

Proper 14 Year C 2019

I serve on the commission of racial justice and reconciliation of the diocese. There are good people on the commission... and of all the diocesan commissions I have served on over the years as layperson and as a priest, this one has been far and away the most active. The commission has held workshops on race and white privilege around the diocese. The commission brought civil rights activist Bob Zellner to All Saints, and has plans for other speakers to come to the diocese. One recent speaker was Lenice Emanuel, executive director of the Alabama Institute for Social Justice who spoke at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in May. Ms. Emanuel had some harsh things to say about the current administration in Washington, and had some harsh things to say about Senate Republicans complicit with the president on matters of race, immigration, gun control, and social justice in general.

One person in attendance was offended so much that he wrote the members of the commission upbraiding us for inviting a speaker who dared to criticize the political powers that be. He said that Ms. Lenice was partisan, and that any speaker invited to the diocese should refrain from partisan politics. So the leadership of our commission, with good intention, decided that we needed to pass a resolution outlining guidelines for what a speaker can and can't say in

presenting a program. I along with four others on the commission (our own Cecil Gardner being one of them) felt strongly that we need not limit speakers to what they can say. None of us thought that speakers should be overtly partisan; none of us thought it acceptable to endorse candidates for example; but in our conversations concerning the public good, who gets to define partisan?(If I get to define it, then we're good!) Is criticizing the government partisan? Or is it our moral duty? And who gets to define what is partisan and what's not... and why limit someone who graciously assents to share their passion for justice, just so someone might not take offense. Speaking truth to power is a vulnerable place to be; and almost always unsettling, both for the speaker and for the audience, and I felt that we dishonor a speaker by inhibiting their heartfelt witness to the matters of racial reconciliation and social justice.... And that by our presumption, I dare say white privilege, we inhibit their courage for speaking out.

We lost the vote sixteen to four. Now, speakers will be warned not to stray into partisan politics, or what may by some be interpreted as partisan. Critique of a public official could always be deemed partisan. So once again we see the institutional pall descend upon the church. We worry about offending those who are "just not where we are." That we have to give people time to come around to matters of race and justice. We say it just takes time. We say we don't want to

risk division.... But y'all we are already divided; more so than any other time in my lifetime. But after all... isn't the church a place of solace? Shouldn't the church serve as refuge from a broken world? As best I could in our conference call I argued that we have an obligation as people of faith to speak the raw truth, as best as we perceive it, even if some might interpret what we say as partisan. Surely shaking up the status quo for the sake of truth is worth the risk.... And after all aren't we grown-ups?

The Gospel of Luke from which we are reading this year is all about shaking up the status quo. It is all about speaking the truth to power, and therefore this Gospel is intensely political. You remember Mary's song in the prologue. She is calling for a revolutionary change in the social and economic order. She says that God has seen the humiliation of God's people; God has routed the arrogant; God has dethroned kings and princes from their thrones and has raised up the abused and the shamed; God has fed the starving; and God has chastened the rich and the elite. You can bet these words were offensive to the privileged of the day. This song, the Magnificat, will govern Luke's entire narrative. Every parable, every teaching owes to Mary's prophetic words.... And in today's reading Jesus tells his disciples: "do not fear... It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." The Father's good pleasure. Mary's song is a description of what the kingdom of

God looks like. It is a world in which all have dignity; in which all share in God's abundance; a world in which wealth is shared relative to need and not governed by greed; a world in which all are welcome. This kingdom of God, according to Luke, has nothing to do with the hereafter; nor with the future... The kingdom is here for the claiming. It is here through our practice of Love for our brother and sister... and we, dear friends of God... when that's not happening, we are duty bound as people baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus.... We are duty bound to call it out; to name it, and to act for change, the transformation and restoration of our world, one act of Love at a time. It is we who bear God's good pleasure for our world. And if Love offends, then let it be so. Because time is short, our lives are short, and the need for God's saving health is urgent. Luke admonishes us that we don't need things... we travel light with only our willingness and persistence to Love as God loves, which is simply to care for the good of our neighbor. That is the way that God loves...nothing supernatural nor impossible... just caring for our good.

The imagery in the brief parable in our reading is astonishing. The master of the house returns in the middle of the night. The slaves are keeping vigil, so that they will be ready to attend to the master upon his return... but when the master enters the house... what does he do? He prepares a meal and serves it to the

slaves... Here is Mary's song reprised... Master becomes slave, and slave becomes guest. The tables between the elite and the poor are turned, and all sit down together and eat. This is the image of the messianic banquet... not at the end of time, or beyond the pearly gates... this is not eschatology (the theology of the end times) This is about how we are to live here and now so that God's kingdom is raised up among us.

Luke's audience would have been mostly the poor and the enslaved, certainly not the elite. Luke is preaching Good News to the poor; But times are different now. We aren't slaves and the majority of us are privileged. But this story is for us too. Perhaps we are the master of the house, whose call it is to, in all vulnerability and empathy, serve those of low estate. In God's kingdom it is for those with power to use that power for good; to raise up the brokenhearted, to welcome the immigrant and the stranger... to proclaim God's jubilee... to let the outcasts and the lost of our world know that it is God's Good Pleasure to give them the kingdom. Love is not vanquished; love is our predisposition; Love is our practice... and the means of Love in our world is justice and kindness and reconciliation... If that is partisan then let it be so.... If that offends then let it be so.

