

Transformation by A Thousand Blessings

October 18, 2020

These days, it's very trendy to listen to podcasts. All the time, I have friends and church members ask, "Do you listen to this series or that?" Or they recommend a podcast that has caught their attention.

Now, I could use the excuse of being a new parent, but the reality is, even before we had the baby, listening to podcasts just wasn't my jam. I tend to get caught up doing something else, and lose the thread of the story or plotline. Part of me wonders if this may not stem from growing up in a household of six, where I had to learn to block out the noise around me to get anything done.

In any case, this aversion to long-format podcasts is part of what attracts me to the work of Dr. Bertice Berry, an African American sociologist turned talk show host, comedian, and motivational speaker. Dr. Berry posts videos online of herself telling stories. They're somewhere between wisdom tales and fables. In each one, she starts out, "Hi, I'm Bertice Berry, and I'd like to tell you a story." From there, through her experiences, she offers these incredible lessons of justice and transformation by building empathy, joy, hope, and kindness. She's remarkable, and unlike podcasts, her stories usually clock in at under 5 minutes. Even I can stay tuned that long. Usually.

One that I listened to recently told of Dr. Berry and her adult daughter going to buy new appliances. She started out talking about what a joy it is to be living with her adult daughter again and how much fun it is to be experiencing that her daughter has become a phenomenal cook. They decided they were going to buy new appliances, and that the best day would be Saturday, right after they had offered their regular shift at the local soup kitchen.

Dr. Berry loves to paint a picture, so she reflected on the fact that, often, when they go to serve at the soup kitchen, the guests mistake her for one of them. She says she wears scuffed up sneakers, jeans and a T-shirt, because the kitchen is hot. The food they prepare is exquisite, made with love and nutritious.

So, on the day that she and her daughter were going to buy appliances as they were on their way home after serving at the soup kitchen, they were looking kind of scruffy. Now, if you've ever gone into one of those stores, you know that the salespeople are vultures. They're trained to pounce on you the moment you walk in, starting the hard sell from the beginning. That is, unless you're two African American women who look like they just stepped out of line at the soup kitchen. She tells of how three different sales people approached them...and then quickly walked away assuming, just by the look of them, that showing them around the store would be a waste of time.

It was only when an employee walked in on her day off, saw that they weren't being taken care of, and started chatting them up, that they ended up getting help. In the course of their conversation, the women started talking about favorite recipes and restaurants, and this woman – on her day off – ended up getting the commission on an entire kitchen of very high-end appliances.

You may think the moral of the story is going to be, “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” and indeed, judging by appearances often doesn’t serve us well, but Dr. Berry wraps up her story by reflecting that what stayed with her wasn’t the series of microaggressions of the appliance store staff, but rather what she called “death by a thousand paper cuts.” She says that we all have these stories, stories of how, all too often, people treat one another as “less than” because of how they feel about themselves. Then her voice gets very quiet and she looks almost teary as she says, “you can choose to believe it or not, but black folk go through this on a regular basis, and your one story (of being seen as less than) should give you a window into what black folk go through every day.”

She ends her stories with, “I love you, and together we’re going to turn things around, because you’re listening and you’re learning, because you know how this feels. I love you. We’re going to get there.”

At first, it may not be clear how this story intersects with our Gospel today, but bear with me. The passage I read from the Gospel of Matthew today is familiar to many. Give unto the emperor, or unto Caesar, that which is the emperor’s, and give unto God that which is God’s. Most often when I’ve heard this passage in worship, it has been preached that Jesus is wily here and tricks the tricksters. Since all of creation is made by God, everything belongs to God. The idea here is that, therefore, we are to give everything to God.

This is a convenient message in the midst of a church pledge campaign! And while this is a faithful reading of this text, it’s not where my prayer is guiding me to take us this week. Instead, I remind you of its setting.

Have you noticed how often our Gospel passages start out similarly to the one we read today? “Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him...” Over and over again, we hear of people – Pharisees, Sadducees, sometimes individuals – asking questions of Jesus for the point of trying to trick or entrap him. Even at some points the disciples seem to do this. Over and over and over again, Jesus is buffeted by people, groups, and systems trying to trip him up. Even when it’s not overt, it’s part of the landscape. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus as a tale of a visionary, a peaceful revolutionary, born into a hostile world.

That is so relevant to our situation amidst pandemic and anti-racism and our current politics that I feel compelled to quote it at length: Jesus isn’t just talking about a private spirituality here. The Pharisees’ question is political, and Jesus’ answer is political as well as spiritual. For Jesus, the political is spiritual. People wanted Jesus to take the lead of the Zealot party and lead the insurrection against Rome. Tax resistance would have been the way to start that fight. It would have been the Boston Tea Party of the day. It would have kicked off their version of the Arab Spring.

Reza Aslan’s book *Zealot* imagines Jesus as that kind of leader. But the Gospels are emphatic that Jesus was dead set against that kind of insurrection.

First, he knew good and well they couldn’t win. When Judea started their revolt with a tax resistance in 66 AD, 1.1 million people died, Jerusalem was sacked, and in the end Rome still ruled.

Second, Jesus knew that armed revolt, or any sort of power play, just replaces one gang of thugs with another gang of thugs.

Maybe you get Bashir Assad out, but then you get ISIS in his place. Mubarak out; Muslim Brotherhood in. Muslim brotherhood out; martial law in.

Jesus had a different kind of insurrection in mind. He imagined groups of people gathering together to render unto God that which is God's. He imagined groups of people cracking the shell of the Old World Order by collaborating to live godly lives.

But godly lives are not something you can impose on others. Jesus' movement was about power within each person, not the power of one group over another. That's what the religious right never got. It isn't about a strict code of rules to follow. It's about people caring for each other. It isn't about judgment. It's about grace and mercy. And it isn't about solemn proclamations. It's about meals and stories and unexpected gestures like foot washing that express people caring for people.

Jesus didn't teach an ideology. He instilled an attitude of appreciation, kindness, caring, even humor. It was an attitude that honored the poor and the outcast more than the rich and the powerful.

If one person goes genuinely Christian, just one person, it makes a little difference in the world. If two people who don't know each other go Christian, it makes twice as much difference. But if the those two people come together – as we do in covenant when joining a church – the power multiplies many fold. You get a dozen of those folks and they can go out into the world making a tangible difference in the world. The deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk, and the domination system begins to crumble before our very eyes.

Perhaps you are wondering why the domination system is still calling the shots. G. K. Chesterton replied: "It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried." But we could try it – any old time now. Nobody says it will be easy, but it is the way to life and peace, not just for a few believers, but for the whole of creation.

Friends, our world is in a state of chaos right now, much as it was in Jesus' time, much as it was at the time of the Reformation. There's a theory that every 500 years or so human society goes through a radical transformation. Maybe I'll talk more about that next week for Reformation Sunday.

In any case, like Jesus and Dr. Bertice Berry, so many in our world are experiencing death by 1,000 paper cuts, tons of little blows that build up to become overwhelming. But, like Jesus and Dr. Berry, we have the opportunity to be about something different. Not to trade one domination system for another, not to trade Pharaoh for Caesar, not to trade Assad for ISIS, not to trade hurting ourselves and our fellow human beings in one way for a different way of hurting one another. I may sound like a broken record, but we have the opportunity to engage this pandemic as a wake-up call. Rather than working to figure out how we're going to keep the old system going, my prayer this week is that we will give to God that which is God's – everything – and radically and intentionally work to build lives and systems and a society of mutuality, of grace, a

world that gives us, instead of death by 1,000 paper cuts, life by 1,000 or even 100 million blessings.

May it be so.

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1 Thessalonians 1:1-9, Matthew 22:15-22
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