

## *INTERSECTIONALITY*

Exodus 3.1-15

September 3, 2017, Workers Sunday

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

You know how there are words that you didn't know before or that you don't think of in a particular context and then you hear that word and it seems like it pops up everywhere?

If you have read about the Creativity Expo we are hosting at the end of October, you know that the theme for that event is “the intersection of creativity and spirituality.”

Or if you have been following us on Facebook, you saw Keith Ervin's note in the wake of Hurricane Harvey about an upcoming climate change event hosted at our sister church, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, which will feature “20 workshops on the intersection of climate and social issues.”

When I first met Nicole, I was reminded that some of the most important models of ministry for me are people who knew the intersection of labor and spirituality.

Helen Barrett Montgomery, the first woman elected to lead a major denomination in the United States – *our* denomination – in 1922. And Walter Rauschenbusch, another Baptist, who was preaching and teaching about the social gospel around the same time. Both of them were concerned about exploitation – the exploitation of women and the exploitation of immigrants and refugees who were working, if they could find work, for wages that kept them in poverty.

And do you know what they called that exploitation? *Sin*. Because they knew that the intersection of greed and labor led to a kind of slavery that disrespected the holiness of human beings made in the image of God. They knew that salvation was the intersection of labor and justice.

And then there was Andre Trocme. You might not recognize his name but if you go to Yad Vashem, the holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, there is a whole room dedicated to him. He had been a union organizer in France but later became a Protestant pastor in a small town in south central France and his church and his town helped to save the lives of 5000 Jewish children and adults during the German occupation. When the Gestapo caught up with him, they marched him through town on the way to the train that would take him to a concentration camp. And the villagers gathered along the route to sing: "A mighty fortress is our God."

If you asked the people of that town why they risked their lives to save other people, their answer was: "What else could we do?" Because in their DNA was this intersection of labor and the kind of love that defends those who are threatened by racism and nationalism.

Or there is, Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement. And, of course, the great Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was killed, you will remember, not standing on the steps of the Lincoln memorial giving his "I have a dream" speech. Dr. King was killed when he was in Memphis standing with sanitation workers who were on strike. Dr. King knew the intersection of labor and justice and peace.

Along with Lynn and Joanne and Roxanne, I was at the installation of the new pastor at Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Baptist Church on Friday evening. I can still hear the choir singing "break every chain ... break every chain." And as I sat there letting that music soak into me, I looked across the sanctuary where there is a huge portrait of Dr. King sitting in a library and he is reading a book with "Gandhi" written in large letters on the cover. Because Dr. King was about finding and making intersections in the work of labor and love and liberation.

Or there is one of my favorite movies, a little independent film, *Pride*. It's based on a true story about real people and the intersection of Lesbian and Gay activists in London and striking miners in Wales.

The promo for the movie says: “In this feel-good, heartwarming comedy, two groups seemingly from worlds apart, discover that standing together makes for the strongest union of all.”

That’s how I want to spend my Labor Day.

Frankly, I’m tired of the narrative of polarization. I know America is divided. I know that there is real hatred and real economic inequality and a real impasse when it comes to the various visions for our country. But I’m tired of polarization as some kind of excuse for us to give up on each other.

I want to feed my soul with the stories about intersections – about people finding their connections. I want feel-good, heartwarming stories where two or more groups, seemingly worlds apart, discover that standing together makes for the strongest union of all.

Now that is a very long introduction to one of the most famous passages in the Bible. I’m not going to read it this morning. You can read Exodus 3.1-15 when you get home.

I’m just going to remind you that this is a story about labor. It’s one of the central stories of our tradition and it’s about the exploitation of the labor of one group for the benefit of another. It’s a story about the intersection of labor and liberation or, as our ancestors might say, slavery and salvation.

“I have observed the misery of my people,” God says, “I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters; indeed, I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them.”

That’s the good news, the voice says from the burning bush. The bad news is I am sending you.

And Moses says: “Who am I that I should go?”

Now you can ask this question two ways: (1) who am *I* that *I* should go or (2) who *am I*?

That was a live question for someone who was raised a son of Pharaoh while knowing there was this closely guarded secret about himself; that he was really a son of Abraham.

I like to tell my Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender sisters and brothers that this a coming out story. Moses looked like an Egyptian. He talked like an Egyptian. He acted like an Egyptian. But he knew all along who he really was.

And you might imagine how that identity crisis would work on him. Eventually, when he sees one of his Hebrew brothers being beaten by an Egyptian, something in him snaps. And he kills the Egyptian and runs away to the desert.

And when we find him in Exodus 3, he is far away from the courts of power. He has settled into the wilderness where he is minding his own business, tending his father-in-law's sheep. Maybe at last he is finding himself.

But then there is this burning bush and this voice calling him to go back to Egypt to liberate his sisters and brothers.

“Who *am I*?” Moses says. And God says, “I AM who I AM.” Somehow the answer to Moses' question “who *am I*?” is “I am who I am.”

And, Moses, you are who you are.

You are a son of Pharaoh *and* a son of Abraham.

You are a shepherd *and* you are one of the sheep.

You are the oppressor *and* you are one of the oppressed.

Your life is an intersection of all that you are.

And I am claiming all of it, God says, for the sake of those who are suffering. Go back to Pharaoh and say: “Let my people go!”

Sometimes I look around at the world and find myself asking “who *am* I in all of this?”

Like Moses, I am a child of privilege *and* I know something about what it feels like to be excluded and rejected and the object of hate.

I am called to be a shepherd but most of the time I feel more comfortable with the sheep.

I am an oppressor and sometimes the oppressed.

And God, the great I AM, says: Look, I am claiming all of it – all that you are - and I am calling you to do the work you have to do at the intersection of love and liberation.

I keep hearing that choir from Friday night singing: “Break every chain ... break every chain ... break every chain.”

And here’s the good news: that’s exactly what God is planning to do. That’s the good news. Here’s the other news: God is calling you to do it.

Break every chain.

And today, if in the intersections of your own life you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

The powerful story of Andre Trocme and “the village of Le Chambon and how goodness happened there” can be found in Philip Hallie’s *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (HarperPerennial, 1979).