

“Go, Do!”

Sermon by Leah Fowler

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Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

When I look at the sampling of headlines over the weekend, all I can see are words of brokenness, distrust, pain and suffering. These words trouble me.

Amaziah told King Jeroboam regarding Amos’s troubling words about Israel: “The land is not able to bear all his words.” I feel the same way, both personally as I read, hear and see the painful retelling of violent events that happened the last week, and as I consider my task as a preacher. The words I can offer, as best I try, will certainly be inadequate for the healing needed in this nation, and the healing needed even in the hearts and minds of this room.

Amos knew something about the inadequacy of words. For this reason, he prophesied with sign-acts: symbols and imagery that were meant to wake up the people Israel when mere words failed to rouse their conversion. A plumb-line is a sort of measure to see if a building is aligned straight. When a plumb-line is held up to the people Israel, they clearly do not measure up to God’s expectations.

Jesus’ words in the gospel are a sort of plumb-line for us today. How do we measure up?

Like Amos, Jesus recognized that imagery speaks more powerfully than words alone. So when a lawyer asked Jesus what he meant by “neighbor” in the commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We do not know why the priest passed a stripped, dying man on the side of the road. Perhaps the priest was late to

prayer. We do not know why the Levite passed the wounded man on the side of the road. Perhaps he was concerned about polluting his own ritually purified body with the bleeding, broken body of someone dying. There could have been plenty of possible excuses. Whatever the cause, both the priest and the Levite passed this suffering man. In doing so, they showed his body did not matter enough to them or to the worlds to which these holy men belonged.

Jesus taught that you cannot love your neighbor as yourself without recognizing that the suffering body of the man on the side of the road *matters*. And Jesus also said that in order to inherit eternal life, you must love your neighbor.

In this parable, Jesus warns us not to let social, racial, or religious standing get in the way of seeing and offering compassion to the bodies of people who suffer. In an article in *Sojourner's Magazine*, Stephen Mattson said this:

“Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, ‘Samaritan lives matter.’
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, ‘Children’s lives matter.’
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, ‘Gentile lives matter.’
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, ‘Jewish lives matter.’
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, ‘Women’s lives matter.’
Instead of saying all lives matter, Jesus said, ‘Lepers’ lives matter.’
Even though Jesus loved everyone, even to the point of dying for their sins, he went out of his way to intentionally help specific groups of people-- the alienated, mistreated, and those facing injustice. So saying ‘Black Lives Matter’ is one of the most Christ-like things we can do.”¹

¹ Stephen Mattson, “Social Justice is a Christian Tradition-- Not a Liberal Agenda” in *Sojourners Magazine/www.sojo.net* August 11, 2015

I spent many years working in youth ministry. I have found that at about the age of 13 or 14, the adolescent brain scrambles and youth have to sort again for themselves a worldview that makes sense to them. Once a 7th grader proudly announced to me: "I have decided not to be a Christian anymore. I've read what Genesis says. I'm also learning some interesting things in my science classes, which tell me there is no way that Genesis can be real." For this boy, the plausibility of evolution ruled out the truthfulness of the bible, which in turn ruled out for him the validity of Christianity. I had to swallow my frustration for a moment: In the churches where I have worked, we have very thoughtfully provided an in-depth, rich theology for our children. We have never taught them that the Bible must be taken word-for-word literally as historical fact. There has always been room for science and religion to artfully coexist. But though this boy had grown up in the church and in our Sunday School classes, he was going through his own sorting and unfortunately had scrambled those thoughtful Sunday School classes.

I explained to him that I agree-- it is scientifically pretty close to impossible for the earth to have been created in 6 days. I will not stake my faith in God on whether or not that actually happened. But the beauty of the creation story-- and I would argue the *truth* in it-- is that when Genesis 1:27 says "So God created humankind in God's own image; male and female God created them... and blessed them... and called them good" we know that God's image is reflected in *all* humankind: male and female, people of all races, people of all abilities. And while I believe strongly that evolution makes the most sense to explain how we physically got here, the spiritual mandate to recognize the image of God reflected in *each human being* has a mandate that science cannot provide on its own.

Recognizing that each human being bears the image of God means that we cannot view another group of people as lesser because they don't keep their houses up. Recognizing that each human being bears the image of God means that when a certain group of people inflict gun wounds on each

other, we cannot shake our heads and write them off saying “they just don’t value life” without looking at the original sin of racism in this country that has perpetuated economic systems that do not value their lives.

Recognizing that each human being bears the image of God also means that when police officers regularly have to make split-second decisions that are not so clear-cut, many bear the wounds of the moral weight of some decisions they have made and also of the brokenness they have witnessed. Just this past spring, when my family was staying in midtown Manhattan, there was a terrible incident on our block that happened minutes after my wife walked the dog. A troubled man wielding a knife was shot and killed by police officers. According to some reports, as soon as one of the officers who shot the man saw that he was killed, the officer fell to his knees and wept with his face in his hands, crying “What have I done?” Dallas Police Chief David Brown has worked hard to shape a police force that recognizes the “distinction between the cop as *warrior* and the cop as *guardian*”-- insisting on the latter. The moral drive for many first responders, police officers and entire police forces to act as guardian and to act as a Good Samaritan to protect those in harm’s way should be celebrated. I certainly felt grateful recently over Pride Weekend, when I admit my friends and I felt jittery about participating in Pride events following the shooting in Orlando. But I confidently told my friends that we would be safe in New York, because the police are present and prepared and highly trained.

Everyone deserves that sense of protection and assurance that the police and the justice system will work in favor of their safety and belonging in a community. Unfortunately, too many events of police killings of black men and boys without just cause or in gross disproportion to the initial violation have left black youth of every class in America to feel like they cannot enjoy this right to safety and protection by the law. They feel like even their very breath can be seen as a provocation. This sense dashes hopes in these

young people's perception of the future of our country as a community, and also in their hopes for their own futures.

Let me be clear: I am not pointing fingers at police officers, because I know the brokenness we see is far bigger than the mistakes of some warrior cops. I also do not want to make anyone here today feel guilty. Guilt can be self-indulgent and paralyzing. When we stoke our guilty feelings, or work to assuage them, we neglect our responsibility to make any kind of meaningful change. I also recognize that America's complicated racial dynamics may be confusing for newer immigrants to this country. Your ancestors were not architects of the racist economic system that was designed generations ago. However, I have travelled enough to know that you do not even have to set foot in this country before consuming the racism America has created and exported. I see it in the skin-lightening creams my Filipino in-laws have in their medicine cabinets. So, it is important to get some white, beige, tan and brown skin in this game of anti-racism work. I have heard from my black clergy colleagues that their churches are not looking for allies; they are looking for co-conspirators. I will have lunch on Tuesday with Gloria Tate, a black pastor leading Teaneck Presbyterian Church and will listen to how her congregation grapples with the pain of the violence of the past week and offer words of support. But both Jesus and Amos indicate that we cannot stop with mere words. Jesus ends his Parable of the Good Samaritan saying, "Go, and do likewise."

So where do we go? And what can we do? One place to start is to put down our own armours of defense. Any good-hearted Christian does not want to be complicit in a racist system. And so we try to prove how we are not complicit in a racist system: we talk about how diverse our friends are; we talk about how our work has served people of color. We may talk about how the suffering we see on the side of the road must have somehow been the fault of the victim-- "after all, I have travelled that road too and have never had any problems; maybe the victim was dressed the wrong way, or

provoked the violence in some way.” If there is any part of us that cares for human life, we have a hard time looking directly at a suffering body and seeing the pain that is really there. And so we put up our armour to protect us from seeing. When we see the extent of the pain, we start to feel it too. And it becomes a measure for how we live our own lives.

Jesus wants us to see and to feel the pain of others, and to be transformed by it. In America, the pain of racism has centuries of layers. The events of the last week, months and years do not exist on their own and did not happen just to individual people. These events hold the weight of every other racist experience and action, and they belong to everybody who has experienced the pain of racism. It is a suffocating suffering.

The Samaritan helped to carry the weight of the suffering body he saw. He held the man, tended his wounds, and carried him on his donkey to a place where he could find healing. He offered resources to see that the man’s body was restored from his injuries. The Samaritan did not do this because he felt guilty. He did this because he was good. He did this because he was a neighbor. Go, and do likewise. Amen.