

Lent 2
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Others

Change is rarely comfortable, but always inevitable. Many years ago, when my parents first went to live among the Tsachila of western Ecuador in the late 1950's, very few of them spoke Spanish. No one was literate, for no children had gone to school, and no writing system existed for their own language. Only the men, who left the tribal lands to trade in the local markets, spoke broken Spanish. My father created a writing system and my mother prepared literacy primers. She began teaching young people how to read.

Very quickly, there was pushback. Learning to read was the first step down a slippery slope to losing their identity as Tsachila. We were warned that if Mom continued, we would be required to leave. My parents stopped all literacy efforts immediately. But the years went on, and of their own, some families began sending their children to the local Spanish-language schools. By the early 1970's enough of the children could read and write Spanish (and by extension, Tsafiqui,) that it precipitated a crisis in the tribe. For the first time in generations, the tribal elders gathered. The conversation ranged far and wide. In the end they came to a compromise. The youngsters would be allowed to go to school, for the tribe needed people to defend them in the public square, but the older ones would not do so--they figured they were too old. Now there are university graduates among them, computer literate, and my childhood playmate has a Facebook page.

Change is rarely comfortable but always inevitable. In May of last year George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police. That in itself was not a change, since the per capita black deaths at the hands of police already way surpasses whites. But this event gave iconic visibility to an underground change that has been brewing for decades. What I believe erupted last Summer was a broad-based grass-roots effort on a widespread scale to face the moral reckoning we must face due to the lasting legacies of slavery. We have found that there are bad apples among law enforcement, and we are unearthing deeply set patterns in our society that often make people of color automatically suspect to law enforcement. We have seen violent pushback from people who expressly reject the moral reckoning before us. We have seen violent reaction to the pushback. But change is in the air. It is rarely comfortable, but always inevitable.

This particular change has been unsettling to me. I did not realize how permeated our social structure is with patterns set up in the days of slavery. I did not fully appreciate just how much harder it is for people of color as a category, to get ahead. Nor did I anticipate the hope I feel for the future. Finally, we can say out loud things like: *People of color are being disproportionately marginalized in the vaccination program against COVID-19.* The vaccination rate among Hispanics is less than half that of the statewide average. The reasons are multiple and complex—beyond the scope of this sermon, but if we can't name it, we can't face it.

Change is rarely comfortable, but always inevitable. Peter in today's Gospel lesson is caught facing an unwanted change. Jesus tells the disciples that he is to be killed and rise

again. Peter, only hearing the "killed" part, takes Jesus to task. We won't let this change come upon our little company of believers. "Jesus, can't you see the good you're doing? We're all behind you. We won't let them get you!" But Jesus comes back even stronger. "Get behind me, Satan." Change is inevitable. It doesn't have to be comfortable—it rarely is. But a fearful desire to go back to what things were short-circuits what the Spirit is doing. Change is not to be feared, but to be leaned into with clarity and intention.

Then he teaches about the cost of discipleship. "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." It's not about you. The Kingdom is about change, not the status quo. More specifically, the Kingdom is about leaning into the right kind of change; not selfish change that shorts others to favor oneself, and not reactive change for the sake of change, but change as in conversion. A turning around. A leaning toward a larger and wiser way of living, one built on compassion rather than selfishness; one that recaptures in new ways the ancient, unchanging truths of the loving heart of God.

So, go ahead. Try to save your life (cling to your self-oriented view of the world) and it will slip through your fingers like sand. Give it up, on the other hand, and you will find yourself more alive than you ever knew possible. Surrender to the Cross.

Surrender is hard language if you've been on the underside of things. Black and brown people have been asked to surrender over and over again. They have been forced to surrender to the purposes of a class of people who ruled over them. Black theologian and mystic, Howard Thurman tells of going to read the Bible to his grandmother who was born in slavery. She had him read many portions of Scripture, but never certain passages from the writings of St. Paul, especially the passage that the white preacher preached with regularity: "Slaves, be subject to your masters as to Christ." The gist of the sermon was always that it was God's will that they be slaves, and that if they were good and happy slaves, God would bless them. She swore that if freedom ever came, she would never read those passages again.

This is not the surrender Jesus asks of us—o no, quite the opposite, in fact. Surrender here is to surrender to the path of love. In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*,¹ Thurman calls on people of all colors to refuse to give in to the categories that make enemies. The way of love, he states, requires of us as believers to see and respect the dignity of those whom society would label as other. And the way of love, he also states, requires of us as believers to see and respect the dignity of ourselves in the same way. Surrender here means to surrender one's desire to make enemies, to hold apart, to make another human being into an "other," whether it be above or below one. A person of color recently said to me that there is a difference between being made other and being diminished for it. Perhaps Thurman would disagree. Any time another is made "other" it is a diminishment of their full, divinely given humanity. Save your "life" with "others" or "enemies," and you will perish, for hate will consume you from within. Lose that life into the wonder of humanity and you will find that you have finally truly found yourself.

¹ Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited* (p. 89). Beacon Press. Kindle Edition. The whole of chapter 5 addresses these ideas.

Change, then, requires a reckoning of who is the “other” to you. Thurman talks about three categories. The first kind is the person who diminishes someone, either intentionally or unintentionally, because of their status on the margins. This is an interpersonal thing, between two people, as when someone uses a racial slur against another as they step in front of them in line, or get exasperated with someone because of language barriers. It’s interactional—it has to do with interpersonal behavior. The fix is reconciliation, based on a recognition of the humanity of the other. As people of faith we have an interpersonal voice—use it to un-other the other.

The second kind are those who make it difficult for a person or group of people to live without humiliation and shame “other” them. This is a social behavioral thing. Perhaps the most obvious example might be the Proud Boys or other such groups who are more and more being implicated as catalysts that turned peaceful demonstrations into violent riots last summer. Another might be the land owner pays his or her undocumented workers inhuman wages and tries to keep them from protesting with threats of turning them in to ICE. The fix is to call out their humanity, to break open their hearts to their own inner humanity in relation to the humanity of those they are injuring. As people of faith, we have a social voice—use it to un-other the other.

The third kind are those who reinforce unjust social structures. These may be institutionalized, as in the economic challenges many prisoners face as they get out of prison, as Chris Hoke explained to us, or the use of computer technology to schedule COVID vaccines that make it harder for those without access or skills—too often people of color. It may be subtle, like the for-profit incarceration companies (one of whom owns and runs the Tacoma Immigration Detention Center) who fund lobbying legislators to be “tough on crime,” because convictions increase their profits. The fix for this, says Thurman, is to call out the common humanity in those who participate and those who are affected—in other words, to precipitate social change based on God’s self-giving love. As people of faith, we have a political voice—use it to un-other the other.

I end with a poem Thurman wrote:

*Thou must not make division.
Thy mind, heart, soul and strength must ever search
To find the way by which the road
To all men’s need of thee must go.
This is the Highway of the Lord.²*

*No has de hacer división.
Tu mente, tu corazón, tu alma y tus fuerzas deben siempre buscar
Hasta encontrar el camino que
Hacia la necesidad de todo hombre de ti tiene que ir.
Esto es el alto camino del Señor.³*

² Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited* (p. 88). Beacon Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Translation by Paul Moore, Mount Vernon, WA, February of 2021.