guns and where Black Lives truly matter.

AMEN.

Sources:

Commentary on Deuteronomy: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1726

Interview with Khalil Muhammad: <http://billmoyers.com/story/khalil-gibran-muhammad-crisis-racial-justice/>