

When I was growing up in Texas I was, as you can imagine, steeped in Texas lore. Texans are proud of their history, so of course I learned all about Texas independence from Mexico, the Alamo, Goliad, the battle of San Jacinto, and the brief glory of Texas as an independent nation. Texas gained its independence from Mexico in 1836 and was later annexed into the United States in 1845. Most Americans know the story of the Alamo and perhaps San Jacinto. However, there are other stories that probably only Texans know. For example, during the period of independence in 1842 there was a border skirmish between Texas and Mexico. In this battle the Mexicans outnumbered the Texans ten to one and after a brave fight, the Texans were defeated. The surviving Texans were promptly marched off to a ranch near Mexico City. Although a number of Texans were able to escape during the journey, in the end 193 Texans remained in captivity. Foreign ministers of the United States and Great Britain tied to secure their release but the Mexicans demanded the Texans pay a price as losers of the battle. A compromise was reached—one that would seem barbaric by today's standards—ten percent of the Texas captives would be executed and the others would be released to return to Texas.

The question then became who should live and who would be executed. The Mexicans devised a plan based on pure chance. In a pot, 176 white beans were placed along with 17 black beans. Draw a white bean and you lived; draw a black bean and you would be executed. If you heard a Texan say metaphorically that he or she had “drawn a black bean” you knew they were either a native or had lived in Texas a long time. I am sure at this point you are asking yourself why I am telling you this story. There are two reasons really.

When I began preparation for my sermon today, I started by reading today's lessons. My first thought was that I had drawn the black bean, metaphorically speaking of course. Jed did you have anything to do with this? In reality, last week's Gospel reading was quite challenging as well, so maybe Jed was just trying to share the pain.

The Gospel reading for today is grim and certainly has a militant feel to it. Jesus tells his disciples in essence he is their commander and they are his soldiers—off to battle they are to go. He also tells them that he has not come to bring peace but rather a sword. If someone loses his life for his sake they will find it. I must admit these are rather disturbing images, ones that we are all too familiar with in today's religious and political climate. Yet clearly, Jesus knew what lay ahead for the Twelve. All but the Apostle John would meet a violent death as a result of their ministries. What then are we to make of this passage in Matthew some two thousand years later? How does it relate to our work as disciples of our Lord in our own time?

In last week's Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus sends the Twelve out with a series of commands, expectations if you will, having first given them authority to cast out demons and cure the sick. By his example, he sent them to do what he himself had done "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness." He also told them not to worry about how they were to speak or what they were to say but that the spirit of God would speak through them.

In this morning's New Testament reading from Romans, Paul continues his remarkable theological explanation of what happens to us when we are baptized into Christ. Again, the imagery he uses is not necessarily a comfortable one. He tells us "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have

been buried with him in baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” In other words, while we may look on baptism as a rite of initiation, something remarkable has happened to us. We have indeed been marked as “Christ’s own forever.” The traditional interpretation of this passage in Romans is that Paul is speaking in an eschatological sense—what will happen to us after we die. However, I also believe that it speaks to establishing the foundation for our discipleship and truthfully, the necessity for it.

Moving on to the Old Testament reading from Genesis this morning, it tells us the story of Hagar and her son being exiled from Abraham and Sarah. Again, elements of this story have a cruel and harsh feeling to it. Yet, just when Hagar feels all is lost for her son, God intervenes to save them both, promising that from the descendants of her son a great nation will arise. Here we see the grace and mercy of God. God was faithful to Hagar and her son and did not abandon them.

I will admit to you that the preparation of this sermon was one of the more difficult that I have had to do. What were those in charge of determining the lessons for this week in our Revised Common Lectionary hoping to have us understand? The readings taken together are uncomfortable and challenging. After struggling with them myself, I have arrived at the following observations:

First, discipleship is part of being a Christian, a result of having being baptized into the Body of Christ. It is not just a matter of being a follower of Christ but actively proclaiming the Good News that the Kingdom of God has come near. Just as Jesus instructed his disciples, we too are to go out into the world and relieve suffering. As a priest, you quickly learn what are

your go-to themes when preparing sermons. One of mine is that Jesus invites us to join him in changing the world. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, describes this as being a part of Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. Yet, many of us think that in the face of so many needs we cannot make much of a difference. The truth is, each of us in our own way can help change the world. I recently gave Cove/Copy as an example of how that can happen for children of an incarcerated parent by sending them to Ascension Camp. The reality is that we can and do change the world one caring act at a time.

Second, as our Lord's' disciple we are not alone. We will be given all that is necessary to accomplish the task God has requested of us. Like the story of Hagar and her son, no matter what God may ask of us, God will not abandon us.

Lastly, discipleship can and does mean that on occasion God will ask us to do something unpleasant and difficult for the sake of the Kingdom. In some rare cases, it may even mean drawing the black bean. However, like the prophets of old, when God calls our answer should be "here I am Lord." In closing, I would like to share a story with you that I think speaks to the lessons we have heard this morning much more eloquently than I:

The great American civil rights leader Martin Luther King was a person with tremendous courage. He endured vilification, beatings, imprisonments, death threats, his house was firebombed, and as we all know, he eventually was assassinated.

So what kept him going? It was his strong sense of God's call upon his life. King was just 26 years old when he was appointed leader of the civil rights campaign in Montgomery, Alabama. Apart from terrifying threats from the Ku Klux Klan, King was harassed by police.

Arrested for driving 5 miles per hour over the speed limit he was given his first stint in jail. The night after his release he was at home when the phone rang. “Nigger”, said a menacing voice on the other end, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.”

King was unnerved and very afraid – for himself, for his wife and for his little children. Shortly after the phone call he sat at his kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee. “And I sat at that table” he said, “thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me at any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep...And I got to the point where I couldn’t take it anymore. I was weak... And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I will never forget it...I said, ‘Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I think I’m right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage... And it seemed to me at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’...I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone..”

Three nights later the menacing threat made in the phone call came true: a bomb exploded on the front verandah of the King home. Thankfully no one was hurt. But King was able to get through it: “My religious experience a few nights before had given me strength to

face it.” Time and again throughout his ministry Martin Luther King returned to that experience to strengthen him as he faced terrible difficulties.

We can be thankful that God most likely will never ask of us what was asked of Martin Luther King. Yet, our Lord continues to call each of us into action to ease the suffering of a broken world and to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ. We are called to make a difference in the lives of those around us. That, my sisters and brothers, is what I believe is the essence of this morning’s readings. And their message taken together, at its heart, is what discipleship is all about.

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