

## If Only We're Brave Enough

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Mark 1:14-20 ~ January 24, 2021

The poet begins,

When day comes we ask ourselves,  
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?

Spoke the stunning Amanda Gordon,

...because being American is more than a pride we inherit,  
it's the past we step into  
and how we repair it.

A new chapter begins and we are faced with the challenge – and opportunity – of “the past we step into and how we repair it.”

Every single year since 1989, first Representative John Conyers, then Representative Sheila Jackson Lee have introduced H.R. 40, legislation that seeks to establish, (quote) a “Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans.” H.R. 40 says, in part, “The commission shall examine slavery and discrimination in the colonies and the United States from 1619 to the present and recommend appropriate remedies. Among other requirements, the commission shall identify (1) the role of federal and state governments in supporting the institution of slavery, (2) forms of discrimination in the public and private sectors against freed slaves and their descendants, and (3) lingering negative effects of slavery on living African-Americans and society.”

Even though it only calls for a commission to study the past and consider options, in over three decades H.R. 40 has never made it to the House floor – regardless of Republican or Democratic House majority. Why?

“Because we are not interested.” So said, Ta-Nehesi Coates in his 2014 *Atlantic Monthly* article, *The Case for Reparations*. Said Coates, “Broach the topic of reparations and a barrage of questions inevitably follows: Who will be paid? How much will they be paid? Who will pay?” Or, if I were to make this personal, as a straight white well-educated man who has benefited from many generations of white privilege, it all boils down to, “what am I going to have to give up?” and “what am I willing to give up?”

That’s one of the first things I notice when Jesus calls those fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew. What did they give up? Says the text, “immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Their nets, their livelihood. And again, he calls James and John, the sons of Zebedee. What did they give up? “Immediately they left their father in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.” Dear old Dad. No small price to pay. Presumably they left not only their fathers, but their mothers; their wives, children, friends. These were not poor men; they had boats, nets, “hired men;” they left a trade, and some version – if not of security, then at least familiarity.

It’s not an unreasonable consideration when making big choices – the cost. But, while it’s not true in every case, most of the big, courageous decisions we make in life are not choices to give something up, so much as they are choices in favor of something else, in favor of what we

might accomplish, or where we might arrive. Choosing to leave our present circumstances is far more compelling when we're opting for a future that is preferred, however defined.

Well, said Jesus, I will make you fishers of men, of people. Scholars have pointed out this may not be the missionary call to evangelism we have often heard, to gather the flock, as it were. When Jeremiah and a number of lesser prophets speak of hooking fish, it is code for overturning the power structures. Is that what Jesus intended or these fishermen heard? Who knows?

We do know that in Luke's version, moments before Jesus called his first disciples, he addressed the congregation in the temple. It says, "He unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. And this is fulfilled now." Now we're talking. That sounds like a vision a person could choose – even if you realize that, for those with privilege, it's going to come at a price.

Elsewhere in that scroll of Isaiah, the prophet says, "If you... offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted...; if you loose the bonds of injustice, and let the oppressed go free.... Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." "Repairers of the breach." Repair and restore. I believe this is the call. This is the vision, the preferred future for which those fishermen left their nets, their livelihood, and their dear old Dad.

Says Coates, "And so we must imagine a new country. Reparations – by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences – is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely." "What I'm talking about is more than recompense for past injustices.... I'm talking about... a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal." (p.202)

If you were inspired by the poetry of Amanda Gorman at the Inauguration, and you'd like to respond and to act upon the hope she evoked, then one small step would be to join me and many others in helping St. Columba's become an antiracist church. Following the murder of George Floyd, the vestry and I committed St. Columba's to this effort. We voted in favor of our own local version of HR 40 – that we might learn, together, how it is that we participated in racial oppression in the past, and perpetuate it in the present. That we might learn how it lurks and subverts in our teachings and practices as The Episcopal Church, as St. Columba's, as residents of North West DC and environs, as individuals. And then to consider options for ways we might live different.

I don't have a preconceived idea about specific ways we may or may not change our ministry – or our lives, but as Coates says of John Conyer's HR 40, "this is the vehicle for that hearing. No one can know what would come out of such a debate. Perhaps no number can fully capture the multi-century plunder of black people in America. Perhaps the number is so large that it can't be imagined, let alone calculated and dispensed. But I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much – if not more than – the specific answers that might be produced. An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future." (p.207) And as that is true for America, it is assuredly true for the church therein.

A commitment to being antiracist as individuals and as a church is so clearly a natural expression of our “yes” to Jesus’ call to discipleship; “yes” to Jesus’ summary of the law – to love God, neighbor, and self, “yes” to our own baptismal covenant, and to St. Columba’s vision to Live God’s Love.

When I speak of us becoming an antiracist church, I picture we begin with the deep reflection and conversations that many of you have been having over the course of time, some in recent months; for some of you, a life-time.

A commitment to becoming antiracist is akin to our intention and commitment to center our life around Jesus Christ; which means, to pray, give, practice mercy, worship, and seek justice. I don’t know how it is for you, but for me being Christian is a daily practice, with daily intention, daily recentring in God’s love, daily generosity, service, and prayer. Given the privilege claimed by white people, baked and legislated into every nook and crevice of our collective life, and given the ways in which almost every aspect of our society continues to affirm and convey that white privilege, especially for us white people, to pay attention and be intentional about being antiracist... this too is a daily practice.

I pray the fruit of our efforts will be evident in the way we live each day as individuals – at home or work or neighborhood, the way we live as a congregation, and in the outward expressions of our faith – through relationships, advocacy, and actions. I anticipate we will consider everything from our budget and hiring practices, to our Sunday School curriculum, worship, and potential partnerships. I pray you’ll join me in one of our upcoming congregational conversations. The first is this Thursday evening, or on Sunday February 21<sup>st</sup>.

This is not a project. There is no end-date – until the coming of Christ in glory. This is a commitment to a way of living, and a commitment to a preferred future. Ched Myers, preeminent scholar of the Gospel of Mark, exegeting today’s passage, explains that in “the traditional method of rabbinic recruitment... the student sought the teacher and followed only for as long as it took to attain rabbinic status himself. The call of Jesus, however, is absolute, disrupting the lives of potential recruits, promising them only a “school” from which there is no graduation. This “first” call to discipleship in Mark is an urgent, uncompromising invitation to “break with business as usual.” The kingdom has dawned;” the adventure in discipleship begins. (p.133)

Or, in the closing stanza of Amanda Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb” ~

We will rebuild, reconcile and recover  
and every known nook of our nation and  
every corner called our country,  
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,  
battered and beautiful  
When day comes we step out of the shade,  
aflame and unafraid  
The new dawn blooms as we free it  
For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it  
If only we're brave enough to be it.

So be it. Amen.