

February 10, 2019, "Launching Out to the Deep", Rev. Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson

Luke 5:1-11, Common English Bible

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One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word. Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch."

Simon replied, "Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets."

So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink. When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner!" Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. James and John, Zebedee's sons, were Simon's partners and they were amazed too.

Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people." As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My mom walks into my room as I pull on white school socks. I am almost ready to head next door to Mfanefile Primary School for morning assembly. “No school, today, Thandiwe.” My mom tells me.

“There is school, today.” I correct her. “I saw kids in the yard. I need to put on my shoes -- Thembi said she’d walk over with me, and I don’t want to make us late.”

My mom takes a breath and corrects herself, “There is no school **for you today**, Thandiwe,”

“What do you mean, no school for me?”

“Someone from the ministry of education is coming today, and you need to be at home. We talked about this -- when someone from the government comes, you have to stay home. They can’t know that you go to a Zulu school -- you’re not allowed because you’re white, remember? We probably wouldn’t get in trouble, but your principal Mrs Khumalo and your teacher Ms. Ndlovu could both be punished. Change out of your uniform, love.”

That was sometime in 1990 -- even though apartheid had begun to collapse, the laws that segregated South Africa were still in place, and I -- a white girl -- could not legally attend the local Zulu school with my neighbors and friends. Apartheid -- the literal translation of the Afrikaans word is separate -- was a system of legally enforced segregation that lasted from 1948 until 1994.

As the only white girl in our rural community of Mfanefile, as a white child living in a rural Zulu community during apartheid, I have always been keenly aware of race, of my whiteness. In the context of South Africa, I knew that there were places and

resources that I could access that my best friend Thembi and her family could not. I knew that my white American family was mostly safe from the police and army, but that this was not true for the principal of my school, my teachers, friends, and neighbors. I learned to fear the military, the police -- the enforcers of laws designed to separate and distance me, a white girl, from the Zulu community that was the only home I knew.

Some of you may be familiar with South African comedian Trevor Noah, and his recent memoir entitled "Born A Crime" -- see Trevor was born to a white father and black mother whose relationship was a criminal offense. My parents, although they were ministers, were never licensed to perform marriages because in order to do so, they would have had to agree to never marry an interracial couple. And this was the 1980s.

My family was forced to leave South Africa and return to the United States in December of 1990. My parents' commitment to living their Christian faith in a way that flew in the face of apartheid, my family's blatant disregard for South African segregation laws finally caught up with us. We left South Africa mid-summer and a week or so later found ourselves in the bitter cold of a New Hampshire winter. We left the only place I had ever called home for a place where people of any and every race and ethnicity could be neighbors, friends, got to the same school, marry and have a family.

But the story of race in this country is not that simple -- it is not as simple as people of any and every ethnicity and race can be neighbors, friends, go to the same school, marry and have a family. Those things ARE true, but the story is more complicated than that. It's messier. I hate to admit -- because this makes me feel so young -- that it was not really until I got to college that I realized that the 1960s were not so long ago.

Not until I was in my late teens or early twenties did it really sink in that my parents could remember the day Dr. King was assassinated. It took a long time to understand that the civil rights movement -- something that seemed like ancient history to me as a young child in the United States -- was something that most of the adults around me could remember. Indeed, in the early 2000s, many of the people who had been young adults during the Freedom Rides of the early 60s or during the heat of the civil rights struggle of the late sixties were not only still living, but had only recently qualified for medicare!

And it has been a difficult process of disillusionment for me to realize, acknowledge and accept that racism -- on an individual and systemic level -- is alive and well in the United States today. It has been a difficult process of self-reflection and realization that has helped me accept that, even with my childhood in South Africa and Zimbabwe, I too am guilty of prejudice, racial bias and racism. Indeed, I am racist -- and I occasionally catch myself in my racism.

It feels like a risky thing to say that. On this second Sunday of black history month, it feels like a risky thing simply to talk about race -- to invite us to look at our history, to invite us to look at ourselves. And it feels like a risky thing to hold up that mirror and look within it. To see the complexity of our history, the complexity of our current culture, which thankfully has changed a great deal since the 1960s but in which systems of oppression still exist, in which race still matters, in which a black or brown child faces struggles that a white child simply won't face. Now this isn't to say that white people do not face struggles or suffer -- it is simply to say that the color of our skin isn't one of the things making your life harder. Yes, even in 2019, this conversation is risky business.

I can't help but think about how following Jesus is risky business. In today's scripture reading, Jesus asks the work-weary fishermen to venture away from the safety of the shore, and risk going back out to the deep. And for some reason they do -- they row out into deeper waters and throw their just-cleaned nets back into the water that has yielded nothing all night long.

The fishermen take a risk. They try again because Jesus has asked them to. They follow the instructions of this strange man who draws crowds and speaks powerful words from his heart about a God who calls us each by name and loves us, a God who cares for the forsaken and forgotten, a God who calls for justice and mercy for all people, a God who seeks love and faithfulness, not power, wealth or fame.

I can't help but think that is what every person who opposed apartheid did -- they kept trying. They kept risking. They kept sacrificing. No matter that they were tired. No matter that their efforts had so far yielded little or nothing. No matter that the task at hand may have seemed daunting or impossible. I can't help but think that this is what every person who worked for Civil Rights in this country did -- they kept trying. They kept risking. They kept sacrificing. No matter that they were tired. No

matter that their efforts had so far yielded little or nothing. No matter that the task at hand may have seemed daunting or impossible.

The names we know -- Rosa Parks and Doctor King -- and the names we may not know -- Rev. Dr Anna Pauline Murray, Mamie Till Mobley, Ella Baker, Ralph Abernathy, Rabbi Israel Dresner, and Joan Trumpauer. Risk takers, rule breakers, people who lived and struggled, and some died that all lives could be valued equally.

And the truth, my friends, the truth is that the work is not over yet. Yes, we can live wherever we want to. Yes, we can go to school with people of different races, ethnicities, religions and backgrounds. Yes, we can love and marry whomever we want without our children being born a crime. Yes, we have had a black president.

AND -- AND Sunday morning is still the most segregated time in our nation. AND mothers and fathers still fear for the safety of their black and brown children. AND in 2017 the median income for white families in the US was 50% more than the median income for black families and 30% more than the median income for Hispanic families. AND prejudice and racism -- individual and systemic -- are still alive and well.

The truth is that the work is not over yet. We need only say the names of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, and Heather Heyer to remind ourselves that the work is still not over.

When we say black lives matter, it is not to de-emphasize the value of other people and other lives. It is not to say that we do not value white people or brown people. It is not to say that we do not treasure our fire fighters, first responders or police officers. When we say that black lives matter, it is because the evidence from our history, the evidence even in our present is that the opposite is true, and we speak in the face of all that evidence. We speak a truth that is not yet lived out in our common lives together. Just as the Hebrew Bible so often specifically names widows and orphans as those for whom society must care -- not because married women and children with parents don't matter, not because men do not need or deserve care but because all the evidence pointed to the devaluing of widows and children. And scripture wanted to point to another truth -- a truth that was not yet lived out in common life together.

And so today, in this Black History month, let us venture back out to the deep. Let us risk seeing the truth of our history and our present. And, though we have worked hard already to make things right, though we have been fishing all night long and are weary, let us too throw our nets back into the water, in the hopes of God's promise of abundance beyond our imagining. In the hopes of true reconciliation. Let us continue to work for justice, for love, for the lives of ALL of God's beloved children and especially the lives of God's black and brown children. Let us confess, as Simon does: Lord, we are sinful people. Lord, racism is alive and well in our country, in our communities and even within our own hearts.

Friends, this IS risky business, but then so is our faith. So is the path of love to which Jesus calls us. As we face the risky business of confession, of living out of love, of the possibility for healing and reconciliation through God, let us take courage, for Jesus' response to Simon is good news for all of us -- "Do not be afraid! From now on, you will be fishing for people." From now on, your efforts will be for your siblings. Do not be afraid. Follow me in the way of love and life -- life abundant, for you and for all people.

Let us pray.

Oh God, you call us into deeper waters. You call us, weary though we may be, to try and try again. You call us to love where we have learned fear. You call us to community where we have learned separation. You call us to risk where we would prefer comfort.

Open our ears, eyes and hearts to hear and receive your call. Give us courage -- help us to hear your call not to be afraid. Empower us to see ourselves clearly, to reach beyond the comfortable and familiar, so that we may be the change that we wish to see in our world.

Help us, in all we do, be led by love, that through love and in love, we may find ourselves and our world transformed. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.