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## Time to Listen

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church  
The Nativity of St. John the Baptist, June 21, 2020*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each one of us Beloved. **Amen.**

Throughout history there have been people who have called the world to repentance and to transformation. Such people are often greatly revered after they are dead, and are perhaps not quite as popular when they are speaking their truth or during their lifetimes. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King is greatly beloved of the church nowadays. At the time he was killed, however, 75% of Americans disapproved of him.<sup>1</sup>

The San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem four years ago to protest police brutality, specifically the killing of Eric Garner who said he could not breathe, and 70% of Americans thought he was wrong or unpatriotic to do so.<sup>2</sup> Now lots of people are saying

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<sup>1</sup> See James C. Cobb, "Even Though He Is Revered Today, MLK Was Widely Disliked by the American Public When He Was Killed", in *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 4, 2018, accessed June 18, 2020 at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-martin-luther-king-had-75-percent-disapproval-rating-year-he-died-180968664/>.

<sup>2</sup> See John Breech, "Poll: Majority of Americans Disagree with Colin Kaepernick's Protest," in CBSsports.com, September 15, 2016, accessed June 18, 2020 at <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/poll-majority-of-americans-disagree-with-colin-kaepernicks-protest/>.

he was right on. We can all think of countless people who stood for something, who were considered unbalanced or prejudiced or overly reactive at the time, but who after the fact are called heroes.

Today is the feast day of St. John the Baptist, our namesake, the patron saint of our church. John the Baptist was exactly this kind of person. He was constantly calling people to repentance. He said that anyone who had two coats should give one of them to a person who had none. He told Roman soldiers they should be satisfied with their wages and not use their power to extort money from the people they ruled. He was relentless in naming the corruption in the political and religious establishment, criticizing King Herod for marrying his brother's wife. He was imprisoned and then killed for this. But what the people needed to do was listen to him.

What these folks all have in common is that they are pointing to what is wrong. They have the courage to say, often at great cost to themselves, this system is broken and is hurting people and it must stop. Even though after the fact this always seems self-evident, for some reason, the first time people hear it, it always sounds disrespectful. Overblown. Exaggerated.

I was speaking with someone recently about how she found out about George Floyd. She was in line to get groceries and someone said, "The police killed a black man again. It was absolutely murder, no question." And she said that her first

thought was, “I bet it was more complicated than that. I bet people are jumping to conclusions and they don’t know the whole story.” And then she heard the report about what actually happened. She couldn’t bring herself to watch the video because hearing the description was enough. She realized how her first instinct, skepticism, was in this instance dead wrong.

My friends, on this feast day of St. John the Baptist whose mission was to prepare the people for Jesus, I believe that the blood of every innocent ever unjustly killed is crying out from the ground along with the blood of Abel, killed by his brother Cain. I believe God hears and is utterly anguished about this. I know that we have been too. We have our John the Baptists, the ones who are pointing to the wrong and who are saying it must stop. For many of us around the country and here at St. John’s, we are beginning to recognize, with all the horror that this implies, that we have been allowing outrageous harm to continue all this time unabated. Maybe we didn’t all quite believe it was still happening or didn’t know what to do about it if it was. But that time is over. I think most of us are ready. It is time to listen, even if we don’t yet know how God calls us to respond.

If you aren’t familiar with Howard Thurman, he was one of the most extraordinary writers I’ve ever had the pleasure to read. Howard Thurman was a black pastor who was both a mystic and an activist. He wrote a book called *Jesus and the*

*Disinherited* in which he described reading the Bible to his grandmother who had been born a slave and who couldn't read or write. She would always tell him what parts of the Bible to read to him, and she never wanted to hear the epistles of Paul. Her slave masters had forced her to listen to the parts of Paul that tell slaves they must obey their masters. After reflecting on this Howard Thurman writes he understands why Paul could say this. Paul and Jesus were both Jews. But unlike Jesus, Paul was also a Roman citizen. And because Paul had a certain level of protection as a Roman citizen that Jesus did not have, Paul could write things like this. But Jesus never did. Pastor Thurman says this:

The striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who carries long over the facts.

My point is this. People like me who have a certain level of social protection truly cannot see the level of fear and genuine insecurity that people without that protection have. And so it is critical, vital, of vast importance, that those of us who have power listen.

We must listen to the John the Baptists of our time. Even if all they can do is point toward what's wrong, we need that as a preparation for the Jesus who always follows to love and heal and empower us to do what is right. It's easy to jump past listening and move straight to "what can we do about

this?” And indeed we do need to act, and we will. But that’s not where things start. It starts with listening—so that we can hear, and see, and notice, and care deeply. Listen to open ourselves to what God wants to change in us. Listen both to people of color and to the living God, so that we can be de-centered and become able, truly, to repent. Then the acts to which we are called will bear fruit because they are born from the life and power of God.

In my own life, some of you know that I was a lawyer. Perhaps you don’t all know that I quit the practice of law during a personal crisis, and I spent five years waiting tables, determined not to seek another vocation until I had tended to what needed tending my own life. During those years as a food server I experienced a different social status than I had had before. At one point I was taking the order at a table, suddenly without warning one of the men at the table pulled me down into his lap. I jumped up and was really angry. The whole table laughed at me, the men and the women. It was humiliating and disrespectful and even a bit threatening. Reflecting on that experience, I realized that as a lawyer, I would never have had that experience. The man who pulled me into his lap would never have done so had I been wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase. It was only because I was both a woman and in a lower social position than him that this kind of behavior came out. I would never have even seen it otherwise.

We have to realize, my friends, that the same thing is true of the experiences that our brothers and sisters and siblings who are people of color have been telling white people about for centuries. Now please hear me. I don't for a minute think that my experience as a white woman waiting tables makes me any kind of expert on what people of color are experiencing in this country. But my experience being discounted and humiliated has opened my eyes to what I might have previously discounted in other peoples' stories. It is time for me to listen. I believe God is calling us as people of faith whose primary vocation is to follow the way of Jesus, is to begin by listening to what communities of color have been saying all along. We can listen to what people are saying, and we can listen to what their actions are showing us.

Let's listen to the Rev. Dr. William Barber II telling us in his homily at Washington National Cathedral last Sunday, "America, accepting death isn't an option any more."<sup>3</sup> Let's listen to Episcopal Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows from Indianapolis, who says that she and other black and brown folk often don't tell their stories of oppression to white people because "it is hard to tell the stories of racial trauma to the people who have the power to make things different and won't."<sup>4</sup> Let's listen to Waltrina Middleton, whose cousin

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<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, Homily, Washington National Cathedral, June 14, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=26&v=dBAltpV20Zc&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=26&v=dBAltpV20Zc&feature=emb_logo)

<sup>4</sup> The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows, "From Bishop Jennifer: A Reflection of Personal Experience, Hope and Challenge for the Church on Dismantling White Supremacy and Racism," <https://indydio.org/from-bishop-jennifer-a-reflection-of-personal-experience-hope-and-challenge-for-the-church-on-dismantling-white-supremacy-and-racism/?fbclid=IwAR1HHEICgvlqIBETdIAK3dXe-x6UOp8cvsbCZC0V5z5vtABs9MYw97J7trQ#>

was murdered at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston by a white supremacist in 2015, who writes, “I do not forgive the man who murdered my cousin” because to insist too quickly “on a narrative of forgiveness is dehumanizing and violent.. and goes against the very nature of lament.”<sup>5</sup> Let’s listen to the brother of George Floyd, Philonise Floyd, who this week approached the United Nations Human Rights Commission to beg them for help addressing the police brutality in our country, since for four hundred years they have been asking white people in this country to address it and it has not happened. Let’s listen to our brother Pastor Ralph Galloway from our sister church, Liberty Community Church in North Minneapolis, who last Sunday preached a sermon about Dominance being the knee on the neck of our hearts, and saying that dominance and the justice of Jesus can’t inhabit the same space.

The line between good and evil runs straight through each of our hearts. It’s far too easy to think that the problem lies only with overt white supremacists or people who voted differently from us. It’s also too easy for those who are victimized to themselves become oppressors as has happened in history far too often. The problem runs deeper than racism. As Pastor Ralph said, It’s about the sin of dominance, of selfishness. Sometimes selfishness looks like shutting my eyes to what is going on. I can begin with myself

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<sup>5</sup> Waltrina N. Middleton, “I do not Forgive the Man who murdered my Cousin DePayne at Mother Emmanuel,” in *Christian Century Magazine*, June 16, 2020, accessed June 18, 2020 at [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/i-don-t-forgive-man-who-murdered-my-cousin-depayne-mother-emanuel?utm\\_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=54948fc9d6-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_EdPicks\\_2020\\_06\\_16&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_b00cd618da-54948fc9d6-82375543](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/i-don-t-forgive-man-who-murdered-my-cousin-depayne-mother-emanuel?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=54948fc9d6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks_2020_06_16&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-54948fc9d6-82375543)

and say, I didn't know what the phrase Jim Crow meant until I was in my 40's. I didn't even know about segregation until my 30's. I didn't know that Minnesota had among the worst standard of living racial disparities in the nation until 2012. My parents didn't teach me, my school didn't mention it, my church never talked about it. The fact that I didn't even know about these things tells me that my communities have not been listening. But we know that the person of Jesus deeply cares about those who are oppressed, since he himself was one of them. Howard Thurman writes,

Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

Today I am inviting all of us at St. John's to do a six-week deep dive into addressing racism, beginning with ourselves. I'm inviting us to do this not because we're a social justice nonprofit with a thin faith veneer on top, but because I believe that to be a follower of Jesus' Way of Love in today's America means putting the sin of racism front and center of our community's journey of faith. Here is a text that Reverend William Barber read from the pulpit of Washington National Cathedral last Sunday, from the Message Bible translation of the prophet Amos, about what God thinks

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, at 29.

about justice:

People hate this kind of talk. Raw truth is never popular. But here it is, bluntly spoken: Because you run roughshod over the poor and take the bread right out of their mouths, You're never going to move into the luxury homes you have built. You're never going to drink wine from the expensive vineyards you've planted. I know precisely the extent of your violations, the enormity of your sins. Appalling! You bully right-living people, taking bribes right and left and kicking the poor when they're down. Justice is a lost cause. Evil is epidemic. Decent people throw up their hands. Protest and rebuke are useless, a waste of breath. Seek good and not evil - and live! You talk about God, the God-of-the-Angel-Armies, being your best friend. Well, live like it, and maybe it will happen. Hate evil and love good, then work it out in the public square. Maybe God, the God-of-the-Angel-Armies, will notice your remnant and be gracious. *Amos 5:10-15*

Just as we are called to listen to our brothers and sisters and siblings of color whose blood is crying out from the ground, we are called to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking in these scriptures. We are called to let ourselves be de-centered. To let ourselves get flipped inside out. To recover the healing and justice of God that is what love looks like. To follow Jesus to the places of the world's pain until we discover that it is and always has been our own.

Over the next six weeks, we at St. John's are going to explore dismantling racism through the Way of Love. This won't be a one-and-done kind of short term program. This is an introduction to a lifelong journey that I believe the living God is calling us to make. Fundamentally, it's about being disciples of Jesus. It's about embracing reconciliation as the heart of faith, and extending that to the deep and protracted hurt our country has experienced for far too long because racism. I'm hopeful that you will be willing to make this journey together with the loving hearts that I know you all to have, generously and even sacrificially with your time and prayerful attention, because I believe Jesus is asking this of us at this pivotal time in the life of our nation.

With us is the living God who created all that is, who called Moses to liberate the slaves from the most powerful empire on earth, who showed up in human form as a person of color in an oppressed and occupied backwater of the Roman Empire, and who was tortured and killed for his beautiful, healing, loving and liberating life. If we did not have this God, we might be tempted to despair. But God in Christ in the power of the Spirit is the one who is creating justice, making healing, empowering transformation in us and through us. Let's follow the Spirit, and not count the cost. It's time. It's time to listen. Amen.

