

Sunday, September 13, 2020

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Dr. Sandra Montes

Episcopal Church Foundation and Union Theological Seminary/EDS, New York

Glory glory halleluiah since I laid my burdens down.

I have been praying for all who will be hearing this reflection since I was invited to preach by Mary Thorpe. And, I have been praying for Creator, Spirit to speak through me and reach you wherever you are.

Today, we are celebrating UBE Sunday! And we are also celebrating the life and legacy of The Reverend Alexander Crummell. UBE states that it designates this Sunday as UBE Sunday to commemorate the racial justice ministry of UBE which was an outgrowth of the Rev. Crummell's advocacy. "We are continuing Crummell's work of overcoming racism in society and in the church." Their website proclaims.

Due to his race, Rev. Crummell was denied entrance to General Theological Seminary. But he went on to receive his theological education in the Diocese of Massachusetts and was ordained to the priesthood in 1844 by the Bishop of Delaware. He became involved in politics including the campaign for equal suffrage and the abolition of slavery.

Rev. Crummell settled in Washington, D.C. in 1873 and focused on founding and strengthening urban black congregations that would provide worship, education, and social services for their communities. When the Southern Bishops proposed that all black congregations become separate missionary districts, Crummell organized the Conference of Church Workers Among the Colored People (succeeded by the Union of Black Episcopalians) in protest. He continued his campaign against racial oppression and the promotion of African American leadership until his death in 1898.

As we continue to see racial unrest, murders, inequality, prejudice... against our Black siblings, we must constantly and continuously lift our voices and our hearts to educate ourselves, to repent, and to act. We must ask for forgiveness seventy times seven and strive to bring others up, especially those who are oppressed, those who are underrepresented, and those who may be too weak or too exhausted to continue the daily struggle.

I wish I could remain with the Old Testament reading for today because it has one of my favorite verses ever in it. Genesis 50:20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good. Oh, my dear siblings. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever wanted to say that or have been able to say that to someone? If there is only one thing you take away from the words I am sharing is this: God loves you so much that whatever is being plotted against you, whatever is being planned to harm you, whatever evil is thrown your way, God is intending it for your good! How do I know? Because I have seen and lived it. Rev. Crummell's life is a testament to it. And, I know all of you have a story to share about how

God has turned your situation, has lifted your head, has provided for your need, has miraculously acted.

Feel like shouting aleluya since I laid my burdens down.

All of today's readings are talking about forgiveness, about things done against someone and being able to forgive. How many times should I forgive? My parents taught me to ask for forgiveness when I have wronged someone and even when I don't feel like it is my fault – to keep the peace. I mess up often and have had to ask for forgiveness many times. And, I must admit, it hasn't always been easy. It is especially difficult when I ask someone to forgive me when I am certain they are in the wrong but they cannot ever ask for forgiveness. So, they usually say, "Oh, Sandra, it's okay! No need to apologize at all! Let's just carry on!" And, I sometimes remain with the sting of knowing they hurt me, they wronged me.

It seems cruel to have to be the one to always try to keep the peace. And, I want to note that I am not saying that those who are oppressed or marginalized by systemic racism and all other isms that contaminate our world and our church are to bow down to keep the peace. I am saying that, as Christians, there are times when we must forgive and ask for forgiveness because it is what Jesus would do, even when it's difficult.

I am grateful that Jesus just says we must forgive. He doesn't say we have to reconcile with the person, just to forgive them. And, he also doesn't say the person must ask us to forgive them. How many times have we said – well, if they ask then I'll forgive. We must just forgive. Jesus also doesn't say we must forget – which I'm so grateful for because I can tell you, if I think really hard I can remember several times when I had to forgive, and I still did not forget. Forgiving someone is more for us, than for them. Have you ever been so angry or resentful against someone and you keep thinking about them, getting more and more angry and realize – they may not even be thinking or worrying about me. Forgiving is such a releasing ritual, it releases us from negativity, from pain, from resentment. It is for us. As the spiritual I'm singing says when I lay my burdens down.

The rest of the passage of the Gospel for this Sunday goes from ok, I must forgive to what am I reading? The story makes me uncomfortable. I have so many questions: Why does Jesus say this story is what the Kingdom of God looks like? And, is God truly going to be so angry as to let us be tortured, sold, banished? It's almost like we are being "scared into forgiving!" But didn't we just hear that The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.? This compassionate, merciful, kind God is the God I know and experience daily.

Let's talk about that person who was forgiven. You would think he was so grateful he would be forgiving left and right! I remember hearing in Sunday school about this unkind, unforgiving, unmerciful servant. This person who was about to be sold because he couldn't pay a debt to the king and then, can't forgive or be patient with one of his own peers.

Does this sound familiar? I can't help but think about privilege here. Once a person is forgiven and has the privilege of not thinking about the punishment, they quickly forget the kindness bestowed towards them.

When has that happened to you? Have you forgotten how much life has given you? Some people don't like to think about God giving them or providing everything, and that is fine, so look at it as luck or life. So it's by luck that you are in a position of great privilege. You have people around you who are not as privileged yet you can't see it. Rev. Crummell had to deal with so many people who did not think he or anyone who looked like him was worthy of the same rights and life they had – even at church. Had they so quickly forgotten that at one time they were welcome into this new country, that at one point they needed someone to help them.

The epistle asks directly: Why do you pass judgment on your sibling? Or you, why do you despise your sibling?

That is the question we must ask ourselves daily. In these times of unrest and when the pandemic has slowed us down so much that we are also facing the pandemic of racism head on, we must truly look inside ourselves and see what kind of judgment or hatred we hold in our hearts. It is not an easy thing to admit nor is it something we want to think about. I would much rather think about forgiveness and love, but this internal work is what we need if we are truly to be followers of Jesus.

So, as we continue this UBE Sunday, let us repent, let us ask God to show us where we have despised our siblings, where we must ask for forgiveness and where we must forgive, let us ask God to show us how we can lay our burdens down and how we can help each other in this journey.

I feel better so much better since I laid my burdens down.