The Original Jesus

Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given June 18, 2023
Matthew 9:35-10:8

Today is a mix of many things. First of all, fathers, happy father's day! Thank you for the love and sweat and wisdom and patience you have poured into your children. Today is also the day we have sent our youth pilgrims to Greece. This week they will be focusing on learning from the Apostle Paul, a person who had made terrible mistakes but who became a proponent of an early and radical form of inclusivity. Our youth pilgrims will also be going to Lesvos Island and in particular to a small village called Skala with a population of 120 people, five miles from the coast of Turkey, where 800,000 migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Turkey, and Pakistan landed in the year 2015 alone. Three people in that village were nominated for the Nobel peace prize because of the extraordinary lengths to which they tried to help the refugees. They rescued exhausted refugees at sea. They cooked them food on the beach. They said that they "hugged them and kissed them," that they saw them as brothers and sisters. They said there were some days it was impossible to fish, because so many people were coming over the water, but that people were drowning so they did the only thing they could—to help to save them, and that if they had it to do all over again they would do exactly the same thing. Our pilgrims are going to talk to some of these people, and they will also go to a refugee camp and speak with refugees who had made the ocean journey find out what it was like to live in the refugee camp that was established nearby.

Today, June 18, is also the five hundred and seventy first anniversary of the Papal Bull that was the first in a series that later came to be called the Doctrine of Discovery, in which Pope Nicholas V gave to the King of Portugal permission to:

> invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens (Muslims) and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.[1]

This doctrine launched and gave official religious permission, in the name of Christ, for the beginning of the slave trade and for the utter conquest and genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

Lest we think this was just a matter of ancient history, this very week we have seen echoes of the continuing impact of the Doctrine of Discovery and the beliefs that underly it. The federal Justice Department found this week that the Minneapolis Police Department "uses excessive force, including unjustified deadly force; unlawfully discriminates against Black people and Native American people; violates the rights of people engaged in protected speech; and along with the City of Minneapolis, discriminates against people with behavioral health disabilities when

[1] English translation: "Dum Diversas," Doctrine of Discovery, Indigenous Values Initiative, July 23, 2018, www.doctrineofdiscovery.org/dum-diversas/ , quoted in Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (InterVarsity Press, 2019) at 15.

responding to calls for assistance."[2] I encourage you to read this report. It's an important and sober reminder that the killing of George Floyd was not an isolated incident, but part of a pattern that still needs correction, and that we as citizens of Minneapolis have a duty to help to change.

So these two things, side by side, are striking in their contrast—the people of Skala helping refugees and the Minneapolis Police Department's pattern of excessive force and racism. I don't know whether the people of Skala had any religious motivation for their generous response to migrants arriving on their shores. One of those nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, Stratis Valiamos, simply said, "Either you possess humanity that will emerge in extreme situations, or you don't."[3] However, the Doctrine of Discovery was squarely founded by the religious motivation to "save the souls" of the Indigenous people of the Americas, and also appropriate all of their personhood and possessions and land for the personal profit of Europeans.

Recently Heather shared with me something from a confirmation class she has taught. It began with some of the students being atheists, because they saw nothing compelling, and much that was negative, in so much of what is called Christianity today. Even if they had never heard of the Doctrine of Discovery, they know instinctively that some of what masquerades as Christian faith today is colonial and violent. But when these confirmation students actually encountered the original Jesus, and what he did and taught, they began to change.

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[2] Department of Justice, "Justice Department Finds Civil Rights Violations by the Minneapolis Police Department and the City of Minneapolis," Friday, June 16, 2023, accessed June 18, 2023 at https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-finds-civil-rights-violations-minneapolis-police-department-and-city

[3] Quoted by Urial Kon, "This Tiny Greek Village Will Restore Your Faith in Humanity," in *Haaretz,* November 20, 2017, accessed June 18, 2023 at https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2017-11-20/ty-article-magazine/this-tiny-greek-village-will-restore-your-faith-in-humanity/0000017f-e92a-dea7-adff-f9fb48530000

Today's gospel story is one that is tucked away in the early part of Matthew, and it does not get much press that I've ever heard. But it is a gem of a story that shows what Jesus sent his disciples out to do. He did not send his disciples out to convert people to a religion called Christianity, a cover which would justify all kinds of violence. Instead he sent them out to heal the sick, cast out evil spirits, and proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near. Jesus did this because he saw the crowds, that they were harassed and helpless, and he had compassion for them. Compassion was the motivation that led Jesus to send his disciples out, because there were human beings in need of healing.

The response of the villagers of Skala sounds very much like the original Jesus, because it involved an instinctive compassion that arises in extreme situations. The enemy of such compassion is a trained numbness that in our society comes from an ingrained, unconscious sense that European Christian whiteness is normative. This trained numbness is the basis of the Doctrine of Discovery and all the horrors that have followed that still are very much alive and well in Minneapolis. Two thousand years exist between us and this small story of Jesus sending disciples out to heal harassed and helpless people, and much has occurred in the intervening years. But the reason we are here together as a community of faith is to learn to repent from the devastating impact of a false notion of white Christian superiority, and instead to recover that original shining compassion, the original Jesus. This being so embodied the love of God that we can still encounter him, can still touch and be touched by him through the Holy Spirit. We can receive and learn to embody his teachings.

Yesterday we had both a funeral and a wedding at St. John's. The couple getting married were young and coming out of a version of Christianity that had taught them they were innately sinful and damned by God, unless they repented and followed religious rules and believed the right doctrine. I told them that even though we do sin and make sometimes serious mistakes, that what the Bible says is truly original about us is goodness and blessing. When they heard this, they wept.

You see, just as was true in Jesus' day, harassed and helpless people are everywhere, and sometimes that is us. The only reason we are here together is to learn to embody love and compassion for each other and for the world, to receive healing when we need it, and to offer healing and hope and help freely—freely we have received, freely we give, as Jesus said in today's gospel reading. We are not primarily here to decide what time or where the services ought to be, or to wrestle over whose liturgy is more important, or even whether or not we can afford this building. We are here to learn to embody love and compassion, to undo the impact of centuries of violence and distortion that have come from the Doctrine of Discovery.

And this is good news. It is good news that there is an original Jesus who can be discovered, because he is not only a historical figure but a compassionate powerful presence that can be experienced.

May we encounter the compassion of Christ in a way that disarms our defenses, dissolves numbness, and frees our own innate generosity and compassion. May we work to undo the harm that has occurred in the name of Christ. May we learn to embody the love of Christ together, step by step. Amen.