

WHAT GOOD IS IT?

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, August 30, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Talking Heart-to-Heart in the Car

I didn't see the movie *Selma* in the theater. I waited for the DVD to come out, and so I watched it a couple weeks ago. It was one of those movies that haunt me so, that I end up thinking about it for days and days, often waking up in the middle of the night, unable to sleep with haunting thoughts.

It's a bit personal for me because, as most of you probably know, my family roots go back to being slaveholders in the North Carolina Charlotte-Gastonia area with its cotton and tobacco plantations. So movies like *Twelve Years a Slave* or *Django Unchanged* or *Selma* sort of give me a sucker punch in the gut.

Watching this movie, one scene really grabbed my attention. It wasn't the really negative scene at all. Instead it was more of a personal conversation between Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis, about whom I'll tell you more in a minute. They were in a car together late at night, and they finally had a chance to talk personally. There had been lots of commotion going on the day before with the March on Selma. Bloody Sunday had just taken place, and they talked heart-to-heart in this car.

I downloaded the transcript of the movie and found the scene. Here's some of the dialog that takes place in it. By the way, John Lewis was one of the main co-leaders of the civil-rights movement. They had something called the Big Six, Martin Luther King Jr. being the Big One and five others who helped out, most

notably in the civil-rights movement. Lewis was one of those five. He is the only one of the six alive yet today, and he was voted to be a congressman from the Fifth District in Georgia, which is pretty much the northern two-thirds of Atlanta, and he held that office for nine sessions in nine elections. One other detail is that Lewis is important enough that one of the pens Lyndon Baines Johnson used to sign the voting rights act hangs in his living room.

Getting Beaten up on Bloody Sunday

So John Lewis was at Bloody Sunday, got beaten up, and is now talking with Martin Luther King Jr. in the car:

(Lewis) "When I was working with the SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] on the Freedom Rides, the Montgomery bus reached the city limits. We got off, and out of nowhere from all directions they [the whites] came. There were men, women, kids too. They had just about every makeshift weapon you could think of, and I mean bats, bricks, tire irons, pipes.

"I remember this little girl clawing her nails into the side of my friend Jesse's face while her daddy, her *daddy* beat him with an ax handle. Jesse was unconscious, and they just kept beating on him and beating on him. I [was beaten up and] must have passed out on the asphalt somewhere.

“Next day I found myself patched up and sitting in a church. I could barely hold my head up, but I needed to be there. You were gonna be speaking, and I needed to hear you. And I was feeling down, but you got me up. You remember that day at all?”

(King) “I don’t think we remember it the same way. What’d I say, John?”

(Lewis) I’m about to tell you right now, and I hope you hear me. You said that ‘We would triumph.’ That ‘We would triumph because there could be no other way.’ And you know what else you said? You said, ‘Fear not.’ ”

So I’m [Suggs] sitting there sort of dumbfounded after that scene. And the part of it that dumbfounded me was, here’s a guy that just got beaten up badly. And where he goes for healing is the church.

Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome

Now compare that scene with a book review that I also came across during these last few weeks. Here’s the title of the book – *Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome: A Memoir of Humor and Healing* by Reva Riley. And sure enough, she had been part of enough churches that gave her a new disease that she has now named PTCS.

So Riley is being interviewed for this book review. Let me read four paragraphs to give you a feeling for this disease:

[Riley] “The origins and symptoms are really as varied as the people who are experiencing it. For me, my experience of PTCS was a tremendous amount of hurt, bitterness, and anger. I realized that if I didn’t get rid

of those things I’d never be a healthy person. I came to the point where I needed to take responsibility for my spiritual health.

“I grew up in a pentecostal-leaning evangelical megachurch before mega churches were a thing. I was very much about Jesus. I didn’t really have an identity outside that of being a Christian. That was our whole life, my past, present, and future. My religion was very real to me, and it fostered a very real connection between me and the ‘Godiverse’ that I liked to call it.

Kicked out of Ministry Training

“I was actually in ministry training, and when I walked away from it, it was like my entire life lost its gravity. It wasn’t just a social circle that I lost. All the certainties I had were gone. I didn’t have a support system because I didn’t know where to look for that. It really was a deconstruction of my whole worldview all at once.”

Parenthetically, Riley had said, “When I walked away from it . . .” Actually, she was kicked out. She was voted out by the other students studying to be ministers in that church because she kept bringing up too many doubts. And then, the fourth paragraph:

“It’s really death by a thousand cuts. You find cracks in your faith and you express them, and you try harder to hide them and reason your way out of them. The process was probably a year-and-a-half long before I recognized that what I grew up with was “believe-it-all” or “believe-it-none”

theology. When I realized there were tenets of this faith I couldn't believe in, I didn't have a choice. It was all or nothing. It's not that I left my faith; it's that my faith left me."

So we have two completely opposite experiences. One in which the church was there to heal somebody who had gotten beaten up and one in which the church was doing the beating.

How Do We Find Our Way?

How do we make the church such that it is a place of sanctuary? A place where people go when they are hurting. A safe place.

I am trying not to propose facile answers for you on this question. But I do have an answer that I would like to put before you. To explain it, I'd like you to look at the artwork on the communion table.

There are three representations of Mary on the table. On the left is a lovely carving, would ask you not to touch it. This small statue is extremely delicate, made by a Russian Orthodox man who lives about three or four blocks from here. I had it commissioned. It's an incredible piece of artwork of the Madonna in a classic pose showing her standing on the world, and if you look closely, you'll see her foot on the snake of Eden.

Next to it is another figure of the Madonna, bought from a street vendor in Haiti. It is carved out of stone with no facial features at all and relatively rough-cut. I bought every one that the vendor had for sale, which created an incident when my luggage was weighed before getting on the plane to come home. I had to spread the figures out among our friends so that our luggage would be

okay. I've been giving them away as the years go by.

The third object on the table is a print of an icon from the black Madonna heritage. It is of Greek Orthodox rather than Russian Orthodox origin.

Now the Question I Would Ask

Okay, there are three different representations. You say, "What are those?" and I answer, "Well, that's Mary. That's the Madonna." Now what I'd like you to do intellectually is to examine the difference between an artistic representation of a person and the real person.

Imagine for a moment the real Mary, the flesh-and-blood Mary who gave birth to the Christ child and was standing at the cross when he was being killed. But she was also a wife and a mother of other kids, friends with her neighbors and the community in Nazareth, with relatives scattered about. She was a normal person, with all the flesh-and-blood normality of what a person is versus a venerated representation.

Now look at the image in the middle, the stone Madonna from Haiti. I point to it and ask you, "What is that?" and you say, "Mary." "What portion of Mary is it?" You know a tiny bit about her from this piece of stone, that she had a kid and that's about it, a woman with a kid. It doesn't tell you very much. You know one-tenth of what Mary is by looking at that image. No, one hundredth, one thousandth, one millionth of who she is.

The point is that you know a vanishingly small fraction of what a person is by looking at a statue or by reading a book written by that person or by looking at a photograph or even by considering their curriculum vitae, which is everything they've done academically in

their life. By the time you look at any one of those sources, you know only a vanishingly small fraction of who that person is.

So Also It Is with God

Our problem as a church, in my opinion, is that we think we know God. And therefore we think that gives us authority to say, “Here’s the will of God.” Here’s what God prefers versus what God doesn’t like. But this kind of thinking shows a combination of stupidity and arrogance.

It is stupidity because we really should know better if God is infinite, if God created the world, if God created people. And then to think that we can read four gospels, and oh my goodness, I think I’ve got it. No. We have literally an infinitesimal fraction of what divinity is. And so it’s stupidity to think that we know God when we really should know better.

It is also arrogance because to act on this unjustifiable belief is to say that we know God and we know the will of God. In this wrong-headed understanding, we have made pronouncements as a church over two thousand years. The church as a whole has long thought that the civil rights movement was not necessary at all. Blacks had their place, women had their place, whites had their place, and it’s all God-ordained. It’s the way it ought to be.

Whenever the church has made these kinds of pronouncements over the years, I would venture to say. More often than not, church authorities have been wrong.

Right now we still think that women have one place, and men have another. We still think that straight people have one place, and LGBTQ people have another, and that the center of mass still thinks there is something

wrong with a person having a different sexual identity, something that needs to be judged.

And then people who have been beaten up don’t end up at church for healing because that’s actually where their wounds are going to be opened again. And salt has been poured into the open wounds.

So what’s the answer? Have I painted myself into a corner? What’s the answer?

I would like to suggest a way of approaching any given issue, any given question, any given situation that we come across in life, whatever it might be. We should never ask what’s the right thing to do. We have a history of asking ourselves that question, and we guess and we guess wrong.

Instead, What’s the Loving Thing to Do?

When we ask ourselves the right thing to do, it’s like having a moral compass in which the needle continually spins around and points nowhere in particular. We end up not having a good idea what to do, so we judge people based upon premises that are just plain false.

But when we ask what’s the loving thing to do, our compass points in a fixed direction. We tend to know what to do in such situations. What is the loving thing to do in any given situation? I would suggest replacing What is the right thing? with What is the loving thing? It goes from the head to the heart.

What I hope for is that the church would once again become the kind of place where the person is never beaten up. I’ve served four churches in my life. All of them have had a history of some sort of conflict that has resulted in collateral damage for people who got beaten up.

My Beautiful Vision for the Church

One of the goals of my life is to make sure that the church is a place where nobody, regardless of what they believe, never, ever gets beaten up. Instead, when they have been beaten up, the church represents a place where they can come to heal safely.

“I must have passed out on the asphalt somewhere. Next day I found myself

patched up and sitting in a church. I could barely hold my head up, but I needed to be there. You were gonna be speaking, and I needed to hear you. I was feeling down, but you got me up.”

That’s a beautiful vision for what the church can and should be. And what’s the path to get there? It’s the loving thing to do. Every single time.

Amen.