

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up; like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore – and then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over – Like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags; Like a heavy load. Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes' poem is as poignant today as when it was written almost 100 years ago. This past week we witnessed in the news what happens when a dream is deferred – these days, it festers then explodes. I don't know about you, but I have been stirred up -- deeply unsettled -- over the death of Freddie Gray, who was injured while in Baltimore City Police custody and later died. Following Gray's funeral, protests and demonstrations sprang up across Baltimore. And despite the pleading of Freddie Gray's family no to, some protesters could not contain their rage and chose violence, inciting riots that attracted the media and then, sadly, became the focus of the story.

For the past week I have been consumed with Baltimore and the issues of race and justice – reading every article, on-line post, and editorial, watching the news, absorbing commentary. Unsurprisingly, it has infused my prayer time and filled the silence set aside for God. This morning I want to share some of my reflections with you.

I began organizing my thoughts through the lens of this morning's story from Acts. In the Sundays that follow Easter, we typically read from the Book of Acts, as each story is meant to lift up for us one aspect of what it means to be Easter people – people who live most fully and faithfully in the knowledge and promise of resurrection. Two Sundays ago, for example, Peter preached about *repentance*. Last Sunday, Peter and John faced the consequences of *healing* by unorthodox means. This morning Philip stars in a story about the deepest, most radical kind of *compassion* – the most central, core practice of an Easter people.

In the story, the apostle Philip has been sent by an angel to Gaza. On the road, he meets an Ethiopian eunuch who is on his way home from worshipping in the temple in Jerusalem. The eunuch has stopped by the side of the road and is reading the prophet Isaiah out loud. We are told the eunuch is an “Ethiopian,” which in Luke's world meant anyone with dark skin from the largely unknown lands below Egypt. We know, too, from the details given in the story that the man is wealthy enough to ride a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, powerful enough to have charge over the Queen's treasury. Philip approaches him, and they start a conversation. Now, just imagine that you are this wealthy, powerful, educated officer of the highest court. You are riding in a glorious chariot and reading Isaiah off a delicately copied manuscript. You are pondering the mysteries of God when some scruffy-looking stranger appears out of nowhere. The stranger is running up to your chariot, struggling to breathe, barely panting the words, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

The question is ridiculous, rude even. Though the man should have asked his driver to speed up and leave the breathless stranger behind in the dust, he instead responds by asking a critical question of faith, “How can I unless someone guides me?” The question comes from a place of deep humility and wisdom. He invites Philip into the chariot and listens to Philip tell the story of Jesus Christ. He sits at Philip’s feet and soaks in the incredible tale of love and loss, devastation and the richest kind of redemption. And then, I would imagine, Philip listens to the Ethiopian man, because they form an incredible bond – an unlikely connection that transcends race and class and culture – a holy, intimate friendship that began with the desire to listen and understand, and ends with Philip baptizing the man on the side of the road, binding them together as family, brothers in Christ, forever. The story is, at its core, a teaching about *compassion* – the desire to truly and deeply understand another person. The word compassion means, literally, *to suffer with* – to first understand and then to feel the urgent tug to join our lives together – to walk with, to want to alleviate the pain of the other.

How can we, God’s Easter people, first understand the plight of our neighbor unless we sit at their feet, walk their streets, believe their pain, and trust their experience? How can we do this unless we allow others to guide us? How can we practice compassion unless God gives us the ears to hear and eyes to still and hearts and the urgency needed to pry open our clenched hearts? How can we, unless God gives us the grace and patience and humility to heed the witness of those people the world tramples?

I wonder, what would happen if we exercised the compassion of the Ethiopian eunuch in light of the events in Baltimore this past week? What might happen if we were willing to subjugate our defensiveness, set aside our judgments and pre-determined opinions, resist our apathy, and listened to the witness of our neighbors? I wonder what we might hear. With these questions in my head, I went back and re-read everything I had come across in the past week and had a few important conversations with friends, people of color, in my life. I tried to hard to listen. And this is what I heard:

First, the fact that I can *choose* whether or not to engage the conversation and events around race relations is a *privilege* in the highest order. I think maybe many of us – who watch protests from afar or read about them over morning coffee -- forget that. For those of us insulated from police shootings, chronic unemployment, poverty, and uprisings over racism, we have the power to choose to simply change the channel and focus on something of more immediate import. The capacity to look away is, in and of itself, a position of incredible power and privilege. And that vantage point makes us vulnerable to the lie that what is happening “over there” to “those people” doesn’t really have much to do with us.

I also heard that it is critically important how we interpret and understand *rage*. There was a short piece on NPR toward the end of last week in which a black commentator reminded listeners that language is extremely important, and there is a difference between a riot and a protest. As long as what is happening in Baltimore is being characterized by the media solely as a riot, the commentator argued, the public doesn’t have to listen – it absolves the rest of us from having to listen to what is going on

underneath the actions, it gives us permission to discount the rage and despair underneath that's fueling it. If the story is framed as a protest, which none of the news media is really doing, then it gives us less permission to dismiss and we are more compelled to take notice and listen to what is underneath. At the end of the piece was a recording of a man standing in the midst of a block in which protesters were throwing rocks at police. The man was furious, yelling at a Fox News cameraman, saying, "What are you doing covering what's going on on this street? There's a peaceful protest four times the size on MLK Avenue – why aren't you covering MLK Avenue?"

Dr. Martin Luther King once said: *riots are the language of the unheard*. While his entire ministry focused on change through non-violence, Dr. King was reminding us that those more removed and insulated don't have the right to "check out" in the face of rioting, but are compelled to listen to the depth of feeling, and the message underneath. Rage is the result of consistent, unrelenting dehumanization experienced over time. In her brilliant piece entitled, "Dear White Facebook Friends: I Need You to Respect what Black America is Feeling Right Now," middle school teacher Julia Blount wrote this: *Every comment or post I have read today voicing some version of disdain for the people of Baltimore – 'I can't understand' or 'They're destroying their own community,' or 'Destruction of Property!' or 'Thugs' – tells me that many of you are not listening. I am not asking you to condone or agree with violence. I just need you to listen.*

Finally, I heard, though the concept may be hard to grasp, that we are in this together. Baltimore kids are our kids. Their problems are our problems. We, residents of Twin Cities western suburbs, are not our own entity but rather part of a community – citizens of this beautiful, vast America – and our destinies, our well being, is intricately tied up together. In his seminal book, *Race Matters*, the great Cornel West reminds us: *We must focus our attention on the public square – the common good that undergirds our national and global destinies. The vitality of any public square ultimately depends on how much we care about the quality of our lives together.* West's "common good" emphasis is deeply embedded in our Episcopal theology. In an open letter this past week to the Episcopal Church, Maryland Bishop Eugene Sutton, himself an African American man, wrote this: *Overall, young African Americans are killed by cops 4 ½ times more often than people of other races and ages. We need to remember this statistic, because those black lives mattered – if not to all of us, then at least they mattered to God. Those of us who regularly attend an Episcopal church renew our baptismal vows several times a year. At the renewal, the presider asks the question, 'Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?' To which the people respond, 'I will, with God's help.' That's one of the most difficult vows for all of us to keep in a nation that has struggled with the sin of racism since its inception.* When we look at the events in Baltimore this week, if we strive to listen and understand, we are reminded that at the heart of our faith we believe that our salvation is linked inextricably with others – our salvation is not a solitary exercise between our individual selves and God, but rather is reliant upon our full and vibrant participation in the building up of others, in the care and nurture of the kingdom of God on earth.

One commentator summed up where we are this way: *Here we are, again.*

*The cycle of police violence and public outrage are once again filling our lives. Or I should say that these conflicts are burdening some with the weight of history of oppression, silencing, and violence while others of us have the luxury to see these events as yet another piece of breaking news, here today but gone tomorrow when some other bit of sensationalism will draw our eyes. Here we are, again. And perhaps we are here again because we do not really listen. We gaze at each other's pain and lament, but we don't really see in a way that will shift our vision, clarify our perspective. We hear each other's stories but don't really listen in a way that will change us in a profound way, lead us to question our deepest held assumptions. We post a hash tag but don't embody these digital signatures in our everyday lives.*

What is important to remember is that in the end, it's just not enough for us to watch on the sidelines – the Gospel calls us to a much higher standard than that. Remember that just like the Ethiopian man and Philip, Jesus was always crossing boundaries of gender, religion, race, age, culture, and class. He was always reaching out – listening, working to understand. And in so doing he made deep connections that redeemed and transformed and gave life – that led to change and justice. I hope you will share your thoughts with me about what's been shared this morning, and with each other. Amen.