

Epiphany 4A
February 2, 2020
1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

INVITATION TO VULNERABILITY

In her novel THE HELP, author Kathryn Stockett takes you inside the lives of black women who work as cooks, nannies, and housekeepers for white families in Jackson, Mississippi, during the early 60's.¹

Narrated by three characters, the book gives first hand accounts of the second class status these women endure from white employers who, while understanding themselves to be superior, are at the same time deeply dependent on the services the women provide.

Two of the narrators, Aibileen and Minny, take us behind the scenes of that racially charged world, and we learn of their personal struggles and losses, their economic insecurity, their fears, their steely resolve, and the supreme effort required of them each and every day to keep their balance while walking the tightrope between the black and the white worlds.

The third narrator, Eugenia, who is white, is an aspiring writer who, returning to her family home after college, engages these women and their stories in ways that are initially self-serving, but ultimately become transformative.

Part of the genius of the book is the way the author shows us the accommodations each of the female characters—black and white—must make as they traverse the well-defined and tightly regulated social world of Jackson, which rewards whiteness, maleness, perceived beauty, and power.

Some of the most poignant scenes in the book, for me, revolve around the interactions between Aibileen and the little white girl she cares for— Mae Mobley.

Whenever Mae Mobley's mother rejects her daughter's bids for love and attention, Aibileen quietly and insistently plants within the young girl the message:

YOU ARE KIND. YOU ARE SMART. YOU ARE IMPORTANT.

United in their vulnerability, the love and affection Aibileen and Mae Mobley share is the underground spring that feeds the hope that racial divisions won't always be written in stone.

Anticipating the day when the little girl will no longer be color blind, Aibileen shares secret stories with Mae Mobley about the goodness and worth of all people hoping against hope that these stories, nourished well, will survive within her.

For a number of reasons, I've become keenly aware of the vulnerable state of things of late—within myself and my family; within our congregation and nation; around the globe.

That awareness has been sharpened by deaths and near deaths that have touched my life and our community the last 12 months; a pattern that has continued in recent days.

- Last week Kevin Klinemeier's mother, Linda, died here in Seattle. (Kevin, Nicole and Esme are back in Kansas right now preparing to lay her to rest on Tuesday.)
- Days later Robin and Collin Brown lost Robin's mother, Anna.
- Yesterday we held LuAnn Baker's memorial—which is where these flowers come from.

¹ Kathryn Stockett, *The Help*. (New York: Berkley Books, 2009)

- Tuesday is the anniversary of Kai's accident—and what we hope will be his final CT scan took place at Harborview Medical Center yesterday morning.
- New medical diagnoses hang over the lives of people we love.
- And to this list each of you could add additional names and situations...and on it goes.

In the wider world, the death of Kobe Bryant his daughter Gianna with seven others in the helicopter crash, while they were en route to a girls basketball tournament, stunned many of us one week ago.

I'm not a huge basketball fan; I have no particular connection to Bryant or the other families; still I found myself weeping for them as if for my own. I can't tell you why...

The CORONA VIRUS is becoming a true global emergency, with nations taking extraordinary measures in an effort to contain it, and the ripple effects of those measures are only beginning...

And I haven't yet mentioned the impeachment spectacle.

I suppose there are some who will come away from the senate trial feeling that democracy has been strengthened, but I don't see how. As a result of the decisions by senators last week and next, American democracy, it seems to me, will become more fragile and vulnerable to abuse than ever.

The last few weeks I've been reading Timothy Egan's memoir of his journey along the Via Francigena—the 1,000 mile pilgrimage trail from Canterbury to Rome.²

As he follows that ancient road through regions of France that, through the centuries, have borne the scars of partisan strife, he wonders aloud how it is that a faith tradition whose founder was called Prince of Peace—could be the source of so much violence through so many long and bloody battles over religion.

Is it any wonder that the people of Europe are less and less interested in professing any form of faith? And that churches and cathedrals are fast becoming relics of the past?

The Christian witness—at least the kind that, flush with power, inspired the building of those cathedrals in the first place...operating as if it OWNED the world—is passing away.

What will take its place?

My two favorite quotes from the book so far come from a section where Egan recalls the energy and conviction of the early Christians before the church became heady with power; before right doctrine and belief, enforced by arms, became the litmus test of one's faith.

Quoting, of all people, Steve Jobs, Egan writes:

“Don't be trapped by dogma, which [Jobs] defined as 'living with the results of other people's thinking.'”³

Egan goes on:

“I take to heart [Pope Francis'] recent advice. 'Allow yourself to be amazed,' he said. 'Because the encounter with the Lord is always a living encounter, not an encounter at a museum.’”⁴

I WANT—I NEED that LIVING ENCOUNTER!

² Timothy Egan, *A Pilgrimage to Eternity: From Canterbury to Rome in Search of a Faith*. (New York: Viking, 2019)

³ Ibid, page 114.

⁴ Ibid, page 115. Emphasis mine.

And it's into this context—our context—of multilayered vulnerability that our readings deliver an incredibly counter-cultural message this morning.

What does the LORD require? asks Micah. Three things:

To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

And Paul:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are nada,

to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might take credit for what God has done.

Finally, there's Jesus:

Where is true blessing to be found? Among the powerful? Among the rich? Among the entitled?

No. It's among the vulnerable that God chooses to reveal himself:

▪ The mourning, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.

And God does so NOT through threats or intimidation; NOT through coercion or manipulation;

NOT by violence or sword; but by becoming vulnerable himself.

As Paul will later say:

He did not count equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, even to the point of death on a cross.

A CROSS?! Yes—the CROSS, as foolish as it seems, is God's hiding place, the place where we meet the GOD-WHO-IS-FOR-US face to face, hear his cries, see his wounds, and learn as never before the unfathomable depth of love poured out for you, for me, for all this vulnerable, aching, heartbroken world.

Later this afternoon a good chunk of the country will be settling in to watch two teams made up of big, powerful men push each other around on a field of grass.

And at the end of the day, after all the striving, the scheming, the cheering, there will be one winner and one loser; the vanquisher and the vanquished. Such is the way of the world.

But, dear sisters and brothers, that is not how the script plays out for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Trophies may be earned, but God's love is not. We can't wring a blessing from God. It simply comes as gift when God, dressed in fool's clothing, meets us where we are; which—when all schemes fail us and life begins to fall apart—is at the foot of the cross.

Love and blessing such as this is not deducible—it doesn't fit our logic.

Like the beatitudes of Jesus, it only makes sense when we trust the one who utters it.

A part of me wishes I could shake this nagging feeling of vulnerability.

But another part, perhaps the deeper part, recognizes that it's while I'm in this space of vulnerability that I am most likely to come face to face with Christ.

Amen.