

In a Time Such as This...MnMN – October 7, 2021

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I am very glad and grateful to be here with you today, among many friends. Its too bad that I couldn't physically be on the ground Minnesota for this event. The last time I was there, I taught a seminary class for my organization, then known as Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE) of which, Luther Seminary was a member. The course was based in the context of the city. The first thing we do is to send our students into the city, to its neighborhoods, its back alleys, bars, police stations, hospital Emergency Rooms, bus stations, homeless shelters and inner-city churches, where they would listen to and learn from the questions and the struggles of real people in the city.

I remember vividly our visit to Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. Students dispersed and went to different areas in groups of two or three. I was with a group that met people sheltering under the expressway overpass, at an outdoor bazaar, and a lot of diverse people on the street. We visited a mosque whose congregation was from all over the world, and Trinity Lutheran Congregation, (shout out to Rev. Jane Bucklee-Farlee) whose ministry in that neighborhood is highly commendable.

For our students, theology begins not by digesting Augustine, Luther or Wesley but by listening to the real questions and struggles of the people on the ground. "I don't have anything to eat," "I don't have a place to sleep tonight," "my daughter is very sick," "I can't breathe!" They learn that they, the pastors, who are supposed to help, are often helpless. They can't just say, I'll pray for you, and leave. They needed to stay with the pain, struggle with it, bend with it, be broken by it, be transformed by it. It is in that struggle, in that expression of solidarity with those in the margins, that theology begins. This is our motto: Listening to, Learning from and Living in deep solidarity with those in the Margins.

Here's my suggestion for the word we hear today: "I can't breathe!" I say that not just because I am speaking to a MN audience. For example, today over 700,000 people have died of Covid in the US. The numbers roll off our tongues now. But if you stop to think about it, each number represents a real person and a family. There's an empty chair at the dinner table, or an empty space on the bed. Someone's life is empty because a spouse, a mother, father, a child, a grandparent, friend or colleague is gone, GONE! Each, a person with dreams and ambitions and potential for greatness.

What is the most heart-rending about this dreadful disease is that people die alone, without a spouse, a child, a parent or other loved one to hold their hand, to listen to their last words, to assure them of their love, to pray with them. Nurses, doctors and health care workers -- God bless them -- it is unbelievable that nurses have to bring an ipad so those who are dying, so they can say good bye to their family on Facetime. Many die connected to ventilators. When they cry out "I can't breathe," they hook them up so that a ventilator can breathe for them, and most people don't come out of that alive.

Then there are massive forest fires still burning in California. Towns and villages are abandoned -- houses, schools, hospitals burned to the ground. Many have died, and others running for their lives. The dystopian image you might see in apocalyptic movies where the afternoon sky is ominously orange and the air is filled with ash has come true. People cry out: "I can't breathe!" Then there are hurricanes that have become incredibly strong and come with increasing frequency because of the rising ocean temperatures. They are devastating low-lying communities. And you know who typically live in low-lying communities? Poor people. They are drowning. They gasp for breath, crying "I can't breathe!"

And then there was George Floyd. Some of you may have been right there in that neighborhood. I know, we were all sick to our stomachs when we saw the video of the George Floyd's killing. This was a lynching, of course, and since then there have been many more. If any of us had the impression that we had left that era of U.S. history behind us, this makes it clear. We haven't. White supremacy is alive and

deadlier than ever. How many others: like Eric Garner, a father of 4 children, who because of his poverty, was selling single cigarettes at a street corner in New York, was put on a choke hold until he cried "I can't breathe!" He too died, right there, on that sidewalk.

After 40 years of SCUPE, in 2016 we expanded our mission and named ourselves OMNIA, a Latin word meaning All. We asked the same question you are asking: "For a time such as this," a phrase that comes from this fabulous story of Esther in the Hebrew scriptures. I encourage you to read it, because I have time only to give this brief synopsis: A young Jewish woman named Hadessah, who because of her beauty, and because she hid her identity, become the queen of the Persian king. She moved from a place of marginality to privilege. When a high official issued an edict to kill all the Jews, Esther found herself in an untenable position: If she maintains her secrecy to maintain her privilege, will she survive even though her people will perish? If she comes out of her closet, admits to who she is and pleads with the king on behalf her people, will she be able to save them, or will she be killed? The call that comes to her is this. Esther, perhaps you've been called into the kings' house for just such a time as this."

We are like Esther. We live in the king's house, in the place of privilege, in the heart of the Empire. Some of us come out of places of margins into places of privilege. We who want to live in deep solidarity with those in the margins must ask: Are we placed here for just such a time as this? To acknowledge our marginality, and represent as forcefully and faithfully as possible, the voice of our marginality to those in power? Can interfaith organizations, speak forcefully to those in power? Can we act to bring about just and peaceful outcomes?

We decided that we are going to build Interfaith Peacemaker Teams. We brought two disciplines together: interreligious dialogue and community organizing, two disciplines that you all in Minnesota know well.

First we went to Northeastern Nigeria where religious extremism is a serious issue. With our local partners there were some of the toughest, most courageous, no-nonsense women and men. An Interfaith Peacemaker Teams has 20 people, many religious leaders, clergy and lay, women and men, some in leadership of large congregations, who come together not because someone told them to, but because they are outraged by their suffering. They are exhausted. They are tired of their religion's legitimization of violence, or their received theology's exclusivism and superiority. So, Muslims and Christians come together. They are revolutionizing the place.

In a tough, highly agitational training, they learn to collaborate with each other, listen to those in the margins, build power and act strategically. They have no time for playing games. They learn to have a clear eyed and hardnosed evaluation of the power they have. The people in their communities may have a self interest around a large problem. But the Team knows to cut a thin slice of that large cake – one that is urgent, relevant and winnable. Because each small victory leads to greater power, and thereby to larger victories. They learn to be sharply focused. They are disciplined peacemakers.

In Gombe State, a Muslim and Christian woman had a one on one conversation and decided that they would get other women in their village to do the same. Three months later, there were 11 pairs of women, 10 months later, 120 women crowded into a room to tell me what they were doing and to plan for the next steps. In February of 2019, when Nigeria had a general election, the women decided that there will be no election violence in a village that always saw election related violence. They held a community feast. 2000 women turned up. All of them made a commitment that day that they will put pressure on their husbands and sons from engaging in election violence. If they don't they will strike. There was no election related violence in that village.

In Bangladesh, a Dalit Hindu woman leads an IP Team in Swami Ramdass temple in the slums of Old Dhaka. She takes inspiration from a 17th century Swami who stood against caste discrimination and equal rights for women. She and the IP Team who are mostly Dalit Hindu women took on the question

of child marriage. When a young girl was about to be given in marriage, they intervened with the village elders. They held protests, marches, and they brought in another IP Team made up of lawyers, who said to the family that they will sue, if they go through with this.

There are lots of stories, but not enough time. Suffice it to say, we now have 166 IP Teams in Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Uganda and now, a global virtual team. We have now trained over 3500 peacemakers. Over a period of time, we hope to significantly multiply IP Teams. Our theory is that when people begin to see that interfaith collaboration leads to effective justice-oriented results, the culture will shift from one that affirms or even tolerates extremism, to one that affirms pluralism. In time, IP Teams will come together to do a bigger project. In time, as the numbers get bigger, we will make a larger impact. We now have invitations from India, Brazil, DRC, Rwanda and South Africa. We'll get to these as soon as Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.

We are together in this: looking for a way we can be faithful, courageous and powerful voices and actors for a time such as this. If our theologies arise from the ground up, we will have opportunities for collaboration, power building and strategic action for justice and peace.