

Pentecost XII

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Rom. 12:1-8

Mt. 16:13-20

St. Mary the Virgin

August 27, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Paula D. Nesbitt

The pair of questions that Jesus asked in the Gospel passage, beginning with “who do people say that the Son of Man is?”, represent a turning point in the spiritual life. According to theologian Henri Nouwen, this turning point comes when we are challenged to answer the second question, “but who do you say that I am?” for ourselves.¹ We need received knowledge, which comes from external sources and authority, but we also need inner reflection, to discern what we truly believe, what we value, and stand for. The events of these past several months have challenged me to reflect on what do I stand for as a person of faith. As a believer in Jesus Christ, how am I being called to live out my beliefs?

This morning’s story of Moses offers a powerful example of questioning the rightness of received authority—that of Pharaoh—and doing what one can, in one’s own way, to act on one’s belief in divine justice. The story also is about women’s resistance, recognizing their bravery and strategy to work around Pharaoh’s edict to kill all newborn Hebrew males. As we hear from the midwives, we can imagine the tactics that may have been used to work around the edict. Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza speaks of listening to where the text is silent and considering the many stories that were not written into scripture.² Similarly, perhaps Moses’ mother and sister may have strategized, knowing where and when Pharaoh’s daughter tended to bathe, and whether she might be sufficiently compassionate to rescue the infant. Technically they obey Pharaoh’s command by throwing the infant into the Nile³—although floating the basket in a shelter of reeds shortly before it was likely to be found. Nonetheless, they took a risk that no family would easily want to make: letting a child go unaccompanied, not knowing if it would survive, but aware that the alternative was certain death.

Reading this story in light of last Sunday’s forum with Interfaith Welcome made me reflect freshly on the pain that a large number of parents must feel in letting go of their children for them to enter the U.S. unaccompanied, as documented refugees, some as young as age five. Equally profound is the large wave of unaccompanied children crossing our border whose families have had no time for the lengthy documentation process—sometimes two years—if they are from a place where our country will accept refugees. Last spring, I had preached about encountering the mother of a fourteen-year-old boy who had fled his Guatemalan village, faced with the choice of being forced into a rogue militia whose mission was to kill, or to be killed himself. She had set out on foot to find him, making her way to Boston, where they eventually were reunited. I have struggled greatly with the politics of who is recognized as a refugee (the received knowledge of public policy) and of shutting the door on someone else who faces

¹ Fr. Henri Nouwen preached on this several times at his early morning daily Eucharist, Harvard Divinity School, 1983-86.

² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory Of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction Of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1986.

³ Chris Haslam, “Clippings,” Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 24, 2014,” <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/apr21l.shtml>

death. Pharaoh's daughter too had taken a great risk, by discerning and acting on what she believed in her heart despite her father's edict.

This raises the question of where do we stand when faced with oppression? This week the Bay Area has been on alert over potential violent confrontations with hate groups. Fortunately, all has passed peaceably so far. Demonstrations and celebrations for inclusivity and compassion have captured the public and media spotlight, while the planned rallies were downgraded to press conferences and moved, or cancelled. For many who have responded through participation in one or more events affirming peace and unity across differences, these days have been moving.

Yet the violent rally in Charlottesville two weeks ago is still a sobering reminder. The day after that rally, I attended a session at an academic conference in Montreal. The first speaker, an African American scholar and Baptist minister, had grown up in the South during the civil rights era and had known what it meant to be the first to desegregate a school. The Charlottesville images of KKK marchers and white supremacists espousing hatred had shaken her deeply. "Never in my lifetime did I expect to see that again," she said, then fell silent, unable to continue.

The next speakers were two Jewish scholars; one, who had just published a book on children of Holocaust survivors,⁴ spoke of how her interviewees have been contacting her, earnestly wanting to know if it was time to leave yet. "Memory becomes a trigger for what is being felt now," she said, and then added that they fear that what had happened in Nazi Germany is occurring here, and they too may need to uproot and flee.⁵ Their anxiety is not unfounded. In Charlottesville, a synagogue holding evening services had been targeted by armed white supremacist in khakis with semi-automatic guns, and by neo-Nazi protesters.⁶ The Torah scrolls were moved out, in case the building was set on fire. Attendees left a few at a time through the back door in order to escape unnoticed and to protect one another. Police protection had been requested, but police did not come. Locally, in Alameda, Jewish and Muslim houses of worship have been vandalized within the last week or two. What values do we stand for? And, how do we respond based on our faith?

Deacon Tim Smith and I have been involved in Faith in Action clergy gatherings, which share information about what members of our congregations are doing, and where help is most needed. Last Thursday we heard moving testimony from Christian and Jewish faith leaders in our community who mentioned their different perspectives and positions, and what they and their congregation could or would do, or not do.

⁴ Janet Jacobs, *The Holocaust Across Generations: Trauma and its Inheritance Among Descendants of Survivors*. New York: New York University Press, 2017.

⁵ Session on *The Holocaust Across Generations*, Association for the Sociology of Religion Annual Meeting, Montreal, August 13, 2017.

⁶ The account was told by a rabbi at the August 16, 2017, rally at 16th Street and Mission in San Francisco. See also Jack Moore, "Charlottesville Police Refused to Protect Synagogue From Nazis, so Jewish Community Hired Armed Security for First Time," *Newsweek*, August 16, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/charlottesville-police-refused-protect-synagogue-nazis-so-it-hired-armed-651260>

As one white faith leader reminded us, the white supremacist and Nazi hate groups are a “white person’s problem.” He meant that those of us who are white have a special role in responding, by affirming the rightness of racial and religious inclusivity, and that hatred, intimidation, exclusion, and violence have no place in our society—or our faith.

The events of this weekend won’t be the last. How do we pray and act (both are needed) to preserve the values of inclusive welcome and God’s love, as the Body of Christ in the world? The beauty—and effectiveness—of resistance is that it needn’t happen at the palace of Pharaoh. It can occur in the reeds on a riverbank, or in the most private and vulnerable places, of bringing new life into the world. It can be a peaceful interfaith gathering against hate, such as Friday evening’s service at Congregation Emanu-El, or Saturday at Grace Cathedral, Civic Center Plaza, or other venues now or in the future.

Paul’s letter to the Romans offers us a theological and spiritual way forward. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (v. 1). “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (v. 2). It is important to know what we authentically believe, as a matter of our faith, so that we can act out of that discernment. Paul’s words also couldn’t be clearer about the importance of human diversity as part of God’s intention. We see and think differently; we have different backgrounds and experiences. We also have different ways of living out our faith. This is a divine gift. “We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (v. 5). None of us alone can be the Messiah; but together, listening to one another, working and contributing in our own ways, grounded in our faith values, we *can* make things happen. We become the body of Christ in the world, joined in Christ’s universal love.

Violence is not the answer. Together, we are called to heal the fear that leads to a Charlottesville and every other expression of hatred. The more we reach across our differences the more we realize we are one. Harming a member harms ourselves; healing a member heals ourselves. Transformation and healing are our hope for the future. This is the way of Christ; and also the way of Shalom, and Salaam. Amen.