

April 15, 2018

TEXT: Luke 24:36b–48

TITLE: Can I Get a Witness?

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

A little over two years ago, Attorney Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of The Equal Justice Initiative and author of “Just Mercy, a Story of Justice and Redemption,” was a speaker at the Carnegie Foundation Summit on Improvement in Education. One of the points that Attorney Stevenson made that evening and that he also wrote in his book is the importance and power of proximity. He said, “We must get proximate to suffering and understand the nuanced experiences of those who suffer from and experience inequality. If you are willing to get closer to people who are suffering, you will find the power to change the world.”

I would dare say that the entirety of Jesus’ earthly ministry was based on him getting close, being proximate. That’s the lesson Jesus sought to teach his disciples during their three years together—that to get close to others, to treat people as they hoped to be treated, to show love was how people would know they were his disciples—and you can’t begin to love, without getting close.

The Gospel of Luke reports on the night Jesus was taken into custody rather than drawing close, the majority of his followers scattered, or followed from afar. And the day Jesus gave up his spirit and died on the cross, all of Jesus’ acquaintances, including the women who followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance according to Luke. They witnessed everything that occurred, but they were not close. A number of years ago, I was walking right next to someone who was assaulted by a person for no apparent reason. Although, the assailant reached around me to land the blow, weeks later when police detectives came and presented photos for me to try to identify the perpetrator, I was unable to do so. Even those I could not have been any closer, I was unable to recognize the attacker. Therefore, we can assume that the distance between Jesus and his followers from the time he was taken into custody and buried, negatively impacted their ability to be quality witnesses to all that occurred.

Luke tells us, on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb to prepare Jesus’ body with spices only to find the tomb was empty and while there, they witnessed two men in dazzling clothes, who asked “why they were looking for the living among the dead?” The women ran and shared with the eleven everything they had seen, heard and experienced. After hearing the women’s report, Peter ran to the tomb to witness for himself. Later that same day, Jesus joined two of his follower on the road to Emmaus and although they chided Jesus, for being the only stranger in Jerusalem who didn’t know what had taken place there, it wasn’t until Jesus joined them at table, blessed and broke bread that their eyes were opened and they realized who Jesus was. Scripture tells us that same hour, the two got up and returned to Jerusalem joining the eleven and their companions who proclaimed the Lord has risen, and appeared to Simon. The two then witnessed to their experience with the risen savior and how their hearts burned within them.

While Jesus' followers were talking, he entered the room proclaiming, peace be with you! Startled and terrified, the followers thought they were seeing a ghost. It's not unusual for us to be frightened or confused by that which we don't understand, by people we don't know or circumstances that seem unnatural. I dare say that misunderstanding and the inability to draw close is what sparked a firestorm, when it recently collided with accusations of gentrification and the elimination of Blacks from this community. The removal of a sign that made some, including me, suspect of the meaning and intent, was met head on with accusations of racism, elimination and exclusion. Rather than people sitting down and engaging in civil discussion, getting proximate to one another and coming to some understanding, the flames of uncivil discourse across social and other sources of media were fanned.

When we allow emotions, and don't attempt to foster understanding, fear and sometimes negative reactions occur. It's easy to label certain groups of people as lazy, good for nothing or always expecting a handout, when we haven't drawn close or know their history. It's easy to label people as racists and bigots, when we don't draw close and hear their story. It's easy to think a community has become gentrified when we can't easily identify where people with limited income live. It's easier to spew vitriolic rhetoric than to reason together, to compromise and to work things out for the mutual good of everyone.

We are honored to have Mark and Miriam in worship with us this morning. It was their willingness to obediently answer God's call to draw close to those who desired a better life for themselves and their families that resulted in the Frontera de Cristo border ministry and the birth of Café Justo. It was by living and walking with, being in close proximity to the people of God who lived on both sides of the borders between Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico and Douglas Arizona, that Mark and Miriam, their family and co-laborers in ministry were able to understand the needs, desires and strengths of those who are being demonized, denigrated, and characterized as lazy, criminals, and worse. Many ELPC members, by being proximate, have witnessed the plight of the people of God on the other side of the border, and know the importance of supporting fair trade and fair trade plus goods and services that enable people to financially support their families and create a legacy that can be passed down through the generations. Drawing close taught us that, not standing at a distance and making unfounded assumptions.

Bryan Stevenson says: "We must get proximate to suffering and understand the nuanced experiences of those who suffer from and experience inequality. If you are willing to get closer to people who are suffering, you will find the power to change the world." Jesus invited his followers to come close, to look at his hands and feet, and to touch the remnants of his suffering on the cross. The followers were joyfully disbelieving, so Jesus asked for and ate a piece of fish to further demonstrate that he was indeed a living, breathing, eating resurrected human being. Jesus opened their minds with all he had spoken to them before and the scriptures saying: "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and

repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are the witnesses of these things.”

Beloved, we are God’s children now, witnesses of these things, as well. However, our witness is only as valid, unimpeachable and genuine as we are willing to be proximate to people, situations and communities. When we walk with others who are different from us, stand up for justice, equality and equity for the disenfranchised and dispossessed; when we give of our time, talent and treasure to ensure others have the necessities and niceties of life; when we seek understanding rather than division or ruptures; when we agree to disagree without rancor or sowing discord, we are witnessing to the things of God—justice, peace, grace, forgiveness, acceptance and most of all love. When we stretch beyond what is comfortable and known, to enter into someone else’s reality it can be unsettling, and frightening, but it can also be joyful, life changing, and transformative. That’s the message of the life of Jesus, his death on the cross and his resurrection.

Now, can I get a witness?

Amen