

Pentecost 3, Proper 7 June 21, 2020
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA Rev. Paul Moore
Father's Day

Happy Father's Day to all of you who are fathers, in any sense of the word. It's a day when I remember my father. He was an amazing man, really. He wasn't the warmest, emotionally, but there were two things we always knew. He loved us with all his heart, and he stood beside us through thick and thin. He wasn't the super-macho type. He just went about doing his work in a quiet, yet decisive way. Not always socially smooth, he didn't really know how to schmooze a crowd, but he was good to his word or you got an apology when he wasn't.

Sometimes I thought there wasn't anyone he was afraid of. If you were a sales person in a store and he thought you weren't doing business right with him he would kind of switch gears. I have watched him ask for the supervisor's name, press until he got it, and march up dark stairways to confront the man in charge—always calmly, always with his facts straight, and always with a humble willingness to be shown to be wrong, which, if he got that far down the line, was almost never true!

That last part about him scared me sometimes. On more than one occasion when I was the target of that heat-seeking beacon for truth. I was never good at lying, a fact that I didn't always remember. My efforts at hiding, slanting or misrepresenting the truth were usually ferreted out in a way that let me know that he loved me, but that I hadn't measured up to his expectations for integrity. I would wither, and he wouldn't step on me when I was down. He always gave me room to dust off my pride, learn a lesson and try again.

Perhaps the day I was most impressed by him was when he told me of a conversation he had with my older sister's brother-in-law, a rather successful, if a bit zealous, evangelical pastor in Ecuador. He had challenged my father on why I had Landon baptized as an infant. My father, whose theology was much more in line with his challenger, nevertheless defended me. He even used words I had used with him, like covenant, and suggested that maybe his friend should expand his understanding of Christian baptism.

The sword of truth slices both ways. It unsettles, and it comforts.

A couple of weeks ago, I read an article that maybe you also read in the Seattle Times. It reflected something I'd seen in other headlines, too. A majority of people in this country support the message of the protests that have rocked our nation for a month now. It's like all of a sudden white people realized that black lives really do matter, and what it is like to be black in America is important information in the national dialog. Maybe Juneteenth ought to become an official National Holiday, remembering when Gen. Gordon Granger read the federal orders in Galveston, Texas on June 19th, 1865, proclaiming the freedom of all slaves in the state of Texas—the last state to hear the proclamation.

I can almost hear Jesus' words behind what has happened: “Do not be afraid, for all will become known. What it is like for black and brown people in this nation will finally catch the public eye—and it won't be smooth sailing. A sword will divide us as some cling to one perspective of what it means while others are committed to another.”

But the sword that Jesus refers to slices both ways, for it is the sword of truth. It slices deeper than just racial justice, not just the truth that black lives matter (though that's part of it) or brown lives, or all lives, or how that affects our national conversation (though all of these are included) but the sword of truth that cuts through our excuses and our denials and our rationalizations and leaves us naked and exposed for what we really are.

There are a lot of responses we can have to that idea, but they really only fall along two lines. For some it is unsettling. There are things that we would just rather not face up to. I remember as a child driving through a black neighborhood in Fort Wayne, Indiana. My mother told us to roll up all the windows and lock all the doors. A child of her age, she was knee-jerking a learned response, but as a kid in elementary school, I remember feeling confused. Why was she making such harsh judgments about people she doesn't even know? Or is there really a danger here I should take to heart? My father, in all his steely integrity, said nothing. I wish my parents had responded differently. I wish I had challenged them.

There are things we fear we might have to face up to. Once I was so convinced of my theological correctness that I wrote a scathing letter to a school mate who had decided to become Roman Catholic. Growing up together as Protestants in a Roman Catholic country made them the enemy. Of course, its only effect was to cut off communication completely. How I wish I could recall that letter. It meant well, but it certainly didn't do well.

There are things we were convinced of that we aren't sure will survive that kind of scrutiny, unexamined assumptions, convictions we haven't thought through, or conveniences we would rather not question...

For some, the truth is comforting.

“Finally, our story will be told.”

“Finally, we will be heard.”

“Finally there is a chance for change that will take the pressure off our chests.”

For all of us, the truth ought to do both. It should unsettle us. Those who are calling for a defunding of the police are, perhaps, more idealistic than realistic. The truth of the need for social order should unsettle them. The fact that yet another black man was shot and killed by police in Atlanta a little over a week ago, under circumstances that were not life-threatening to the police should unsettle us all.

And when a black protester in London carried a white counter-protester to safety and saved his life, it might unsettle some of the ways we may be thinking about protests. But it should comfort us, as well, to know that there are people in the world who are willing

to risk the wrath of fellow protesters to do good to his adversary. This brave man shows us something that is profoundly true: Whatever the truth that is revealed might be, however twisted or blinded or incomplete or embarrassing we fear it might be, there is a deeper truth, a more solid reality that is truly the edge of this sword. Though we go around painting one another a hundred different shades of colors and then assign those colors judgments that we live into reality, God's love is color-blind. God loves us more than we can ever know, each and every one, black, brown, white or any other stripe we paint one another with.

The truth is that at that level, all lives matter, and when we live that way, when we live out the love we have received, then and only then, are we truly free to strive for justice and peace from a launching pad of love, not hate, of love, not anger, of love, not fear.

My father would not have been out in a protest march to save his soul. It just wasn't his way. And I didn't drive for four hours to participate in the Silent March and Strike a week ago, either. But I believe he would smile on me this morning, preaching this sermon, and I would hope that his willingness to stand up for what he believed when the chips were down, his lack of fear when he knew he was right, are gifts he might have passed along in some small way to his son.

In a way, he wielded the sword Jesus speaks of, and whether we like it or not, the grip is in our hands now. How, then, shall we live?

Meditation questions:

1. What does your own father mean to you?
2. In what ways has a father figure in your life confronted you with difficult truths?
3. How have you been comforted by a fatherly love that ran deeper than your faults?