

Reclaiming My Time

A Sermon preached by Pilar Millhollen, February 18th, 2018

Readings: *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Delores Williams);
2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

I was SO tempted to preach Isaiah 58 today. Let me tell you, when I saw the lectionary for this week had one of my favorite passages – “Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” It took every fiber in my being not to go, bingo, there’s my text for this week! God admonishes the people for forgetting justice and mercy, and calls them to respond to the most vulnerable among them, to get off their high horse and lift up their neighbors...This passage makes my soul sing...but I knew it wasn’t the one. It was too easy, too comfortable to jump into, the message so crystal clear. So taking my own advice from our reflection last week on the uncomfortable search for deepening understanding, pushing ourselves to grow into the stuff we just don’t want to face, I kept listening and reading for where the Spirit was calling me. And it called me right into one of my least favorite books of the New Testament, Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. This was one of the passages allotted for Ash Wednesday of this year, which fell on Valentine’s Day this past week, and as I read it I had a visceral reaction to some of Paul’s words. Perhaps it was because we were in the week of celebrating love, but I did not feel so much love from this text. First of all, this excerpt feels pretty self-righteous. Here’s Paul, who we know to be quite calculated in his rhetoric, shaping his message for each various audience, and he’s saying “we’re putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,” and then congratulates them for “commending themselves in every way.” But things begin to get dicey in what Paul lifts up as this commendation: great endurance – that makes sense; afflictions, hardships – okay, I’m with that, our spiritual journey demands such as these for growth; calamities – yes, I’m still with him, he’s onto something here...and then his tone shifts dramatically. Verse 5 follows, “beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger.” I want to stay with this verse before we look at what follows it. Taken out of context, this verse might very well be a call to the heart of any justice-seeker, particularly those who have put their lives on the line to save the lives of others. I am thinking in this realm, in this month, of James Cone’s writings about black theology and its connection to the Black Power movement. Cone is one of the first contemporary theologians to articulate a theology of black liberation, and did so in the midst of the rise of Black Power acknowledging both King on one end of the spectrum and Malcolm X on the other. In Cone’s analysis, one is not fully participating in the liberation of black folk in this country unless one is actively, ceaselessly, willing to die for this liberation. In Paul’s message, one is not fully participating in the liberation of the oppressed unless one is actively, ceaselessly, willing to die for this liberation. In either case, this necessarily includes putting one’s body on the line. But what does that mean to someone whose right to make choices about their body, their very life, has been hijacked for generations? What does it mean for Paul to commend beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, hunger, in the context of being black and a woman? As Delores Williams writes in her book, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, what is a black woman to make of theologies that claim Jesus on the cross as a sacrifice for humanity’s sins, in what is ultimately interpreted as an act of love? What is she to make of Paul’s entreaty to suffer by choice, when beatings, imprisonment, riots, labors, sleepless

nights, hunger, have never been a choice for her? And it isn't one line here, or another there that hint to a theology of martyrdom. We find a perfect example of the larger message here in verse 6 after Paul lists the litany of violence, sandwiching it with: "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God." Language is powerful, and Paul's language here, which puts such latter virtues in the same category as the former violence, opens the door for an interpretation that creates a space for exploitation without accountability. It has for too long and too often created exactly that space. It is too long and too often that pastors have told women to "bear their cross," to fix what they did not break, to find joy in suffering that has nothing to do with Jesus on the cross and everything to do with a dark history of abuse. This text and others that were written in Paul's name to include the "household codes" of telling women to keep silent in the church, to submit to their husbands, for slaves to obey their masters, have been used to ignore, or worse, uplift the exploitation, abuse, and suffering of black women in the private and public sphere. But what we must reckon with is that the past and the present are far too closely linked. Years after writing his 1969 book *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone lamented that he had neglected to include the voices and lived experiences of black women in Christianity and in feminism. But his lens was and is not uncommon. In our time, from school boards to performing artists to Congresswoman Maxine Waters having to figuratively wrench, grab, pull back her time to speak in the midst of a vitally important hearing on Capitol Hill, black women are in the position of having to unnecessarily demand that attention be paid to their very existence. From second-wave feminism to Malcolm X and King to the academy today, across the board black women are still fighting for a place at the table of liberation. The church, as far as it has come, is one of the places that attempts to provide a space for that which is life-giving and healing of our wounds, and yet men still dominate in the majority of leadership positions in the pulpit and in the academy, black and white alike, while the shadow of domestic violence and the suppression of black women's experiences looms large. It is no wonder then that seminary students still have to be schooled in how to handle violence and other forms of domestic abuse that disproportionately affect women of color in their communities, because it is considered one of the biggest issues that the church still hasn't grappled fully with. But what Delores Williams, Emilie Townes, Katie Cannon, and many others are saying is that we cannot respond adequately to these issues without addressing it from the top. From their vantage point, if women are not given the opportunity to take the lead on these matters, how can we expect to rewrite the verbal narrative and its unconscious counterpart that they are not worthy? Today, my female colleagues in the black church as a whole – many Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal – have yet to see more than a handful of their sisters in senior leadership positions. Those rare ones that are, are statistically churches of primarily white denominations. And excluded from the conversation altogether are the evangelical denominations, including the primarily black Church of God in Christ, that refuse to recognize the worth and dignity of black female prophecy. But, in the spirit of Paul's claim that now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation, they are now reclaiming their time. And we are the ones who are able to listen.

While reflecting and praying on our text and the message that was bubbling up within it, I couldn't speak without the help of my colleagues as *they* are the great cloud of witnesses; *they* are the ones who know that when so many people have so little power for so many generations, surely we cannot ignore the effect of white supremacy upon the

hierarchy that continues to exist for them in a way that doesn't exist for me. I share their words with you now, honoring their requests for anonymity as they continue to work toward a time when their words will be historical and no longer immediate:

"The senior minister called me into his office to discuss the Bible study at our large church. I'd been teaching Bible studies for years before in other churches and am in my second year in seminary, so I was glad to take it over recently. He says to me, 'I'm putting Martin on your Bible study too so you'll work together.' I was confused because I had my lesson plans done, and felt like it had been going well. As we talked longer, and I started to get the feeling there was something else underneath it, he finally said, 'you cannot conduct Bible study without Martin present. Everything has to go through him.' I thought, wait a minute – this isn't about what I'm doing or not doing. This is exactly what I hoped it wasn't – because there are no women in leadership positions here. I couldn't wrap my head around it until after I left, and now I'm going, I have to confront him, and yet I know it's not going to end well." She did confront him, but as she predicted, it did not change anything. She has since left her community for another denomination.

Another account: "Did I ever tell you about how my roommate responded about me going to seminary? So in January of 2012, I told my roommates I was going to seminary. I told them separately. One roomie responded with, 'Well, you know what the Bible says: suffer a woman not to teach.' She and I went back and forth. It pretty much ruined our relationship for a good while. We're cool now, but I never told her how much that hurt me. I had just kind of decided to cut her out of my life. But we've since mended and I think she regrets a lot of her past theological standings. She's moved away from the sort of church she grew up in and now is much more open-minded. But yeah, this mess around women is deep in the black church. And that's why I left Abyssinian. While I was interning there with our other two male colleagues, it was hard to be treated equally to the guys. Often, my work would be presented as their own – one would take credit, while the other who was a good 15 years younger than me, treated me like a peon. But they don't really have any women in leadership positions there, so I knew I needed to leave."

And another account: "For eight years, I belonged to a black church that offered support programs for battered women and hosted domestic violence awareness month events every October. I felt proud. We were doing something in the community. Nothing prepared me to watch a married woman from my church stand onstage and proclaim herself a survivor of ongoing domestic violence at the hand of her husband. She lifted a shaky finger and pointed him out in the congregation. He stood frozen with an offering plate in his hand. Her admission did nothing to affect his status in the church. He remained an usher, just as he had always been."

These voices matter. These voices are our colleagues, our co-workers, our friends, our family members. These voices are us. We must do everything we can to listen when the world won't. We must do everything we can to respond when the world doesn't. In the spirit of the truth, and in the love of freedom, we close with the words of the women who are speaking for those who have been silenced.

(Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjhtUGqFCWg>)