

Sermon 10.04.20
Proper 22, Year A
Isaiah 5:1-7, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

As some of you know, for my Monday - Friday "day job" I work as a corporate accountant for Lee Masonry Products, a company that manufactures and sells masonry construction materials throughout Kentucky and Tennessee. What most people don't know is that I majored, not in accounting or finance or economics, but in anthropology. The twisting, turning road that led me to a career in accounting is a story for another day, but I will say that although on the surface you would think a degree in anthropology wouldn't be of much use at an accounting job, there are many times I find that what I learned studying anthropology helps me not only at work but also in every other area of my life where people are involved.

Anthropology is the study of human societies and cultures, behaviors, language, and biology. There are four main subfields of Anthropology - Physical, Cultural, and Linguistic Anthropology, and Archaeology. My main focus was Cultural Anthropology, which studies the ways people organize themselves in community, adapt to their environments, develop cultural norms, and make sense of the world around them. As we studied the cultures of different people in every part of

the globe, it was eye-opening to see how so much of what I considered to be normal, accepted practices for each and every human being could look very different in other communities - from how family relationships are defined, to the systems of commerce that are established, the moral and ethical practices that are expected, issues of aging, care of the vulnerable, religious and spiritual practices, and the reactions and consequences that occur when norms are broken. It is an important and difficult challenge for students of anthropology to pay attention and learn about different cultures with clear eyes, seeing the realities of the people they are studying while not becoming distracted by judgments and value assumptions they might make about other people and communities that are based on their own personal, cultural norms and expectations. It was also interesting to see how very powerful and resistant to change cultural norms can be. When there is a deep sense of how things ought to be and what is expected of the members of a culture, changes and challenges to these expected practices are seldom welcomed by the broader community.

I was reminded of this a couple of weeks ago as I listened to an audio version of N.T. Wright's book "Paul: A Biography." I bought a hardback copy of this book two years ago when it was first published, but its 400-plus pages seemed a little daunting at the time, and the copy was

added to my ever-growing piles of books to be read - someday. During the last several months, as I have found myself working from home more often, I have discovered that listening to audiobooks as I do some of my work has been productive, and when I received an email offering the audio version of "Paul" for free, I downloaded it and started listening.

This particular book, as the title indicates, is structured as a biography of Paul rather than a strict theological study of his writings, and Bishop Wright follows Paul's personal journey, focusing on his humanity, the culture and society in which he lived and moved, and his struggles as a faithful Jewish man whose encounter with the risen Jesus changed how he understood his life of faithfulness. As I was listening to a section about Paul's, or Saul's, time in Tarsus, where he returned home for several years, something caught my attention. Wright supposes that this time was filled with not only work, study, and prayer but also interactions with people in his predominantly Jewish community who had not experienced Jesus as he had, some of those whose religious traditions and understanding did not have room for the new thing that was happening and the new community created through Jesus that Paul was sharing. Wright goes on to say that in that familiar community, Paul asking "what it would look like if the One God created a new single family of 'brothers and sisters' in the

Messiah, had potentially revolutionary answers. And traditional societies do not welcome revolution."

Traditional societies do not welcome revolution. This is the statement that caught my attention and one that I have been mulling over for a while. Before we go further with this, I want to be sure we do not think of this in an anti-semitic way, as has too often been done throughout the years. Many individuals and groups of people, not just in the Jewish community, were challenged by and upset with Jesus, his teaching, and how their lives might be changed through the new things he promised. Because much of Jesus' message was directed to the people of Israel, they likely felt most intensely that the traditions they deeply valued were being targeted for revolution, but their response should not elicit from us blanket attitudes of blame or condemnation, nor should the extreme reactions of a few be attributed to an entire people.

Paul's own life is a story of tradition and revolution. As he states in our reading from Philippians, he has every reason to see himself as a model of faithfulness, following explicitly all of the training, learning, and customs required by his faith tradition. He also alludes here to how, in his extreme zeal to be faithful, he persecuted followers of Jesus in the name of that faithfulness. However, after he meets the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus his life is turned upside down, and while "his loyalty to the One

God of Israel (is) as firm as it had always been” (Wright, page 66), he finds new purpose in knowing Christ, and he spends the rest of his days living a very different life, traveling, teaching, writing, spreading the news of Jesus far and wide, producing fruits of the kingdom. Through Jesus, Paul experiences a personal revolution that transforms his life and has very significant impact on the lives of people far and wide, across many generations, to the current day.

Traditional societies do not welcome revolution. What kind of revolution do we have the opportunity to welcome? In the introduction to the book “The Way of Love” that we have been studying via Zoom on Wednesday evenings, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry shares a quote from University of Virginia professor Charles Marsh’s book *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*. Professor Marsh states that Jesus “founded the most revolutionary movement in human history; a movement built on the unconditional love of God for the world and a mandate to live that love.” Bishop Curry goes on to say that “Jesus founded a movement that is revolutionary when it is lived...(a)nd his way of love became (Jesus’ followers’) way of life.”

A revolutionary movement based on unconditional love. Is that a kind of revolution traditional societies, or any other society for that matter,

might be more apt to welcome? Is that a type of revolution we might personally welcome? What keeps us from inviting a Jesus-led revolution into our lives and into our communities?

I, for one, hear the word revolution and am immediately uncomfortable and resistant. I like familiar routines, I'm not big on stirring things up, and I hate confrontation. But when I manage to turn my eyes away from myself and what I want, and instead listen to the cries of the world, pay attention to the stubbornness and hatred that exists, hear Jesus' call to produce fruits of the kingdom, revisit the example of Paul's transformed life and the continued nourishment it yields, and remember that the two greatest commandments we have been given are to love God and to love our neighbor, I begin to see the very real, great need for this kind of revolutionary love and am more open to being a part of that kind of revolution - despite still being very uncomfortable.

What are the ways that you are being called to live the revolutionary love of Jesus? What are the ways we as a church are being led to make Jesus' way of love become our way of life? There is no shortage of people who are in need of love. There are so many situations filled with bloodshed and tears where there should instead be justice and righteousness. Too much that is broken and trampled that could be tended and given room to

grow. How will we welcome the revolutionary movement of the unconditional love of Jesus? What good fruit will come as a result?

During this current time, when hatred and mistrust, contempt and ugliness seem to be filling much of what we hear and see, bringing fear and darkness to our hearts and minds, may we be prepared to invite the revolutionary love of Jesus into all of the broken and trampled places and be ready to make that love the center of our lives for the transformation of the world.