



Dear friends in Christ

June 21, 2020

Pentecost 3, Proper 7

“If This Stuff was Easy...”

The Rev. John C. Forney

John 9:35-10:8

My first parish assignment at a little town in the upper Mojave Dessert. There I met a number of wonderful, faithful Christians. Yes, the town was little. My wife would have said infinitesimal. When we first arrived to be interviewed, in all of about one minute we had passed through the entire downtown section and crossed the railroad tracks back into open desert. My tearful wife said with a quaver in her voice, “Is this all there is?” Later she would tell friends that we were centrally located, “One hundred fifty miles from nowhere.” She was certain that the End of the Earth was only four blocks past the local schoolhouse. Or was it two?

One of the wonderful members of that church was Bill, our Lay Leader. Bill’s father had been a Methodist pastor, and it was his father’s example that led Bill to strongly insist that the church should be involved in its community.

One day Bill told me the story of his father’s involvement in the early Civil Rights struggles in Florida. Tensions had been building and Bill’s father had an idea of how the church might bridge the gap and promote understanding.

He went across town to see an acquaintance who was pastor of a Black Baptist church. He proposed a plan whereby the two children's choirs might do an exchange on an upcoming Sunday. The two pastors agreed on a date. The Baptist kids would spend Saturday night over at Bill's father's church, getting to know their kids. Then, on Sunday morning they would perform a couple of numbers for the eleven o'clock service. Bill's father had decided that since race relations were so raw, he ought to spend the night at his church with the kids and their chaperones.

Around 9:00 p.m. there was a banging on the church door, and when the pastor opened it, he was confronted by an armed mob of fifty or sixty. A man with a shotgun stepped forward, "Preacher, you best send those kids out here now." Bill's father told the man in no uncertain terms, "They aren't coming out. And if you want them, you're only get to them over my dead body."

Everybody got really quiet. After what seemed like an hour, Bill's dad being silhouetted by the light of the open doorway and the belligerent armed men facing him, there was the faint sound of shuffling feet. A few around the edges began to peel away, then others. Sounds of some more car doors closing and engines starting up. After a few more minutes most had gotten back in their cars. The mob had quietly dispersed. They'd gone home.

That is an indelible story Bill would take to his grave. It is a story of Christian courage and discipleship when it was all on the line. The Baptist kids remained unaware of what had happened that evening as they sang to the delight of that Methodist congregation Sunday morning. Given the emotionally charged experience, so fraught with potential for tragedy, the Methodist kids never made their reciprocal visit to the Baptist church across town.

In our passage from John's gospel, we are given fair notice that this Jesus Movement stuff will not be a walk in the park. Most everybody will hate and despise you. Your ways are foolishness. Un American. Communist! Jesus' way will tear up families. If daughters-in-law were not be getting along all that well with the in-laws, Gospel values will make things exponentially worse. This is going to go way beyond kitchen turf conflicts and how to raise the grandkids. And who makes the best meatloaf.

One's not going to need to heed Civil Rights leader, Congressman John Lewis's call to get into, "good trouble, necessary trouble." It's going to come knocking at your doorstep. In spades! Neighbors will shun you. You will be beaten in city streets by hostile policing authorities. Some of your neighbors will burn down your church. Tear gas, pepper spray. It's all coming at you. I can testify from personal experience. You are about a most inconvenient truth THEY don't want to hear. You will be fired and sidelined if you work for a government agency. Your career's toast. Nobody wants to hear it. Go away.

During the recent mass rallies, the *Los Angeles Times* has reported on the ugliness peaceful demonstrators have encountered in rural, mostly white, California. Protestors encountered pure ugliness. They were beset upon by threats of violence and malicious rumors. Two teenagers from Angels Camp spoke of horrible abuse. Angels Camp – remember the home of the "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" by Mark Twain.¹ That Angels Camp.

One seventeen-year-old Black student in rural Quincy has been spat on by white students at her school and called the N-word. The torment got so bad, she finally had to transfer to another school -- a move that would cost her a scholarship and the captain position of the cheer squad. God may love all, but not so much some of the residents of Quincy.

In Tuolumne County some angry folks threatened to bring guns and dogs into town. Large dogs.

In Shasta County an unauthorized "militia" of armed men in tactical gear threatened to show up at the protest at Oakdale. Not at all what local law authorities wanted. The word the sheriff used? "Counterproductive."

One mixed race citizen, Camereon Medico, began a one-man protest with a sign board in Susanville. He was assaulted with racial slurs and curses, "We don't like your kind around here." And "Black lives don't matter." Some on Facebook denizens threatened to bring guns and "run over" protesters. In spite of the hate and threats, a white neighbor and then others soon

¹ Brittny Mejia, Hailey Branson-Potts, "Some in Rural California take up racial justice cause," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2020.

joined the man's protest. Yes, there's going to be "trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble."

Standing for justice and equity – standing for the ideals Jesus preached is not easy. "If this stuff was easy, we'd have already done it a long time ago," President Obama is fond of saying. If this stuff was easy, Jesus would have had it wrapped up during his earthly ministry.

My first work while in seminary was in community organizing. Trained seminary interns in teams of two were sent to clusters of churches who had invited them in to help them work on white racism. Vic and I ended up at Temple City, California, hosted by a cluster of five congregations. We called it Project Understanding, though there often wasn't an abundance of understanding.

Our work there took shape as an ecumenical fair housing council. Temple City was a bedroom community for Los Angeles and it was in housing patterns that racism was expressed. Talk about lack of understanding! I remember our first meeting with the city manager. His opening words, "This is a nice, peaceful (read white) community and I intend to keep it that way." Our first client was Italian. For some reason, the owner of this rental property hated Italians. Why? Go figure.

Members of our project were sent out to investigate, or check out complaints, to confront hostile apartment managers and owners. To secure the just rights of minority clients, they were often castigated as "trouble makers" and worse. Called all sorts of names. Jesus was right. His message of love put into action would not be popular. Justice is the public form of love, and it's not often popular because it means giving up power.

The last time I visited the church that had hosted our office, was on the occasion of a memorial service for the woman who had followed me as director of Project Understanding. Now, Temple City was overwhelmingly Asian. Communities change. But it was "nice and peaceful."

"They will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake..." Tough stuff. Not easy, indeed!

“Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake.” Yes, indeed if this stuff was easy, we’d have done it a long time ago. And, if you try -- yes, you too, will end up in deep doo-doo.

“What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul...”

Cinch up your belt. Get your game face on. There’s work to do if we’re going to build a Promised Land. It’s about the risk to love.

Dante Stewart alerts us to risk as the costly expression of faith. “Sympathy feels bad about a situation. Solidarity joins in as a co-laborer to change the situation. Sympathy calls for love without risk. Solidarity calls for risk as love. Sympathy centers the comfort and timetable of those who benefit from a system of difference. Solidarity calls for a revolution of value in a system in which we build a loving and just common life together.”²

Solidarity, as corporate love, is costly. It demands something. It demands risk. It is easy to march with thousands of like-minded people in Los Angeles or in any other large, mostly progressive city. To make that witness in a small, rural setting is costly. One will quickly reach the “unrepentant heart.” Fearful and damaged persons will react out of that fear and reject you and your message. The challenge then, is how might one creatively engage and disarm that fear. Move beyond it. I can’t say we interns in Temple City were often that successful. Too green, most of the time.

But understanding is possible. Or maybe just tolerance. We did have some small victories. We did host a number of community symposiums on the fair housing laws and how to follow them. When managers and owners heard that if a Black family would rent a unit, the rest of the tenants would not move out. Why? Because people hate to move. If the new family could afford the same rent the others were paying, they would keep up their unit in pretty much the same fashion. And this was the case. Most people want to do the right thing. Soon neighbors got to know one another and the

² Dante Stewart, “Verse and Voice,” *Sojourners*, June 16, 2020.

neighborhood's heart grew one size bigger. In the years I ran the project, we never actually had to sue anyone.

For those brave Catholics, Methodists, Quakers, Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ members of Project Understanding, this was costly love. Faith, being put to the test, grew beyond measure. In the work, Jesus became real like he had never been for many of our investigators. They tasted a smidgen of Life Eternal.

Our nation, we sense, is at a crossroads. The Rev. William Barber calls our time a Third Reconstruction. Lately I have been moved to pick up a book of Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where do we Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*³

In one of his last works, Dr. King lays out his hopes for a better America. It is a vision firmly rooted in the promise of our Constitution and founding documents. But he knew that the continued pressure of mass demonstrations, supported with strategic organizing and policy proposals would be essential. Just as now.

Love, if it is to amount to anything in the public sphere, must be disciplined and tenacious. Just as now.

“Mass nonviolent demonstrations will not be enough. They must be supplemented by a continuing job of organization. To produce change, people must be organized to work together in units of power.”⁴

Building up what King called “The Beloved Community” is tough stuff. It’s about changing the power dynamic. And power makes no concessions.

If this stuff was easy, it would have been done a long time ago. It is sort of like of weeding or housework. It’s never done. Those of us who marched in the sixties thought we’d gotten voting rights, civil rights, fair housing, LGBT rights, women’s rights and a city worthy of the Beloved Community.

Far too many of us rested on the accomplishments of a past day. When we awoke, we woke to racism and discrimination every bit as virulent as when we had begun so many years ago. We woke up to intolerance, economic

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where do we go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, (Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 2010).

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 139.

despair and voter suppression. Crap schools and dilapidated housing. Thousands sleeping on the streets and rampant addiction. Gangs and disaster neighborhoods. Did I mention global warming, mass incarceration and a pandemic? And an America with no direction, a nation adrift?

I'll give Dr. King the last word here before we pull the covers up over our heads.

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of *now*. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with lost opportunity...We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation. This may well be mankind's last chance to choose between chaos and community.”⁵

“I set before you the ways of life and death,” says God. “Choose life.”

Thousands, Black and White marching in solidarity through America's streets, are choosing life. Two brave teenage protestors in Angels Camp, California, are choosing life. City mayors and police department chiefs confronting legacies of abuse and misconduct are choosing life.

Tough stuff indeed, but more precious than much fine gold!

As Anne Lamott has written in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, “Hope begins in the dark...”

Amen.

⁵ Ibid, 202.