

*Called to the Cross*  
**A Sermon on Exodus 3:1-15 and Matthew 16:21-28**  
**Proper 17**  
**Ordination of CeCe Jones-Davis**  
**August 30, 2020**

**Introduction**

Sometimes the stars are aligned. On the day of CeCe's ordination the lectionary gives us two call stories. The Old Testament lesson is the call of Moses. The Gospel lesson is the call of disciples to the cross.

**First Move: God Hears the Cries of Suffering**

Moses has been tending the flocks of his father-in-law. He doesn't seem to be a particularly religious man so far in Exodus. Moses goes farther out with the flock this time, to a mountain called Horeb, the mountain of God.

An angel appears in a burning bush. The only kind of bush that grows in these mountains is a thorn bush. It has flowers like roses and fruit like raspberries.

The gods of other ancient peoples were associated with tall, majestic trees, like the cedars of Lebanon. The God of Israel appears as a thorn bush. God identifies with the lowliness of the people. The burning in the bush is also symbolic of the Hebrew slaves. They are tormented by the fires of slavery but not consumed.

Moses approaches the bush. He is curious. The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes about the burning bush in her poem, *Aurora Leigh*:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
And only he who sees takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

God is looking for a leader for his people. God calls to Moses and Moses says, "Here I am." That is the response we hear in the Old Testament whenever God calls a prophet.

God has a mission for Moses. God knows that Moses has a strong sense of justice. God tells Moses about the injustice that he has seen. God has seen the misery

of the people in Egypt. God has heard them cry because of the slave masters. God knows their suffering.

God wants to give the people hope. God says, “I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them . . . to a land flowing with milk and honey.” The milk was probably goat’s milk. It would mean that there was lots of pasture on which goats could feed. The honey was probably a sweet syrup that was produced from grapes and dates. The promise of a fertile land would give the Hebrew slaves something to hope for.

God invites Moses to lead his people to the land of milk and honey. “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to lead the people out of Egypt.”

It is Moses who will meet with Pharaoh. It is Moses who will bring the people out of Egypt. It is Moses who will act in God’s place to save God’s people.

## **Second Move: A Christ Who Suffers**

The gospel lesson has another type of call story. The disciples have already been called to follow Jesus. Now Jesus tells them what awaits them as they progress on their faith journey. This is masters-level discipleship.

Peter has already confessed, “You are the Christ.” Yet Peter still doesn’t understand what it means to be the Christ.

The Greek word, Χριστός, means the smeared one, to be smeared with oil. That sounds just as strange in Greek as it does in English. It refers to the practice of pouring oil over a king’s head when he takes the throne in Israel. The oil is a symbol that the king will bring fatness to the land.

The Jews hadn’t had a king in several centuries. They longed for a Messiah to rise up and reestablish Israel as an independent kingdom. The Messiah was expected to be a king like David, a warrior king, who could liberate the people of Israel from foreign rule.

Jesus then makes the first of four Passion Predictions in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus tells the disciples what to expect when they get to Jerusalem. Jesus says that it is necessary for him to endure great suffering and be killed, then rise again after three days.

To say “it is necessary” is the divine passive; it means that it is God’s will. God does not want Jesus to die, but it is inevitable that those in power will reject his vision of the kingdom. God gives people free will and they misuse it to keep themselves in power. The God that Jesus prayed to is persuasive never coercive. It is God’s will for Jesus to take the suffering on himself instead of responding in kind.

Peter doesn't hear the part about being raised on the third day. He stops listening after Jesus says he will suffer much and be killed.

Peter takes hold of Jesus and begins to rebuke him. The Greek word, ἐπιτιμάω, which is translated as rebuke, means put a low value upon. It is the same word that is used when Jesus rebukes demons and tells them to be quiet and when Jesus rebukes the wind in the stilling of the storm. It is a hierarchical word. Peter is acting like a teacher to Jesus instead of like a disciple. Peter will not accept this understanding of what leadership is about. He believes that the Messiah will be a great warrior like David who will lead Israel to glory and liberate them from the Romans. The Messiah doesn't endure suffering; he inflicts suffering on the enemies of Israel.

Now Jesus rebukes Peter. Jesus says, "Get away from me. Get behind me, Satan." Peter is trying to tempt Jesus to abandon God's plan, just as Satan did. Peter is trying to persuade Jesus that suffering is unnecessary. Peter is literally in his way to the cross.

### **Third Move: Redemptive Suffering**

Jesus begins teaching the disciples about the cost of discipleship. He tells Peter, "You are not fixing your thoughts on things of God but on things of men." Peter is thinking in terms of conventional human wisdom instead of the things of God. God's way of thinking violates common sense. God's ways are inscrutable. As God told Moses, "I am what I am," or "I will be what I will be." It is human instinct to respond to violence with violence. Jesus is telling his followers that in God's way they will suffer much, they will absorb the violence in their own bodies instead of responding to it.

The way of the cross is the way of redemptive suffering. That brings us to the key verse: "If anyone wants to follow behind me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

Deny is the opposite of confess. After Jesus is arrested, Peter will deny Jesus. One should deny oneself rather denying Jesus, as Peter will do. The Greek word ἀπαρνέομαι, is usually translated as deny; it can also be interpreted more broadly to mean, to disregard or to renounce. To disregard one's self, to put God's will ahead of one's own. It is Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, "Yet, not what I want, but what you want."

Gandhi understood what Peter did not, that it is necessary to voluntarily endure suffering as a mechanism for transforming the enemy. Gandhi believed that, "Real suffering bravely borne melts even a heart of stone. . . . And there lies the key to *Satyagraha*." *Satyagraha* was Gandhi's understanding of the power behind

nonviolence; it means holding onto truth or truth force. It does not apply to just any suffering but to suffering borne voluntarily and without hatred against the enemy. It is taking on suffering that is inflicted upon you in order to rouse the conscience of the enemy. Martin Luther King would later say that this kind of “unearned suffering is redemptive.”

Gandhi writes about redemptive suffering in *Young India* in 1931:  
[T]hings of fundamental importance to the people are not secured by reason alone, but have to be purchased with their suffering. . . . Suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason. . . . [i]f you want something really important to be done, you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man. Suffering is the badge of the human race, not the sword.”

Howard Thurman was a mentor of the civil-rights generation. He led a delegation of African-American ministers to India in 1935 on “a pilgrimage of friendship.” He met Gandhi, who was leading the Indian people in nonviolent struggle for independence from British rule.

Gandhi asked Thurman and his delegation about racial segregation, lynching, African-American history, and religion. Gandhi was puzzled as to why African-Americans adopted Christianity, which was the religion of their masters.

Thurman asked Gandhi what was the greatest obstacle to Christianity in India. Gandhi replied that Christianity as practiced and identified with Western culture and colonialism was the greatest enemy to Jesus Christ in India.

The delegation asked Gandhi about *ahimsa*, which is usually translated as nonviolence, and his perspective on the struggle of African-Americans in the United States.

Gandhi explained that though *ahimsa* is technically defined as “non-injury” or “nonviolence,” it is not a negative force, rather it is a force “more positive than electricity and more powerful than even ether.” It is love that is “self-acting.” When embodied by a single person, it bears a force more powerful than hate and violence and can transform the world.

Gandhi told the delegation, “It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world.”

Thurman went on to dedicate his life to teaching nonviolence. He wrote *Jesus and the Disinherited* in 1949. It was black liberation theology before there was such a thing. Thurman addresses the negative forces of fear and hatred as forms of violence that ensnare and entrap the oppressed. Thurman believes in the more powerful force of love and the willingness to nonviolently engage the adversary, creating the possibility of community.

Thurman says that the act of love as redemptive suffering is not contingent on the other's response. Love, rather, is unsolicited and self-giving. It transcends merit and demerit. It simply loves.

Thurman was the dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University in the early 1950s when Martin Luther King attended seminary there. He preached at chapel every Sunday, with Martin Luther King sitting in the pews. This is where Dr. King was introduced to Gandhi's understanding of nonviolence.

Dr. King, James Lawson and John Lewis made redemptive suffering the cornerstone of the civil-rights movement.

#### **Fourth Move: CeCe's Call**

CeCe Jones-Davis was called to ministry as a child. She was born and raised in Halifax, Virginia. It is in south central Virginia, near the North Carolina border. You may not have heard of Halifax. It is a town of 1,200 people. It is the largest town in Halifax County, so it is a rural area. The town is 62% white and 36% black.

CeCe grew up in St. Luke CME Church in Halifax. CME is short for Christian Methodist Episcopal. It is a black denomination within the Methodist movement. It is conservative.

CeCe says that she learned to recite the Apostles Creed as a child, and she still holds on to every word of that. CeCe, if I had known that earlier, we would recite the Apostles Creed once in a while.

CeCe refers to her call as "an irritating nudge in the pit of my gut since I was a child." She says that she naturally gravitated to spirituality and the inner life, reading the Bible often and keeping a prayer journal. She says she was probably the only eight-year-old excited about the annual three-night church revival.

She tried to keep her passion under wraps, but adults now and then would look at her and say, "You're going to be a preacher." Halo, when your mother was your age, folks were saying she would be a preacher.

As a teenager, CeCe was asking more questions and digging deeper theologically than her church could handle.

She went to Howard University in Washington, DC, a historically black college. Its alumni includes Kamala Harris, Chadwick Boseman and Howard

Thurman. Thurman was the dean of the chapel and taught at the School of Divinity from 1932 to 1944. His visit to India took place while he was on leave from Howard.

School at Howard University was CeCe's time in the wilderness. She says she was thrust on a journey of pursuing God and Christian faith on her own. She worshiped with Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Baptists, non-denominationalists, Lutheran and Episcopalians. She was wandering among the faithful, trying to find her way.

CeCe flip-flopped between majors until she absolutely had to decide. Her sociology and philosophy classes gave her questions room to breathe. She became a sociology major. Her mother gasped and argued that she would have a very hard time finding a job.

CeCe applied to Yale Divinity School and started on a journey to see what ministry could be like.

It was during seminary that she came to understand that her calling would be more than giving sermons on Sunday. She would have to be an engaged participant in the world around her by responding to the deep needs of the poor, the broken and the disenfranchised. She would have to take her ministry to the streets.

CeCe started volunteering at Leeway Hospice, one of the first AIDS hospices in the U.S. She saw that there were people dying in her neighborhood. She got to understand faces and names outside of the statistics.

CeCe applied to and was accepted as a voice student in the Institute of Sacred Music, Worship and the Arts while she was in seminary at Yale. She graduated with a Masters of Divinity and a certificate in Sacred Music.

During seminary CeCe heard a still, small voice saying, "CeCe, what do you do?" She replied, "I'm a singer." The voice said, "Sing for change."

The next day she filed incorporation papers for Sing for Change, Inc., a faith-based non-profit. She began knocking on doors of community agencies for support. She began calling local congregations and asked them to partner in hosting events. She called health departments and mayors' office saying she need money to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS in the black community. As a result, she led many Sing for Change concerts, tested hundreds of people for HIV on church grounds, and raised thousand of dollars for small AIDS services throughout Connecticut.

She went back to Washington DC and got a job in the Obama administration, helping to build international policy at the White House.

Then she discovered a white spot on her elbow. She went to a dermatologist, who referred her to a specialist. It was confirmed as vitiligo, an autoimmune disorder that causes your body to attack its own pigment. It is the same disease that Michael Jackson suffered from.

CeCe started to shut down. She asked, How it could be her destiny to stand in front of crowds if she were disfigured? She asked, How could she tell other people to have hope when she didn't have any hope for herself." She started letting go of her dreams.

She had a twin sister, Lele Jones Sneed, and three girlfriends who refused to let her die. Lele is here with us on Zoom. They called her, prayed for her, reminded her that there was still promise on the inside of her. They would listen to her sob story and then tell her to get off her butt and do something with her life. CeCe calls them her spiritual midwives.

Three other women also played pivotal roles in getting CeCe back into ministry: her co-worker, Nefeterius Akeli McPherson, her sorority sister, Tonisha Bell-Alston, and her hometown friend, Chandra Craig. They were passionate and dedicated mothers and loyal friends. Within a span of one year, they all died of cancer. Their ages were 39, 34 and 51.

Losing these women gave CeCe a crash course in respecting life. She decided to pick up her bed and walk.

CeCe and her husband, Mike Davis, moved to Edmond five years ago. Mike is a physical therapist for the Thunder. CeCe has stayed home and raised her two young children, Halo and Honor. But she couldn't keep away from community organizing. She continued her work with Sing for Change, Inc. She also started the Women and Girls Working Group, an international project to raise awareness about how poor menstrual health impacts disadvantaged women and girls

She also drove by a little church on the west side of Edmond and saw that they were having a Martin Luther King service. She said, "I have to check out this church." She has been with us every since, singing solos and preaching a few times a year.

CeCe learned about Julius Jones here and organized the Justice for Julius campaign that has gotten nationwide publicity to release Julius Jones from death row.

CeCe also found a home with the Disciples of Christ. There was no place in the pulpit for women in the CME Church. She wanted to do more than lead praise songs and do women's and children's ministry. She had been an itinerant speaker in all kinds of churches. Disciples have had women leading our denomination as General Minister and President for the past 15 years. CeCe says she is inspired by Disciples' dedication to social justice and racial reconciliation. She said that our Statement of Identity, "We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world," gives us hope that the world can be whole. She especially loves our emphasis on the table, a warm and inviting place for everybody.

## **Conclusion**

CeCe, you know all about the suffering. You have endured it yourself. You have stood in solidarity with victims of HIV/AIDS and prisoners on death row.

People are suffering now. God has given you prodigious gifts, as a preacher, a singer and a community organizer. Today marks a new stage in your faith journey. You are now an ordained minister.

Your call is to use your gifts and your power for the benefit of people who are suffering. It is a different type of power, a power that the world still does not recognize. It is the power of redemptive suffering.

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