

Unforced Rhythms of Grace

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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Black Lives Matter. White privilege. Protests. Riots. Racism. These topics and more have recently received a lot of attention, and have led many to engage critical thinking and dialogue, which includes reconsidering titles, names and symbols (such as statues) because of their associations with the legacy of chattel slavery in this country. One such request is now before First Church who was gifted with the land (known as the Goodman Green) across the street from the church. Timothy Goodman gave the land to the church in 1747, and the church leases the land for a nominal fee to the town of West Hartford. A request has been made for the name of that parcel of land be changed to something other than "The Goodman Green" since the Goodman family were slave owners. This fact was amplified on June 19th, at the Juneteenth celebration in West Hartford Center. It was there that Conard High School graduating senior Eshe Griffith said, "in order to celebrate the 4th of July, we must first recognize the 19th of June." A combination of June and 19th - Juneteenth, is often referred to as "America's second Independence Day." The holiday was first celebrated in Texas, where on that date in 1865, in the aftermath of the Civil War, enslaved people were declared free under the terms of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation.

This year, for the first time, West Hartford recognized the holiday. As such, an official proclamation included a formal apology to the descendants of individuals, many of whom died without the title of free person, and acknowledged respect for the individuals as well as their agency as free human beings (posthumously) and recognizes they had a part in building the town's foundation. Individual names were listed on the proclamation, most of whom were researched for the witness stones project. Mayor Shari Cantor closed the event by saying, "we are at the start of the start" indicating that, though this proclamation begins the work, there is a lot of work yet to come. I believe she is right. I know many of us did not even know about Juneteenth. Some of us struggle with the concept that black history *is* American history. We have not had the benefit of learning this more complete picture.

Some of us still insist that "all lives matter" and have not yet been able to understand how embracing "black lives matter" will ensure that "all lives matter." I also believe that God wants us, as members of God's kingdom, to forever advocate for those who are disenfranchised. It seems really clear at this particular moment in time, there is a preponderance of evidence which points toward how our black and brown brothers and sisters have been disenfranchised. We have a choice to make about how we respond.

God is a God of grace. My prayer for us is that we will lean into God's grace as we consider how we respond, what work we will choose to engage, and how we will engage it.

Today's word from Matthew offers us the reassurance that we can do hard work when we are yoked with Jesus, especially when the work is the work Jesus calls us to. Jesus tells us in his parable that the people in his generation struggled to understand what Jesus came to do. He describes them as being "like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'we played the flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn.'" Jesus is clearly frustrated with their lack of understanding and their inability to be responsive to what was going on around them.

The people were fickle, saying John the Baptist had a Demon, and calling Jesus a glutton and a drunkard! Jesus simply stated "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." Another translation puts it this way, "wisdom is made right by her deeds." One commentator believes this refers to the series of deeds Jesus describes earlier in chapter 11 verse 5¹, which demonstrates the core of the gospel Jesus proclaims and enacts: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead raised and the poor have good news brought to them." Matt 11:5 (NRSV) Jesus, the advocate for the disenfranchised, tells us "take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." We learn from Jesus' deeds, his actions.

You may have noticed that today's gospel reading skips over five verses. In those verses Jesus lets fly on the cities where he had worked the hardest but whose people had responded the least, shrugging their shoulders and going their own way. This lack of understanding and proper response is no doubt frustrating to Jesus, since the people do not have ears to hear or eyes to see what is right in front of them. Jesus pronounces judgement and issues some of his "woes" upon them, comparing them with other biblical towns which were destroyed by God's judgment. There is a distinct feeling of tension in Jesus' lament: the people have a reliance on self, and lack understanding for the kind of kingdom God was wanting to establish through Jesus.

At this point, Jesus abruptly breaks into prayer. God's grace... always shows up!

Jesus begins talking to the people again, but now tenderly. Jesus does not tell them there is not work to do, but rather offers these words, which I believe are best translated in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

We have work to do around issues of racism. The town of West Hartford has gotten the ball rolling. The mayor said it, "we're at the start of the start." As people of faith, as followers of Jesus, we have the reassurance that we can do hard work when we are yoked with Jesus, especially when the work is the

¹ (Park, 2011)

work Jesus calls us to... and God sent Jesus to forever advocate for those who are disenfranchised. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear what is right in front of us. Let us strive to understand and respond appropriately.

There are many opportunities to begin the work right here at First Church... participate in our BLM prayer walk on the labyrinth, check out the (G)race speaks traveling sermon series led by Erica, take part in the First Church READS book discussion group about the book *So You Want to Talk about Race*. Attend the GHIAA Zoom meeting this Thursday night to begin together to articulate what it means for us as people of faith to understand and meaningfully confront racial injustice.

How can Jesus offer rest when he asks so much? Lance Pape answers the question this way: "What Jesus offers is not freedom from work, but freedom from onerous labor...The easy yoke means having something to do: a purpose that demands our all and summons forth our best...It means work toward a certain future in which all of God's dreams will finally come true. To accept the yoke of the gentle and humble Lord is to embrace the worthy task that puts the soul at ease."²

My prayer is that we will lean into God's grace and begin the hard work of unpacking racism and white privilege. Jesus has not said we are to avoid hard work, he simply encouraged us that when yoked with him, the burden is light. May it be so.

Works Cited

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² (Pape, 2020)