

Erica Avena
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Romans 5:1-8

A Walk of Faith

Prayer: We who are forgiven sinners turn to you, O God, for healing and comfort. Grant us grace to hear the promise of faith, hope, and love spoken to people of former times and shared again to meet our own need. We seek courage to trust you and to follow Christ as disciples...

This is the season of graduations that didn't happen. The Zoom party; Google hang out gatherings, the social distancing barbecue, the drive by well wishes, the year that we all were interrupted, and asked to re-think everything we do, how we do it, and whether it can be done safely at all. It's the year we have each had time and opportunity to feel sorry for ourselves, for what we wish we could do that we used to do, and we've been challenged to take specific actions to protect ourselves and others.

In this season, commencement walks have been adapted and reconfigured. I used to serve a church where one of the duties I inherited by way of historical precedent, was to speak at the commencement exercises at the nearby private school. I loved that assignment – it's a great moment: they're done with their work, the last papers have been turned in, they've learned new things, struggled with new ideas, ready or not the semester is concluded and the moment has arrived to take their leave. Its emotional. It is an ending, but it is called commencement because although something is ending, something very important is also beginning.

Forbes magazine headlined a recent article "when you can't have all the pomp because of the circumstances?"¹ In the 2020 virtual commencement speeches,

- Oprah Winfrey asked "can you, the class of 2020, show us *not* how to put the pieces back together again but how to create a new and more evolved normal, a world more just, kind, beautiful, tender, luminous, creative whole?"
- Bill Gates said: You can use your voice and your vote to insist on policies that create a healthier, better future for everyone everywhere.
- Barak Obama said: Nobody can tell you anymore that you should be waiting your turn, nobody can tell you anymore that this is how it's always been done. More than ever this is your moment, your generation's world to shape.
- Comedian Chelsea Handler said: "embrace rejection, whether it's from a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a coworker, or a boss. Rejection doesn't feel like something you want to embrace, but rejection is never permanent. Just like success is never permanent, and the sooner you can embrace rejection, the sooner you get through it.

Good advice.

When I graduated, one of our Deans made the point that our shiny new degrees did not entitle us to anything at all, the diplomas we held in our hands – were essentially a hunting license. Certification to go out and find something to do, get involved meaningfully, make new connections – essentially, to begin something. The meaning of commencement.

It is a helpful distinction because it asks us to turn an entitlement mentality on its head and instead ask, (I think he was tired of recent graduates' expectations of good jobs) how can I be of service... in the world?

We don't need to compete, we don't need to posture, we don't need to count our followers, we need to find that place of meaningful service – what Fredrick Buechner described as "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." And that place changes over the course of a lifetime, many times over.

This is the way that the Apostle Paul asks us to see our role in the world, not as entitled, but paying attention to suffering in the world, our own and the suffering of others – and this can set in motion the positive forces in your life. What the Greeks called the virtues.

In Greek philosophy, which is Paul's context, this is a much debated subject: which one is the essential root virtue which gives rise to all the others? They understood virtues to grow out of one another organically – so there's all this language about which gives rise to which. For the Greeks the root virtue is often identified as self-control. So Paul is speaking their language when he says "we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts..." Paul locates our faith in suffering which reflects the suffering of Christ on the cross; and that gives rise to the walk of faith for Christ's followers.

In this season of pandemic and protest I have been thinking a lot about who is suffering and how we support one another in this time of physical distancing. For Paul, the suffering itself isn't anything to be celebrated, it's what we do with it.

One of the voices which has had a big influence on me is that of the late theologian James Cone who wrote among others, the book: *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. He points out how much comfort the theology of the cross has provided to those who experienced the lynching tree. The similarities of experience, the terror and the love for those who suffered, that brings healing to the memory and can move us all forward.

In his introduction to *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone spells out his motivation for writing the book. He writes:

To give voice to black victims, to let them and their families and communities speak to us...I wrestle with questions about black dignity in a world of white supremacy because I believe that the cultural and religious resources in the black experience could help all Americans cope with the legacy of white supremacy and also deal more effectively with what is called the war on terror (xviii-xix).

Cone writes about black suffering for the victims of white supremacy with the hope of the liberation of all peoples. In connecting the cross and the lynching tree, Cone makes the statement that death and despair do not have the last word. The meaning of Good Friday manifests itself on Easter Sunday...²

Friends we are living in difficult days. Important days; days of change and days of opportunities. It is entirely within our grasp to emerge from this season of pandemic and protest, having paid attention to the suffering of the world, and working together, where we are, to make a change.

Good Friday and Easter Sunday are part of one whole. It's a walk of faith.

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The meaning of the cross in black (and white) experience is to neither easily forget the past nor easily move on to the future. The cross offers us a place for openness and community, a place where we can look back and mourn the past together, as Christ mourns with us on the cross. But the cross is also a symbol of hope. The cross of Christ is sometimes hard to look at, not because of its darkness, but because of its light. This important book about the struggle to be both *black* and *Christian* in America is a call for hope and love as blacks and whites move forward dealing with the horror of the lynching tree.³

First Church West Hartford
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

¹Adams, S., 2020, *The Best Commencement Speeches Of 2020*, Forbes, viewed 11 June 2020, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2020/05/16/the-best-commencement-speeches-of-2020/#2d87312773f0>>.

²Taylor, B., 2012, *Review of James H. Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Journal of Lutheran Ethics, viewed 11 June 2020, <<https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/137>>.

³Taylor, B., 2012, *Review of James H. Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Journal of Lutheran Ethics, viewed 11 June 2020, <<https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/137>>.