

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Mission: The Instructions
July 5, 2020
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Exodus 4:1-9; Matthew 10:5-15

What are we supposed to do with this Jesus? I ask because I don't particularly like this Jesus. I don't like him because he is exclusive rather than inclusive. "Do not go among the Gentiles, or enter any town of the Samaritans," he says, "Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel." This is not the Jesus I want. I want a Jesus who welcomes all in the name of the living God. I don't like this Jesus because he wants us to go out and do Moses-like miracles. "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons." No offense, but this seems to be a bit above my pay grade. Sure it would be nice, maybe to heal those hit by the Coronavirus, but it seems to say we are not up to being followers if we can't do miracles. Next, he tells us that we are not to be financially responsible and prepared for our work. "Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts; no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff." Finally he seems too judgmental. "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home and shake the dust off your feet. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town." I don't like this Jesus. I want my everybody's Jesus back.

What then are we to do with this Jesus? The answer I believe can be found in the one of the most often used monologues of the 21st century; the words we all hear when we board an aircraft. It begins with a welcome aboard, then a note about how to use your seat belts and a reminder of the location of the emergency exits. Then comes this portion of the talk. "This cabin is pressurized. In the event of a loss of cabin pressure an oxygen mask will automatically drop from the overhead compartment. To start the flow of oxygen, pull the mask towards you; Place it firmly over your nose and mouth, securing the elastic headband behind your head and breath normally. Although the bag does not inflate, oxygen is flowing to the mask. If you are traveling with a child or someone who requires assistance, secure your mask first and then assist the other person." The last sentence is the important part. "If you are traveling with someone needing assistance, secure your own masks first and then assist the other person." In other words, we need to be healed and safe before we can help anyone else be healed and safe. Let me explain.

Jesus came to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven, or, if you will, the Kingdom of God. In this portion of his discipleship instructions he tells his disciples that "The Kingdom of Heaven is near." Jesus believed that in his life and his teachings the kingdom of Heaven, that presence and power of God to remake the world was at hand, moving like a powerful wave across the earth bringing peace and justice. Yet Jesus knew that bringing this kingdom was supposed to be a team effort and his partners were to be not only the disciples but the people of God; the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This understanding is at the heart of the Abrahamic covenant, where God tells Abram that if Abram and Sarai will get up and go on a journey with God, that God will not only bless them but will bless all the nations. That through their descendants all the world will find peace and justice. The only problem was that the people of God were not ready. They were ill. They were angry. They were oppressed. They were, in Jesus' own words "the lost sheep of Israel." They were the ones sitting on the plane who could not secure their own masks but needed someone to help them. And those someones were to be the disciples. The disciples were to teach them about God's in-breaking love. The disciples were to heal them as a sign that the kingdom of heaven was arriving. In other words, if the people of God were to fulfill their calling to

help bring peace and justice to God's creation, they had to put the mask on themselves first before they could put it on others and help the world. They had to be healed before they could heal anyone else.

I believe that the same is true for us, that if we are to help bring peace and justice, especially racial justice, then we need to begin by putting the masks on ourselves first before we try to put it on society around us. One of the easiest things to do is to point to the faults of others. Chances are most of us have done this in some way this past week. I know I have. I have said things like, "If only they would do "x" then there would be peace and justice." The problem with only looking out there though, is that it ignores what is in here, in our own minds and our own hearts. It ignores our own culpability in this lack of peace and justice. Bryan Stevenson, whom I mentioned two weeks ago, speaks of the process of bringing about peace and justice. He says that what we as white Christians often say is that all we need is reconciliation. If everyone would just get a coke and teach the world to sing in harmony then we could call it a day. But he says that won't work until several other things happen, the first of which is to discover and tell the truth about our own selves; the truth about our privilege as white people, our own hidden biases and prejudices and our own often unacknowledged and unrealized perceptions about race; meaning we have to put the masks on ourselves first before we can help others establish peace and justice.

This morning then the diversity and justice committee here at Everybody's Church is inviting people to begin this process of putting our masks on ourselves by participating in small groups that will be reading and discussing the book White Picket Fences, by Amy Julia Becker. This book is an easy first step in examining our own perceptions about race and privilege. We are also looking for people who will be willing to lead a discussion of the book...discussion guides will be provided. All you have to do is go to the webpage and there will be a link to a new page about the book, the groups and a place to sign up. I hope that you will prayerfully consider joining us in order to take the first step in our own healing so that we might heal the world. My challenge for all of us then is to prayerfully consider taking this first step, even if it makes us feel uncomfortable in order to open our eyes and allow us to help bring in God's Kingdom.