

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 9, 2020

Lectionary Readings: [1 Kings 19:9-18](#) • [Psalm 85:8-13](#) • [Romans 10:5-15](#) • [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

God Is Very Near

The Rev. Larry Bussey

With all of the renewed focus on racial justice, the personal question that haunts me is, “Am I a racist?” I know that I have benefited from racist systems, but does that make me a racist? Is racism about attitudes and beliefs, or is it about something deeper. It’s an important question to ponder as we work to fight racism and consider what it means for us to truly be a Beloved Community.

I just finished reading *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Coates is a Black author and journalist. The book is a letter to his son about his life and experience as a Black man.

In the book he offers an observation about race and racism that really struck me.

He writes:

“This leads us to another equally important ideal, one that Americans implicitly accept but to which they make no conscious claim. Americans believe in the reality of “race” as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition.

In other words, the reality of race is the ground from which racism grows.

But he turns this notion on its head.

“But race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming “the people” has never been a matter of genealogy and physical appearance so much as one of hierarchy.”

He goes on:

“Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible—this is the new idea...”

Or maybe this is not a new idea. Maybe it is much older.

On the sixth day of creation, God said:

“Let us make humankind[c] in our image, according to our likeness...”

²⁷ So God created humankind[e] in God’s image, in the image of God ,God created them;[f] male and female God created them.

²⁸ God blessed them.

One rich abundant creation, one human family, created in the image and likeness of God.

Racism, I would argue—the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can organize a society—is a reflection of our original sin, our fallen state.

Racism is not the child of race, but the father.

This is a hard truth. I can’t escape racism through my hard work, good intentions, enlightened world view.

But I do think the readings for today can speak to us in our condition and help us heal.

The scene from Matthew of Jesus walking over the water to the disciples on the boat, and of Peter’s attempt to walk out to him is so vivid.

Peter so wanted to walk over the water. He believed he could do it. But fears overtook him and he began to drown.

“Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.

Back in the boat, Peter says, “Truly, you are the Son of God.” That’s a great theological affirmation of who Jesus is, but those may not have been the precise words that came to Peter in that moment.

Maybe it was something more like, “Oh my God, I can’t believe what just happened!” But whatever words he actually uttered, they express the startling realization that God had come near him—it was God’s hand that reached out and pulled him from the waters. God had come near and saved him.

The message in all of today’s readings is that God is very near to us.

In Roman’s Paul cites the author of Deuteronomy who is trying to make precisely this point. God is not far off up in the heavens, not hidden in the depths or across the sea. “The word is on your lips and in your hearts.”

When Elijah escaped to a faraway mountain for his safety, God did not speak to him through wind, or earthquake or fire, but through the very silence that surrounded him. God was so near that Elijah could hear him in the silence.

There is an obvious, but important point we must not overlook as we consider the nearness of God to us.

This is not an exclusive deal.

Just as God is near to me, so God is near to you. God is near to people of all races, faiths and beliefs.

It’s that very nearness to all of us that draws us together. We heard the story of the loaves and fishes last week. The crowds came out to be near to Jesus. Full stop. But as evening came, and as the young boy offered a few loaves and fishes for them to share, they found themselves near to one another, as well, as they shared the meal.

Paul understood this perfectly and profoundly. He understood that God has come near to all of us. And so he could make what was then a very radical statement, and still is:

“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.” It’s a radical statement because the distinction between Jews and Greeks was seen as the natural order. The way things are.

But as God comes near us, drawing us closer, the distinctions between Jew and Greek, hue and hair, must necessarily dissolve.

I started this sermon by sharing my question, “Am I a racist.” What I’ve concluded is that racism isn’t just about personal attitudes or beliefs that I can modify or change. Rather, it is a manifestation of the human condition.

But God has come very near us—on our lips, in our hearts, in the silence—in order to restore creation, and reestablish all members of the human family as defined not by hue or hair, Jew or Greek, but only by our likeness to God’s image.

Our job, as Paul writes, is to believe, to say yes.

It sounds easy, but it’s not, because there is so much noise around us.

As I think about this, I am imagine myself to be like Peter. I am motivated, determined, ready to say yes, to believe. I want to be part of fighting racism, and to helping our community become more and more a Beloved Community.

I am ready to get out of the boat and start walking across that water. I also know there will times when I will become afraid or weak or unsure. I will start flailing. I will start sinking. But in those moments I know I can cry out, “Save me,” and God will be very near, reaching out a hand to pull me up. So the work can continue.

This is our work. Friends, God is very near us.

As the psalmist wrote:

Truly, God’s salvation is very near to those who fear God, *
that God’s glory may dwell in our land.
¹⁰ Mercy and truth have met together; *
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

Amen.