

TEXT: Jeremiah 20:7-13; Matthew 10:24-39
THEME: We are not to be above anyone, but like everyone
SUBJECT: The word of the Lord
TITLE: I Must Cry Out

Third Sunday after Pentecost
21 June 2020
Messiah Moravian
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The prophet Jeremiah laments, If I say I will no longer speak God's word, within me there is something like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I must cry out. Jesus tells the disciples, "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops." What does Jesus tell the disciples? We are not above or better than anyone, but it is enough for us to be like, equal to everyone.

The coronavirus pandemic has not only magnified longstanding racial inequities in access to health care, housing, food security, income and jobs but also exposed a truth that many scholars, health care professionals and activists of color have forcefully professed in the face of strident denial for decades: Racism literally kills people.

In 1832, a cholera epidemic swept across Europe and the major cities of North America, killing more than 100,000 people and sickening many thousands more. During the epidemic, Baltimore's free and enslaved black population—relegated to substandard housing conditions and subjected to daily discrimination—experienced disproportionate rates of infection and morbidity. By the time the epidemic subsided, free African-Americans, who were only 14% of Baltimore's population, made up 28% of the city's deaths from cholera.

At the beginning of the outbreak, Sister Duchemin, the only member of her order (Oblate Sisters) trained as a nurse, volunteered her services to the poorest and most vulnerable Baltimore residents at the city's almshouse. When Archbishop James Whitfield of Baltimore fell ill with the disease, his staff did not call on the favored and all-white Sisters of Charity, who had formal nursing training. Instead, Sister Duchemin, an Afro-Creole native of Saint Domingue who immigrated to the United States during the Haitian Revolution, was summoned to care for him. She had worked as a private nurse for one of Baltimore's wealthiest families before entering religious life.

Sister Duchemin spent two weeks nursing the archbishop back to health and then returned to her work at the almshouse. She was soon called back to care for the archbishop's housekeeper, who had also contracted cholera. Within 24 hours of being recalled, Sister Duchemin herself succumbed to the disease.

In the weeks and years that followed the subsiding of the disease, church leaders and all but one city official systematically erased the Oblates (an all black order) and their courageous service to Baltimore's black and white communities during the crisis from local memory, championing only the all white Sisters of Charity. In Archbishop Whitfield's will, the slaveholding Carmelites received \$1000 and the slaveholding Sisters of Charity \$500. He left the Oblates \$100.

During our current crisis, black Americans are suffering disproportionate rates of infection and fatality. The Associated Press has estimated that black Americans constitute as many as one-third of the nation's reported deaths from Covid-19, although they make up only 13% of the population. Most brown and black Americans have been unable to exercise the most basic precaution of staying at home because they have jobs that do not permit them to telecommute or are deemed "essential."

St Gregory (c.335-395), consecrated bishop of Nyssa c.371, was deposed by Emperor Valens in 376 and remained in exile until 378, regaining his see upon the emperor's death. Nowhere in the literary remains of antiquity is there another document quite comparable to Gregory's fourth homily on the book of Ecclesiastes. No other text known to us—Christian, Jewish, pagan—contains so fierce, unequivocal, and indignant a condemnation of the institution of slavery.

The text of his homily is Ecclesiastes 2:7, "I bought male slaves and slave girls, and had home-born slaves, too." Gregory treats slavery not as a luxury that should be indulged in only temperately (as might an Epicurean), nor as a necessary domestic economy too often abused by arrogant or brutal slave owners (as might a Stoic or a Christian like John Chrysostom), but as intrinsically sinful, opposed to God's actions in creation, salvation, and the church, and essentially incompatible with the gospel.

In the fourth century, sustaining the economy without slaves was unimaginable. Gregory lived at a time when the response of Christian theologians to slavery ranged from—at best—resigned acceptance to—at worst—vigorous advocacy. Gregory's sister, Macrina, prevailed upon their mother to live a common life with her servants. This may explain Gregory's general distaste for the institution, but it does not account for the sheer uncompromising vehemence of his denunciations.

In 321 Constantine granted the church the power to free slaves it owned and propertied Christians had often made Easter an occasion for emancipating slaves. Gregory was obviously encouraging his congregation to adopt an established custom. He could have recommended manumission simply as a gesture of benevolence in terms calculated better to persuade than to offend.

But his sermon goes well beyond any mere exhortation to the exercise of charity. He leaves no quarter for pious slave owners to console themselves that they, at any rate, are merciful masters, not tyrants, but stewards of souls, generous enough to liberate the occasional worthy servant, but responsible enough to govern others justly.

Gregory's language is neither mild nor politic: for anyone to presume mastery over another, he says, is the grossest arrogance, a challenge to and robbery of God, to whom alone we all belong. To deprive a person of the freedom granted all of us by God is to overturn divine law, which gives us no prerogatives one over another. At what price, asks Gregory, can one purchase the image of God? Can you hear Philonise, George Floyd's brother, asking Congress, "Is that what a black man is worth? \$20?"

God alone possess the resources to purchase the image of God, but as divine gifts are irrevocable, and God's greatest gift to us is liberty restored to us in salvation, it lies **not even in God's power** to enslave humanity. The exchange of coin and receipt of deed may deceive you that you possess some superiority over another, but all are equal, prey to the same frailties, capable of the same joys, beneficiaries of the same salvation, and subject to the same judgment. We are equal in every respect.

As Gregory phrases it, "You have divided human nature between slavery and mastery and have made it at once slave to itself and master over itself." If, says Gregory, Christians indeed practiced the mercy Christ commands of them in the Beatitudes, humanity would no longer admit of division within itself between slavery and mastery, poverty and wealth, shame and honor, infirmity and strength. All things would be held in common and all would be equal one with another.

If the church is truly invested in the flourishing of the entire human family, then it must finally make racial justice a leading priority. It must also begin to understand, says Shannen Dee Williams, assistant professor of history at Villanova University, what African-Americans, especially women, more than any other group foresaw and fundamentally understood in 2016: The violence of white supremacy is never exclusively reserved for black people but always imperils all. If this is not understood, history has already made clear that we will be here again or somewhere much worse.

(The story of Sister Duchemin is from "An Unequal Burden: What a forgotten black nun can teach us about racism and Covid-19," *America: The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture*, June 8, 2020. The story of Gregory of Nyssa is from, "The Whole Humanity," in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics*.)

PRAYER of St Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo.

Here and now—why not?—let
there rise—even as You
provide it, even as You grant
both pleasure and ability—let
there spring, at long last, truth
from the earth, and let joy
in finally *doing* something
settle on us from heaven.

Yes, we have thought good
thoughts, and guessed
good thoughts were plenty.
High time for a little light
in the firmament. High time
we did as we thought, did
as we said. Help us.

And look! New fruit
leaps from the earth,
and this because the earth
is good. May we see
our momentary light
burst forth and—born
of good work and the sweet
savor of contemplation, born
of the Word of Life above—
let us appear as sudden lights,
drawing radiance from the lush
firmament of Your Scripture.