

June 14, 2020 Begin Preparing to Mark 100 Years Matthew 9:35-10:8 Rev. Ross Leckie Caledon East UC

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, tells the story of a young Jewish woman named Etty Hillesum. Hillesum was in her twenties when the Germans occupied Holland. She was not a conventionally religious person, but between the years of 1941 and 1943, as she watched her world descend into a nightmare, she became deeply aware of God's hand on her life. Imprisoned in the transit camp at Westerbork (before being shipped to the gas chambers of Auschwitz), Etty wrote these words: "There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?"

Williams describes Hillesum's commitment this way: She decided to occupy a certain place in the world, a place where others could somehow connect with God through her. She took responsibility for making God credible in the world. She took responsibility for God's believability.

I've been thinking about that phrase all week. *Making God credible in the world. Taking responsibility for God's believability.* How do you feel about that challenge? What kind of reaction do you have to the very idea of going out and "making God credible in this world of ours?" Does the thought of going out tomorrow and starting this venture, bring you hope, alarm, excitement, fear? Does it even occur to us that this could be our calling as a follower of Christ? Is it possible that we are called to make belief in the kingdom of God credible for the world we live in? Not just when that belief is easy, but also — and especially — when belief feels impossible? Our reading this morning and what follows are a significant challenge.

We may be in a bit of a 'bubble here in Caledon East' or Georgetown (in my neighbourhood for that matter) where we live in predominantly white English and European origin neighbourhoods. Lately, through wider church connections I have heard from those with Asian family backgrounds who have been targeted and harassed in the marketplace-blamed for bringing the Covid-19 virus to Canada. People have been made unwelcome on the bus or in the bank lineup, subject to name-calling and accusations. The children of these Canadian-born adults have had to be counselled to ignore the verbal jibes and walk away.

Earlier in the month, Caledon Mayor, Alan Thompson received this message from a Caledon student. "What are you doing about racism in the wake of the death of George Floyd in the United States?" She went on to say, "Racism is also a Deadly Virus." He agrees, that it can be.

Last Monday night, about 40 people lined up along Highway 50 in Bolton waving signs that said, "Black Lives Matter" and "Indigenous Lives Matter." The small group, in support of the global anti-Black racism campaign, received a mainly positive response from the people driving on the busy road — honking their horns and waving. But organizer Keirstin Gajadhar, who also hosted a rally on Saturday, said not all those passing by were happy to see them. She said some people gave them the "finger," shouted obscenities or yelled for the protesters to "go back home." Gajadhar said she has been organizing the rallies to support the global movement. There have been hundreds of rallies around the world since George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, died after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes while Floyd was handcuffed. Floyd had been accused of using a counterfeit \$20 bill at a nearby store.

I grew up in Sarnia, border community with Port Huron, up the river from Detroit, Michigan. I remember, my mother went cross border shopping with a relative to Detroit in early July 1967, just before the race riots there got ugly. As the story goes, they saw evidence of the national guard bringing in tanks and armaments, so they 'scooted back' across the border immediately. Historians note, Fifty-three years ago, "Police brutality and racial profiling were ordinary occurrences in Detroit's African American neighbourhoods. Residents were regularly subjected to unwarranted searches, harassment, and excessive use of force by police, and a few well-publicized shootings and beatings of African Americans by police occurred in the years preceding the riot. All of those factors encouraged African Americans in Detroit to view the police as merely the occupying army of an oppressive white

“establishment.” In such a volatile atmosphere, it required only one provocative act by police to produce open revolt.

So, if you are like me, remembering how long ago that was, you might say, throughout my life this has gone on and it will continue regardless of what is done. Or, you could look at all of the nations around the world who have become aware of the death of one more person of colour, of the way people have seen police relate to marginalized people, to our indigenous people and you might see this as a sign of hope, a possibility of change. Better still, you might get on board to make that change happen. This all relates to our United Church of Canada, which within its Creed says, “...We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others, **to seek justice and resist evil**, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope....”

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus commissions his twelve disciples to liberate and enliven the “harassed and helpless.” Seeing the multitudes of “sheep without a shepherd,” Jesus is deeply moved, and so he tells his disciples, “Go.” Go and proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Go and cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Go and touch. Go and heal. Go and resurrect. Go and make peace.

Go and render believable the compassion of God.

Needless to say, this commissioning is for us as well. Are you scared yet? Hang on — Jesus has more to say. After explaining to the disciples what their task is, he offers them some appalling operating instructions: “You received without payment; give without payment.” Now read on just a bit more, “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts.” “Take no bag, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.” And (saving the best for last): “I’m sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves, so be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. You will be dragged before governors. You will be handed over to councils and flogged. You will be hated by all because of my name.”

Writer Debie Thomas offers these guidelines, they echo the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount

- Prioritize those who have nothing. Go to those who have no one to advocate for them, no one to hear them, no one to attend to their needs. Go to the harassed, the mistreated, the oppressed, and the exhausted. Knock on their doors, and place yourselves at their service. Humbly accept *their* hospitality.
- Choose poverty, simplicity, and vulnerability. Carry no weapons. Stockpile no resources. Have no back-up. Do not parade in like a savior, basking in pomp and circumstance. Lead instead with quietness, gentleness, curiosity, and humility. Insofar as it depends on you, keep, make, and share the peace.
- Don’t be foolish. Be wise. Be attentive. Listen. Know the complexities of the world in which you move. Make every effort to understand what’s happening beneath the surfaces. Be pure of heart, but don’t revel in ignorance, flatten reality, or mistake naïveté for faith.
- When you’ve done all of the above — in other words, when you get all of this just right — expect life to get pretty grim. Know that lots of folks will distrust you. Understand that many well-meaning people will yell and scream at you. Expect to get rejected, called out, wounded, beaten. Don’t be surprised when your life gets uncomfortable. This is what success looks like.
- Do not despair. You are not alone. The Spirit of God is with you, and the Spirit will give you the words you need and the courage you lack. Remember, grace abounds, so don’t lose heart. The one who endures to the end will be saved.

To make God believable here and now is to stand in the hot white center of the world’s pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and injustice, and then sidle away, but to dwell there. To identify ourselves wholly with those who are aching, weeping, and dying. In the case of Canada’s longstanding racial bias, making Christ credible means moving beyond denial, beyond willful ignorance, and beyond the Band-aid approach of “thoughts and prayers.” It means deciding, as grateful

followers of a man of colour who died at the hands of brutal law enforcement two thousand years ago, that we will not tolerate the demon of racism in our midst for one more generation.

Why does Jesus ask so much of us? Because he gave us so much. “You received without payment. Now give without payment.” Maybe, if we can put aside our reluctance and our fear, we will feel the weight, the power, and — dare I say it? — the *glory* of this calling. Jesus calls us only to what we were created for. Jesus knows the cure for our brokenness, our malaise, our boredom, our angst. He knows that when we go out into the world in his name, healing what is diseased, resurrecting what is dead, and casting out what is evil, we participate in the transformation of our own souls. What we’re hearing in these days is the very heart of God within us, deep calling to deep, the Spirit crying out on behalf of a world desperate for justice and mercy. Will we listen?

We as a denomination mark 95 years. We as a congregation, let us work toward that 100 year goal. What can we do and be, to live and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times? Let us take responsibility for God’s believability. We can be that witness in our neighbourhoods and beyond. Amen.

Acknowledging inspiration by:

Thomas, Debie, “I Am Sending You”, Journey with Jesus Webzine, June 14, 2020

Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, p.140-145