

A Sermon for the 6th Sunday of Easter by Sandra Miller

May 26, 2019



The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Good morning community. Please hear my prayer –

*Let the words of my mouth
And the meditation of my heart
Find favor in your Heart
O my Beloved, my strength and
My joy!
Amen, and amen.*

I take these words from Nan Merrill's version of Psalm 19 in her *Psalms for Praying*, from which I also draw inspiration for the opening of this sermon. Ms. Merrill offers the first stanza of Psalm 67 not as prayer, but as a strong reminder of

the Holy One's power in our lives, and couples that with an injunction, to my mind anyway, that as believers we are charged with responsibility for the spreading of love throughout creation.

Hear her words:

The Beloved is gracious to us

And blesses us;

O, that Love's Way be followed

In all the earth,

Love's saving power among all

The nations.

Today's reading from John stirs my heart with its parting message from Jesus that he offers us his peace, that our hearts should not be troubled by his leaving, and that we should not be afraid. It will come into play in this sermon; however, it is not the focus of the word as I have heard it.

In the reading from Acts 16 we are deprived a thread that links the reading from John, by the omission of verses 6-8, which tells us that Paul and Silas were prevented by God from taking the word to Asia and Bithynia, which were under Roman rule and Roman protection, respectively, and where they would have been far less than welcomed. This follows Jesus' dictum/warning that "Whosoever does not love me does not keep my words", and his sending out of the disciples two by two with the warning that they should shake off the dust of places they were not welcoming.

There is a big however for me in this story. How do I to reconcile the fullness of Psalm 67's prayer that love's saving power will spread to all the nations – a message of

inclusivity to my ears, with God's sending Paul and Silas only to places where they are welcome, and not the places where God's blessings are especially needed? Didn't God, through Jesus, enjoin us to cross all borders? What I hear is, and forgive me for saying so, that God gives Paul and Silas an easy path, and is being exclusionary. Maybe there's a punch line that I am blind to, and that is quite possible as I am far from an avid Bible reader or theologian. But aren't we supposed to put our very lives on the line as followers of Jesus? What about God's saving power among all nations? What about the lection from Revelation that the nations will walk by the light of the Holy City?

The truth is that I can't answer those questions. I am here, and now, in a world that I perceive as broken and hurting, seemingly to the point of eventual demise. Is Jesus' message that God's Holy Spirit will be sent to teach us everything we need to know, counting us as disciples no less than the Twelve enough?

Where do I find the peace Jesus left with me, his peace given to us all? I long to not carry a troubled heart. I long to not be afraid. Where do I draw hope and strength and joy? I can't deny climate change, or rapidly expanding wealth and health disparity, or every bullet and gun made and put into the hands of vulnerable and angry people, or war, violence, and discrimination for any reason and of all kinds. Just as I find temporary balm from this week's readings, I also find moments of hope in the world. I am neither pessimist nor optimist in the face of my own experiences, or the state of the world, but there are moments.

There is hope for me in Lydia's story, but who was she? Lydia was not her name, but the designation of the province she came from, and Thyatira was the city in which she resided. We have to move beyond the mere acknowledgement given her in Acts to answer that question, and even then we do not know her given name. We know that she was a "dealer in purple cloth", though

we do not know if she was a purveyor of the dye, ran a dye house, or wove cloth. Purple was expensive because purple dye came from the processing of sea snails, which had to be harvested, cooked in lead pots, and then distilled to its dye form. In ancient Rome, purple was the color of royalty, a designator of status. Regardless of which part or parts of the production of purple cloth she lent her hand to, she would have been prosperous, which afforded her the ability to relocate from Thyatira to Philippi, making the intersection of hers and Paul's story possible.

Some Bible translations say that Lydia was a worship leader, others that she was among a group of women gathered by the river to pray, keeping the tradition of Jewish practice of having a source of clean running water for the ritual washing of hands before worship. Paul and Silas go to the river looking for a minyan, the requisite 10 Jewish men to gather for worship, hoping to find the man from Macedonia Paul had seen in a vision. Not finding the man or a minyan, they approach the women and speak with them. The Holy One opens Lydia's heart to the teachings of Jesus, and she and her whole household are baptized, and welcome Paul and Silas into their home.

In my reading, Lydia is considered a deaconess (translated as "one who serves), and in the Greek Orthodox tradition and others she is granted sainthood. Quoting from the website of [Saints Mary & Martha Orthodox Monastery](#), "By humbly saying to Paul and those with him 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay', Lydia compelled them to reside at her house while they preached the Gospel in the city. In this way Lydia could learn more about Jesus and His teachings and ask many questions. Her home became the first Christian Church in Europe and a place of Christian hospitality." Furthermore, "In addition to her many business connections, Lydia's ardent faith, sincere prayer, humbleness of heart, willingness to serve (diaconia), generosity, and

following God's will for her life was instrumental in establishing the Christian Faith in Philippi. Only Christ knows what it cost Lydia to follow Him. Lydia did much to set the tone for the Church at Philippi whose members Paul called 'my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown' (Philippians 4:1) and whom he thanked for their assistance." Lydia's story beyond the Bible offers me the opportunity to claim what one woman can accomplish through faith, and shines with hope.

In the time and space that I inhabit, this week I rejoiced in [the story about Ivana Giang, covered widely in the press](#). She is the 2019 Valedictorian at USC. Ivana is a Vietnamese American who, although admitted to an institution whose history is one of male dominated, white conservatism, took an activist role in her freshman year to increase diversity at USC. She had her eyes opened to her own story and strength in a new way in her senior year, exhibiting a willingness to follow her journey forward. She offered an incredible graduation speech.

It's about respecting the narratives of people who have been disempowered throughout history. It's about listening to what they have to say – making sure they have the tools and resources to decide for themselves how they want to live as a community.

Ms. Giang talked about how the biggest distance she has yet to cover is in talking with her family about their experiences of the American War in Vietnam, and subsequently their struggle to find their way in a new land. The non-conversation by immigrants with their children is also my experience. I celebrate with Ms. Giang that she still has the time and ability to have these deep and revealing conversations with her parents and grandparents. This young woman holds hope for me, and her story has some connections to Lydia's story.

Some moments of respite last longer than others, and give me a glimpse into my own story, both to me alone and in relationship to creation. On April 23rd, my friend Rev. Susan K. Smith's meditation for the Samuel Proctor Foundation helped me find a way into writing part of this sermon. She wrote the following:

Spirits must be tended to in order to grow. Every single living thing must be tended to in order to live and to grow; without care, life dissipates. The wind and rain and sun dries (sic) out our skin, and the winds, the rain and scorching experiences in this thing we call (sic) life dries out our spirits. For some reason, we don't take time to tend to our spirits, to keep them in good health and inclining toward the will, the word and the light of God. We expect them to take care of themselves, but they cannot. Without deliberate care, spirits can be covered with the residue left by difficult and painful life experiences. Deadened spirits must be scraped clean in order for new life to generate and give us strength for the journey to keep pressing for justice, peace, joy, and strength...

Our spirits are continually assaulted by the "troubles of the world." The hits we take as we fight for justice for all who are oppressed, beating against thick stone walls of opposition take their toll. We are bruised and battered, weathered and worn, yet we continue to press on. But pressing on with spirits that are covered with dead spiritual residue cannot give their best to the struggle inherent in the work...

Sometimes, we have to stop and scrape our spirits clean. We have to scrape off the residue caused by fear and exhaustion, by betrayal and disappointment, by anger and confusion, and so much more...

We have to agree to remember that in order to have a full life, we must experience death while we are yet

alive, and experience it in a positive way so that we recognize when something in our spirits has died or needs to, and do the work of scraping it away...

... In so doing, we leave our spirits fresh, fertilized with our own joy, and ready for yet another planting of God's Holy Spirit in us so that we can do the work we have been called to do.

Before I go on, I want to interject that Susan writes from a black activist perspective, and I read her meditation weekly because, hard as they sometimes are, she helps to ground me in some of the modest work I think I do in the world. I want to also point out that the start of the meditation is a story about her young son being teased because he went to school without putting Vaseline on his skin. (I am happy to share the whole meditation with anyone interested.)

I have found some ways to scrape my own spirit clean, though I readily admit that my success is always, like the relief I feel in reading Jesus' words according to John, temporary. The most significant way that I have taken that kind of agency in my life was in moving across the country to become a part of this small expression of the Body of Christ. I came to Seekers broken and lost, and have found at least a part of myself and the trajectory of my life through the love and support offered me by this welcoming community. I was welcomed as I believe I would have been to Lydia's house.

Without the Seekers Church community, I don't believe that the other way I've been scraping my spirit would be possible – my journey of continuing healing through art. I have been making art or practicing craft since I was 5 when my grandfather helped me build an airplane out of 1X4s painted orange. I remember taking it to kindergarten for show and tell, and by the time I got to school my palms were orange! I have never stopped feeling that art was a motivational force in my being,

even in the darkest times in my life. There is a longer story here, but suffice to say that I have allowed the circumstances and experiences of my life, and the world's trajectory to deaden my spirit and joy over and over. I've had many false starts to claiming my true nature. Now is my time, and while depression still dogs my heels at every step, and the world is awash in dystopia, I speak with the Holy One every day through art making.

The sculpture that you see on the altar comes from one of my conversations with God. *Lydia/Dolly*, is very purple and the tie-in between God talking to me, and Lydia being a ready and willing recipient of Jesus as her Savior is obvious if you know me. We both came to our true nature in mature adulthood, and we both believe in God. I confess that when this piece first came together, she was immediately dubbed *Hello, Dolly* as visions of Barbra Streisand descending the staircase at the end of the film danced in my head. I don't recall exactly what outrageous outfit she wore, probably not purple...nevertheless.

If I've had the joy of talking with some of you one-on-one or in a small group, you will have heard me say that when I go to the studio where I make the paper elements of my sculptures, I go empty. For me, making paper is an act of praying with my hands, and finding the ways that the various elements want to commune is the continuation of that prayer. Making art for me is a letting go of expectation, desiring a particular outcome, or of producing anything from the process. The prayer is the prayer regardless of outcome. My heart and mind take part in the process, but I have no words to describe exactly how that happens. Sometimes the voice of my old design teacher, Mr. Fox (really) whispers to me about the first assignment in his class that asked me to make paper speak and draw people into the conversation. Sometimes it's the simple gift of somebody's leftover purple paper pulp and how it behaves when I pray with it.

Lydia/Dolly is one of the pieces I've made that holds a

message of healing for me, in addition to the healing in the action of making her elemental forms. This sculpture is about a woman at home with herself, unafraid and out there, and while our styles are very different I feel like there are moments when I am at home in myself, and they are almost always in the act of making art. Regardless of the donation of purple pulp, I believe that *Lydia/Dolly* would have come to be made. Chronologically, she came after several pieces that were about really deep injuries, and like *Lydia/Dolly* those pieces were a surprise to me when I made them.

This is quite contrary to how I spent my working life where outcomes were very measured whether I was a banker, a caterer, a middle management administrator, or a house cleaner. Making art is where I have found the deepest healing, and where I have been, as C. S. Lewis put it, *Surprised by Joy*. These are my most precious moments. In those precious moments I get the story of Abraham as sung by Ruthie Foster for our offertory, the refrain of which is "*when I do good, I feel good, and when I do bad, I feel bad, that's my religion*".

That refrain goes through my head a lot, and it relates to my life of service, and my time making art. Just this last Thursday, I had gotten the pulp vat to the consistency I really like to work with, and when I laid out the inclusions (I love that this word has a place in my making), mimicking some elements I had made before in order to build a finished piece, my work did not yield the result that I expected. I talk often about liking the surprise of watching elements as they dry on a jury rigged clothes line across my living room of an evening, thinking I have a pretty good idea of what they will do. In the morning when I wake up and look at them fully dried, I get many surprises. Looking at the elements I made Thursday I was, and days later still am surprised by joy. It is so very much like life! And so, moments of joy, scraping away at my deadened spirit.

I close with [the quote featured on Friday on *Inward/Outward*](#)

[from Jean Vanier](#); whose hope and light lives on in the world in the work that he did:

The response to war is to live like brothers and sisters. The response to injustice is to share. The response to despair is a limitless trust and hope. The response to prejudice and hatred is forgiveness. To work for community is to work for humanity. To work for peace is to work for a true political solution; it is to work for the Kingdom of God. It is to work to enable every one to live and taste the secret joys of the human person united to the eternal.

Vanier offers us a way to live into Jesus' promise in our time and place that "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." Through Vanier's life example and words, it is left to us to bring Jesus' peace to fruition, each in our own way. It is up to us.

Amen