

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Pentecost 18
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Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and Brother in Christ, his name is Bryan Stevenson.

He is a lawyer. He is a social justice activist. He is a professor.

As a lawyer, Stevenson represents poor people on death row in the South.

As a professor, he teaches at the New York School of Law.

Stevenson has helped achieve United States Supreme Court decisions that prohibit sentencing children under 18 to death or to life imprisonment without parole.

And Stevenson is the founder and executive director of The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), based in Montgomery Alabama.

Through his work with EJI, The Equal Justice Initiative, Stevenson has created the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which honors the names of more than 4,000 African Americans who were lynched from 1877 to 1950.

EJI has two other sites in Montgomery, Alabama, under its umbrella.

The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, offers interpretations to show the connections between the post-Reconstruction period of lynchings to the high rate of incarceration and executions of people of color in the United States.

And, the other site, Freedom Monument Sculpture Park honors the lives and memories of the 10 million Black people who were enslaved in America and celebrates their courage and resilience.

If you are interested in a good video about Bryan Stevenson and his work, I highly recommend "True Justice: Bryan Stevenson's Fight for Justice" which was produced by HBO Pictures.

And if you are ever in Montgomery, you should definitely check out the EJI sites.

PAUSE

Now, in addition to his titles as lawyer, professor, social justice activist, I would include visionary, seer, and even prophet.

Yes, Bryan Stevenson is a modern day prophet.

Now Old Testament prophets, if we didn't know, were very much about social justice.

OT prophets railed against the powers that be, especially with respect to their indifference toward the poor and destitute.

Often the prophets proclaimed God's condemnation toward God's people as a result of their mistreatment of the impoverished, the widows, and others.

So, to say that Bryan Stevenson is a prophet is not a stretch.

He is doing a similar thing, when he is advocating for the poor, especially those who are poor and incarcerated.

PAUSE

During our Civil Rights Tour, our group had the opportunity to visit the three EJI sites: The Legacy Museum, The National Memorial for Justice and Peace, and Freedom Monument Sculpture Park.

We also had the opportunity to hear one of Stevenson's former clients, Anthony Ray Hinton, who had been on death row for 28 years, before he was exonerated.

PAUSE

I bring all this up because I want to share a quote from Bryan Stevenson.

Stevenson said, "Each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done."

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Now, why would Stevenson say that?

Because of the clients he has worked with on death row.

Our society tends to write off those who are incarcerated, and even more so, those who face the death penalty.

But we forget that inmates are real flesh and blood people.

And, furthermore we don't realize but inmates, especially children, are terribly traumatized by prison.

Now, I am not saying then that we open up the doors of all the prisons in this country and let everyone go free.

We all must be accountable for what we do.

But we need to think about what the prison system does to the humanity not only to those who are incarcerated, but also to a society, which incarcerates 2 million people.

The United States makes up just 5% of the global population, and yet the United States has more than 20% of the world's prison population.

Since 1970, our incarcerated population has increased by 500%. It has increased fivefold.

So, when Bryan Stevenson says, "Each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done," he means that the stigma of incarceration follows us around forever, and it shouldn't be that way.

When persons are released from prison, when they have served their time, they should be able to return to society.

And when persons are in prison, there should be some decency of humanity shown to them, because stigmatizing a person so as they believe they are nothing more than a criminal reduces that human being's sense of self.

That is what Bryan Stevenson is getting at.

Each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done.

Each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done.

And this statement applies not just to the criminal justice system.

PAUSE

At our Thriving Together meeting a week ago Saturday, our tour group met to revisit our trip and share our experiences, now that we have had some time to process the tour.

And one of the members of our group told us about his meeting with his teachers at the beginning of the school year.

You see, this individual from our group is a principal at a school, and he spoke to his teachers about the trip we had made, and how this quote from Bryan Stevenson might be applied to teaching.

For it can so happen that teachers will mark this or that student as a “troublemaker” or a “wrongdoer” or as a “problem child.”

And that label can follow around a student from one grade to the next, as teachers talk about incoming students.

And the label can even become a self-fulfilling prophecy, such that a student who is told they are a troublemaker will then behave that way.

And so this principal in our tour group emphasized to his teachers this saying from Stevenson: Each student is more than the worst thing they’ve ever done.

PAUSE

It makes me think of the Gospel text today, where Jesus uses a little child as an object lesson.

Jesus tells us that greatness is not measured by God the same way we measure greatness.

A little child is not powerful. A little child is not great. A little child needs to be cared for. A little child needs to be loved.

A little child needs the concern and support of others.

And to be great is to care for such children.

To be great is to care for people who are in need, like the incarcerated, like the poor and destitute, like the forgotten and unloved.

But it is not about being patronizing, as if we are so good to care for these people who can’t care for themselves.

It is not about treating others as less than human, like we are superior, that we are condescending to help them.

We hardly see the humanity of another when we do that.

No, this text is about hospitality, welcoming those who have no one else to welcome them.

Whoever welcomes one such person in my name welcomes me, says the Lord.

And to truly welcome another person is to see the humanity of another.

This is what Bryan Stevenson is getting at, too.

Each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done.

In other words, Stevenson is telling us to see beyond the wrong that someone has done, and see a person's humanity.

PAUSE

This is what I think Christianity is truly about, Friends.

Each Sunday, we have gathered here.

For almost sixteen years, I have gathered here with you.

And what is the first thing we do?

We have the Order of Confession and Forgiveness.

We confess our sins and we hear God's forgiveness for us through the power of Jesus Christ.

And what is it that we are doing?

We are reminding ourselves, or being reminded by God as the case may be, such that God says to each of us, "You are more than the worst thing you've ever done."

"You are more than the worst thing you've ever done."

In other words, you are forgiven, such we need not have to live with the shame and guilt of whatever it is that we have done.

“You are more than the worst thing you’ve ever done.”

That is the hospitality God shows us in Jesus Christ. This is how God welcomes us to this family each well.

Yes, we have to account for what we do before God.

But then, God, in God’s graciousness, shows hospitality and recognizes our humanity, not showing condescension toward us, but instead forgives us.

This is the hospitality of Christianity.

It is the forgiveness of sin.

Hospitality is the welcoming of another’s humanity into our midst, welcoming a person as fully human, faults and all, and not turning the other away because of the worst thing they ever done.

Seeing others as human beings and forgiving others go hand in hand.

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PAUSE

Like I said, Bryan Stevenson is an amazing prophet in my opinion.

Jesus Christ was amazing prophet.

Both would have us think deeply about what it means to be forgiving and to recognize the humanity of another.

As my time is drawing to a close with you, this is one learning I hope stays with you even after my departure.

It is like that scene from Shakespeare, which I have shared with you at various times in my ministry.

It is the scene from *The Tempest* where Prospero is confronted by the spirit Ariel.

Prospero whose brother Antonio has usurped him and sent Prospero and his daughter away to die at sea.

Antonio then takes over as ruler of Milan.

But Prospero and his daughter don't die, but instead they become marooned on an island.

And through the power of the spirit of the island, named Ariel, who becomes Prospero's servant...Ariel causes a tempest to bring the boat Antonio and his party are sailing in, Ariel causes Prospero's boat to land on the same island.

Prospero is now able to plan his revenge, but then Ariel says to Prospero, "You know, if you could only see your brother on the other part of the island, if you could see how he has changed...you would have a change of heart, you would reconsider your plan to revenge yourself."

And Prospero says, "What do you know of it, spirit? Were you usurped by your brother? Were you cast off in a boat, left to die at sea? Your daughter left to die at sea? Do you really think you'd show mercy if you were in my shoes?"

And Ariel responds saying, "I would, I would show mercy if I were in your shoes. If I myself were human."

And this then is Shakespeare's definition of what it is to be human.

It is to be forgiving. It is to welcome the other with mercy. It is to see the humanity of the other.

And at the end of Shakespeare's play, the brothers then are reconciled.

To see beyond the worst thing another person has done.

Every human being is more than their worst fault.

We are more than our worst fault.

To believe this is to be free of our guilt and shame.

Thanks be to God. Amen.