

Weeding Meditation: A Siren Song

St. John's, Minneapolis

August 9, 2020

Wednesday morning I woke up, as usual, like most of you, wearing White skin. I didn't notice it, however, until around ten-thirty, when I was taking a break from writing this, pulling weeds. I heard some sirens. I prayed briefly for whoever was in trouble. It's my habit. I also prayed that it wasn't a Black person, for whom sirens are often a sign that things are going to get worse. Think of just a few stories in the news, where the person with the uniform and the gun eventually explains,

- *We thought you were driving a stolen car.*
- *Did you know the light on your license plate isn't working?*
- *I don't think you're having a seizure. I think you're on drugs.*
- *You matched the description of two teenagers we are looking for.*
- *We got a call saying someone who doesn't belong here was looking at the houses. Can you prove that this is really your house?*

Nobody has ever asked me those kinds of questions. No realtor has ever met me in person, after talking to me on the phone and assuming I was White, and told me *I am so sorry, we just sold this house.*

Years ago I told my then-fiancée, Lynnell, back in my mostly-Black hometown of Detroit, *it's really a miracle that all Black people aren't paranoid.* If something bad happens to a Black person involving a White person, it could easily have been racism. And if something good happens, it could just be due to a White liberal feeling guilty, which is still racism. But it might just be bad luck or nonracist karma. One of her Black co-workers once said, *Thank God it's Friday! for the whole weekend I don't have to deal with a single White person. What a relief.*

Especially in places like Minnesota, where we don't want to talk about unpleasantness, a Black person can get exhausted wondering whether racism just happened. So it's best to avoid possible confrontations:

- don't call the police.
- don't complain to the principal unless it's really bad.
- don't ask to speak to the manager.

Just go home and tell your spouse. And make sure your kids know that everything they do will be seen, by most White people, as an example of Blackness.

I always wear my White skin. My Black students, colleagues, and friends are always Black, even when they may wish to keep their race irrelevant or unknown. Our society is built on race-consciousness and race-stratification. Unlike my race or my gender, I can conceal my political identity or my profession if I wish. Most of the time, I don't wear my clerical collar. I don't want to be judged, to have airplane seatmates tell me what they think of organized religion, or apologize for poor church attendance. But my Whiteness, like my maleness, is always on display, almost always to my advantage.

I was reminded, by that siren, that Black people don't get to delete their morning email reminder without reading it. *No thanks, I'd rather not do any anti-racism today. I'm trying to be productive.* Ditto for Asians and Hispanics and so many other folks who are kept at the margins of American life.

And I'm not sure how our scriptures help us with that today. Elijah, a fanatic and seriously badass prophet, is pursued by vengeful enemies. God rescues him and appears to him in a cave in a very gentle way instead of the expected windstorm, earthquake, or fire. Eijah then gets fresh instructions to crown two kings who will eventually get rid of the aforementioned vengeful enemies. The "still small voice" is a beautiful image. But the voice of God Wednesday morning was in the sirens, and it wasn't announcing good news.

And the other story? Jesus, trying to sleep after having his disciples feed 5,000, is awakened by the wind and, worried about his friends straining with the oars, goes walking to them on the water. Peter says 'me too' and for a few seconds it works, until he notices the wind. Jesus rescues him, and the wind stops. Where is the Way of Love lesson here, the anti-racism message? Are we supposed to have more faith than Peter? Supposed to believe that God will miraculously come to rescue us? Do I believe that Jesus "really" walked on water? I don't know.

Somehow, Jesus can come to us when we're headed for a shipwreck. Somehow, God can find us when we are hiding in our emotional caves, scared and depressed. And even though God can make whirlwinds, earthquakes, and fires, God's voice is as likely to be a whisper as a roar.

So if I want to walk the Way of Love, where is the Good News in these two stories? Is it Good News or just the truth that, like Elijah, you can be reassured that God is with you, but now you need to get back to being a nurse walking into an ICU full of covid with fresh PPE: *you're gonna be okay, but it's still really scary.*

Is the Good News that we're all in that boat and the wind feels like we're going to be swamped, but Jesus is keeping an eye on us? Should we, knowing this story, have more faith than Peter the Rock, and if we do, we will be able to walk all the way back to the boat?

Does the still, small voice tell us we can walk on water, or just that it's time to get back to work? Does that soft whisper of our conscience tell us something about love, that it's the tiny and gentle dimensions of things that matter more than the huge and frightening ones?

Two invisible plagues menace us. One is a virus, a natural plague. We are right to fear the grim and mindless spread of this unrelenting virus. The other is an idea, a social sin. We are right to despair that racism is the organizing principle of where we live, who we go to school with, who we have in our family, and who we worship with.

In my case, a siren somewhere in the neighborhood made me remember my Whiteness, that invisible force-field of good fortune that smooths my path. If the siren had been wailing for me, I'd likely be glad for the help. But it wasn't. That squad car or ambulance was headed for somebody in trouble, and I found myself praying they were not going to make it worse. I went back to twisting plantains out by the roots, and trying to get the whole creeping charlie vine. You have to pull gently, or you'll just rip off the leaves. Next week, some new leaves will have grown back. You have to tug and maybe dig to get the root out. And next year, the dandelions and crabgrass will be back. But somehow the work of weeding helps me. I tell people it's meditation, and I mean it.

After hearing God's soft whisper, Elijah was able to get back to being the biggest badass prophet in the Bible. After Jesus calmed the storm, the disciples were able to get back to the shore. We have things to uproot. Battles to fight. Storms to weather. I go to church because being with you, doing what we do, helps me remember: God is love. If I pay attention, I can calm my fear and despair. Connecting to God is sometimes undramatic, like a still small voice, and sometimes incredible, like walking on water. Time will tell whether all the weeding is merely calming, or has actually helped me find more tangled vines and roots in my White American soul.