

“Ohio”

Songs of Protest Sermon Series – Rev. Rich Darr

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UMC Geneva, IL

Monday, May 4th, 1970 I happened to be sitting in class at Kenmore High School in Akron, Ohio when the Principal’s voice suddenly came over the sound system. He announced that there had been a shooting at Kent State University – a mere 12 miles away – and that we were being dismissed from class early and should return home. It was a shock! While my older siblings, Dianne and David, were students at Akron University, I did have at least one cousin attending Kent State at the time. When I walked through the door at home, Mom was obviously worked up. She’d heard from her sister, Barb, who was frantic that she had been unable to reach her son by phone at Kent State. Cell phones didn’t exist way back then, so you can imagine my Aunt’s (and the extended family’s) relief when she finally reached her son and found out that he was O.K.

The lyrics of Neil Young’s song haunt me to this day: “What if you knew her...And found her dead...How can you run when you know?”

“Ohio” is a protest song, a countercultural anthem written and composed by Neil Young, in reaction to the Kent State shootings. (1) It was performed by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. This song has been described as the “greatest protest record” of its era. Neill Young wrote the lyrics after seeing photos of the tragedy in *Life Magazine*. A tragedy that occurred during a peace rally at Kent State opposing President Nixon’s expansion of the Viet Nam War into neutral Cambodia, as well as the presence of National Guard troops on campus. Four students were shot dead; nine others wounded. Young described the Kent State shooting as “probably the biggest lesson ever learned on an American campus.” He also revealed that David Crosby cried when they finished the final take of the song. In the fade, Crosby’s mournful words can be heard - “Four!” ...”Why?” ...”How Many More?”

Protest breaks through the pages of the Bible in many places and forms. In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Exodus is one long narrative of Israelite subversion and refusal to work as slaves under Pharaoh, King of Egypt. Another book, the book of Lamentations, is an extended lament, a protest by Jeremiah...Jeremiah...the

“weeping prophet.” Hundreds of years after liberation from Egypt, he laments not the Kings of Egypt...but new Pharaohs...the Kings of Israel who practiced the very forms of violence and injustice that God had freed God’s people from through Moses. In today’s reading, the Prophet Hosea picks up that same protest. And in our Gospel lesson from Luke...Jesus, standing in the line of the Prophets, laments...protests the violence and injustices of his day.

Actual songs of protest are scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The book of Psalms – Israel’s hymnal – is full of songs of lament and protest. Read Psalm 137! It is a chilling song of protest against exile in Babylon. Luke’s Gospel itself begins with a Song of Praise based in protest in Luke 1 – Mary’s Magnificat. There she extols the God who “scatters the proud, brings down the powerful from their thrones – who lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away hungry.”

In today’s Gospel reading, the Pharisees warn Jesus, “Get out of here! Herod’s going to kill you!” and they weren’t kidding. While King Herod is known for his impressive building projects, his infamy for violence and collusion with Imperial Rome is far greater. Here’s a man who executed a wife and two sons...who upon hearing of the birth of a rival King attempted to murder the Magi, and ordered infanticide in the land. This is the guy who had John the Baptist beheaded at a raucous late night party, just to please the woman he was having an adulterous affair with. And now he’s coming after Jesus! Look out!

These individual atrocities were horrific. But even more horrific was “the system” in Herod’s day. We’re hearing a lot these days about “the system” here in America...especially “systemic racism.” And the violence against persons of color built into “our system” over hundreds of years. I happen to be one of a dozen or so clergy in the Northern Illinois Conference selected to serve on our Anti-Racism Task Force’s clergy discussion group. We have our first meeting by ZOOM this Tuesday. In preparation we’ve all been reading the NY Times bestseller *So you want to talk about race* by Ijeoma Oluo, a Nigerian-American woman whose work on race has been phenomenal. (2)

In her chapter titled “What is racism?” she distinguishes between two definitions: 1) Racism as any prejudice against someone because of their race, and 2) Racism as any prejudice against someone because of their race, when those views are

reinforced by systems of power. When we use only the first definition of racism, as any prejudice against someone based on race, we inaccurately reduce issues of race in America to a battle for the hearts and minds of individual racists—instead of seeing racists, racist behaviors, and racial oppression as part of a larger system (a system of power).

In an article titled *That Fox!*, Nancy Rockwell places today's Gospel lesson smack dab in the middle of "the system" of Jesus's day. (3) Here's what she says. "The system' is Herod's savvy and manipulative reign, his power-sharing relationship with Rome, the corruption of taxes by the military and by the Temple itself, the perpetual wealth of the one percent in Palestine who like things the way they are. (Sound familiar?) This system is the problem...Herod has said 'yes' to the same temptations Jesus refused. Herod lusts to rule his world. Herod will control the people by controlling their food. And Herod defies God and the Temple by his actions."

When Jesus calls Herod "that fox!" - the metaphor refers to Herod's ruthless, destructive use of violence to get his evil way. (4) Thus, Jesus sees Herod as a blood thirsty tyrant out for easy kills. Jesus, in turn, uses feminine imagery for himself, the imagery of a vulnerable mother hen, protecting its chicks under her outspread wings. In the overall "system" of Herod's day, Jesus was indeed an easy kill.

Leave it to Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor to spin today's story in a memorable way! (5) She notes: "But a hen is what Jesus uses, which—if you think about it—is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top and kings and scholars land on the bottom. He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first. So, of course, he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: You can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks."

Jesus cried, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem...the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it!" Today, we must ask, "What is our Jerusalem?" Is it our current political state of affairs where there is simply too much corruption at the highest levels of government? Is it our current economic set up that favors the rich and powerful 1%? Or our social structure that continues to struggle with systemic

racism? What about the religious sphere? How do we, the religious- especially us religious leaders...how do we fit into and support systems of injustice? Or do we oppose them? Truth be told, I believe we (the church and clergy) engage in both!

Are we more like Herod the Fox? Or Jesus, the Mother Hen? And where do songs of protest fit in? There is an upside to protest and lament, you know. Scholar Arland Hultgren points out that, "While on the one hand lament and protest express anger and sorrow at the current state of affairs. On the other hand they offer hope...and encouragement." (6) They spur us to action! And as a follower of Jesus, songs of protest, both secular and religious, reinforce my belief that God exists...that God hears our cries...And that God has the power to turn our lamentable state of affairs into something good through us: That is - a just and peaceful world that is secure. Amen.

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- (1) This paragraph is based on the articles "The Kent State Shootings" and the song "Ohio" in Wikipedia.
- (2) Ijeoma Oluo, *So you want to talk about race*, Seal Press, 2019, pp. 26-27.
- (3) Nancy Rockwell, "That Fox! The Temptations of Herod and the Hunger Games," *Patheos*, February 13, 2016.
- (4) John A. Darr, *Herod the Fox: Audience Criticism and Lukan Characterization*, Sheffield Academic Press, England, 1998, pp. 179-183.
- (5) Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, "As a hen gathers her brood," *Christian Century* magazine, February 25, 1998, p. 201.
- (6) Arland J. Hultgren, "Commentary on Luke 13: 31-35," *Working Preacher blog*, February 28, 2010.