

## **Being the Church: Resistance and Repentance**

Throughout the summer we are looking at how our journey with Jesus shapes us into living more fully as the Church. What does it mean to live out faith, hope, and love in the world and to believe in the ever-emerging kingdom of God? As I look at the Scripture texts assigned for today there is a theme of resistance to those who proclaim the heart of God.

God seems to suggest that Ezekiel may encounter people within Israel who will refuse to hear the message God is giving him. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians shares that he is content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, noting that “whenever I am weak, then I am strong” because his weakness reveals the extent of God’s grace and shows the power of God to work through all of us without requiring us to be perfect. But Paul is clear that his life, in service of the Gospel, does include resistance from others.

Jesus, obviously, did not escape resistance and in today’s Gospel we see that some of the strongest early resistance came from people in his hometown. He had been traveling through towns around the Sea of Galilee and returned home. As he started to teach many were amazed but then their fascination quickly soured and grew cynical as they pointed out that he is just the son of a carpenter, with brothers and sisters there in town. They seemed to be saying, “Who is this guy to say he has authority to talk to us about God?”

And there is this strange little detail. Mark tells us that “he could do no deed of power there – except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” Laying hands on a few people and curing them is more than I have done in my life so far, and yet this was far less than Jesus was accustomed to doing with people – and apparently this had something to do with their level of belief. Is it possible that the kingdom of heaven is frequently ready to explode in the midst of humanity, bringing unprecedented healing and renewal, and yet a lack of belief constrains it? Does God’s commitment to human freedom mean that we co-create through our belief in God, and when we are cynical and resistant to God, we slow down the unveiling of the mystery we are invited to witness?

I'm not suggesting that if we just prayed hard enough and believed enough, that all the individual sick people we love would automatically get better. But I do wonder whether humanity experiences more transformation of social and economic systems when it is open and oriented to the heart of God, and God's kingdom. When humanity releases its fear, its commitment to entrenched social norms, and its investment in structures of economic power and turns instead with expectancy to see what God might do, does our love for God then pave the way for greater deeds of power by God?

God is greater than our disbelief. Jesus rose from the dead in spite of the resistance to him that led to his death. So we can never fully tie God's hands, but this Gospel does seem to suggest that distrust among religious people blinds us to what God desires to do for us, and possibly inhibits God's full expression of power and transformation. To live as the Church is to reach out with a faith that might feel risky and foolish.

And it might feel foolish because of the response of resistance that we sometimes encounter from friends and family. Jesus receives resistance from his hometown, and when he sends his disciples off, two by two, on a mission to preach a message of repentance, to offer deliverance, and to heal the sick, he tells them what to do when they are not welcomed and people refuse to hear them: "shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." As if to say, "Leave behind the ground that they walk on; you are called to stand on a very different kind of ground."

Why all this resistance? I suspect that a great part of it was the call to repentance that characterized Jesus' early ministry. Let's face it, that word probably isn't easy for many of us. It conjures a person with crazed eyes standing on a street corner with a sign that says, "Repent or die!" Or we associate it with conservative Christians whose rigid ways of reading Scripture leads them to exclude and judge people they do not understand. But when Jesus came to earth, he saw things that broke his heart and he asked people to look at what was broken around them, and to repent of ways they had enabled that brokenness to continue. He wasn't interested in shaming them, he was interested in bringing deliverance and healing, but it's hard to heal when you don't even acknowledge there's a wound to be healed.

So, repentance isn't about self-flagellation or shame, it's a calm awakening to what isn't working, along with a reorientation to the heart of God for oneself and one's community. Around the country we see communities rising up and forbidding educators from using curricula that would be honest about racism in our history and in our current structures. One of the arguments they use is that this kind of teaching leads white children to feel badly about themselves and that it tarnishes our nation's heroes. I don't think white people need to feel bad about being white, but we may need to feel uncomfortable - uncomfortable because some things are broken and have been for a very long time.

One of those broken things is that all of us, regardless of the color of our skin, have on some level internalized ideas that white culture is the default expression of what it means to be American – and that all other peoples, as Toni Morrison pointed out, need to use hyphens: African-American, Asian-American, Mexican-American, Native American. Another broken thing is having heroes that are more myth than reality. Our founding fathers were complex people – like most of us – and they were truly inspired in some areas while profoundly unrepentant in others, enacting laws that supported the enslavement of men, women, and children. Christian nationalists who insist on the purity of America's origins, are like the people of Nazareth who, when offered the opportunity to enter repentance and healing, looked at Jesus and said, "Who do you think you are?"

For those of us who believe in Jesus and the authority given to Jesus to bring healing and transformation, repentance around racism and any other form of brokenness, is the permission we give to God to go ahead and do all that God longs to do for us. It is the permission we give God to bring deliverance and healing. Repentance is not only a kind of sorrow, but also a joyful acknowledgement that there is a better way and that God can be trusted to make that possible.

We, as the Church, are invited to be like the disciples, experiencing the power of repentance, deliverance, and healing for ourselves and then inviting others into that space as well. We don't preach a repentance that shames others, but a repentance born of both sorrow and joyful expectation that God will do a new thing in the very places where we see broken things.

In today's readings from the Covenant to Root out Racism, each of the promises we make have to do with broken things and inviting ourselves and others into repentance. In these promises, we anticipate moments when it will be our turn to speak up and draw attention to what needs to be repaired: acts of oppression and aggression; denial of civil liberties and voter suppression; places where privilege blinds us to the need for compassion; bigotry and hate speech. When these things go unacknowledged and unaddressed, we limit what God desires to do in building a beloved community where all people are treated with value. We perpetuate the sin of Nazareth and refuse the offered deliverance and healing.

This past week I received an email from a Christian organization urging me to help them stand against what they called the "anti-Biblical agenda" of our government. They were proud of a stand they'd taken against a proposed curriculum in Texas that would discuss racism as a part of our history. I also read an article written by a Christian who outlined research that shows white Christians registering significantly higher on a Racism Index than nonreligious whites. He reveals that these aren't only Southern Evangelical Christians but also Catholics, and mainline Protestants (that's people like us).<sup>1</sup>

Jesus and his early followers encountered resistance. They called broken things broken and trusted God to repair and redeem all broken things. Let us be unafraid of admitting our own brokenness as a Church and as a country – for that is the way we give God permission to heal and transform us, and to lead us into the actions that repair and renew.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/racism-among-white-christians-higher-among-nonreligious-s-no-coincidence-ncna1235045>