

“Healing Our Community”
by Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage
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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

As you know, I spend a week on the Pine Ridge Oglala Lakota Reservation about every other year to work with a group named Re-Member. Every evening, we gather in a community room to learn from Lakota elders and leaders. One year, in particular, this learning was very hard for me. The week started with a wonderful speaker and political activist who I had heard before, Ineela Wakan. I had been looking forward to hearing him again because I had learned a great deal from him about the more recent history of his people. But on that day, he came into the room in a towering rage that seemed barely held in check. He had come that day from the house of a family where a teenage girl had committed suicide.

It turned out that that year there had been a wave of suicides among the children and teenagers on the reservation and the grief and anger felt by the community was impossible to describe. Every day that week, another speaker came in and talked to us about these suicides—the feelings of their young people that the situation on the Rez was just so horribly bad, that the violence, discrimination, and hopelessness in their lives were so impossible to endure that there was no point in living anymore. It was very, very difficult to hear.

The anger of the speakers about this was startling and palpable. Although it clearly was not directed at us, we still felt that mix of emotions you feel when you are in a room with someone who loses their temper. You have felt that, right? That anger just pours out of the person and at first you feel kind of uncomfortable. Then, maybe you start to feel a little guilty. Then, if it keeps going on, you maybe start to feel angry that you were made to feel guilty. Or maybe you feel a deep sadness, or a sympathetic anger. Or maybe you start to feel just as helpless as the person who is speaking, and you get that horrible feeling in the pit of your stomach or your heart.

Many of us felt particularly guilty because, even though the speakers weren’t telling us that the deaths of their children was our fault, they did talk a lot about the ways that U.S. citizens, particularly white people, had destroyed their people, their way of life, and were, ultimately the cause of their children’s hopelessness. Most of us there were white and all of us were U.S. citizens. We all felt somewhat responsible. Many of us left Pine Ridge that week wondering why we had gone on the trip. What is the purpose of going to such a hopeless place? And what are we supposed to do with so much anger?

As I thought about these questions, I thought about the constant grief the Lakota people must suffer, constantly being subject to discrimination from their white neighbors and constantly seeing the systematic destruction of their culture. And I know, from losses in my own life that there is that time, that moment when grief is so bad, it’s so horrific and so...huge...you can’t

imagine that the entire world can't see it on your face. In fact, you *need* the world to see it, to hear it, to know it. You need a witness to your experiences.

I think that is what the Lakota people needed from us. In order to start healing from their experiences, they needed witnesses. They still do, as do all of God's people who suffer. And we, as God's people, are called to be witnesses for them.

Modern psychology tells us that in order to heal from terrible grief or trauma, we have to talk about it. We have to tell our stories to really know them, and we have to know them to be able to live as a whole person. And this act of speaking requires a listener. It is also about being heard. It is about being able to look into someone else's eyes and believe that what was experienced is being *known* and *believed* by others. As Ineela Wakan said, it is about seeing compassion and understanding in the heart of another. And it is about knowing that no one is alone in their experiences. This is why the act of witnessing is so important.

As we found in our Fresh Perspectives story, God acts as witness for the people of Israel, helping them to know that they are not alone. In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus acts as witness to Bartimaeus. He is on his way to Jericho with a huge crowd. But even though he is busy, even though he is surrounded by people, and even though the people yell at Bartimaeus, telling him to leave Jesus alone, Jesus stops in his tracks and listens to him. Not only that, but he invites the man to tell him what he wants from him. This is a fantastic example of listening—a moment when Jesus witnesses to the pain of a man ostracized by his entire community, when Jesus asks the man to tell him what he wants, and when Jesus—guided by that man's request—does what that man wants. Jesus shows us how to listen.

But what the folks who went to Pine Ridge will tell you, and what you will have experienced yourself if you've ever served as a witness for another person, is that acting as a witness is extremely difficult. To some degree, when we act as witnesses, we feel a terrible grief, fear, helplessness, and guilt. Looking in someone's eyes or holding someone's hand as she tells her story is hard. We want to run away, or stop listening, or try to immediately fix it! And I am not saying that we should not act in response to the stories we hear. Ultimately, being transformed and galvanized into action by these stories IS the second part of witnessing. But first, *first*, we need to hear and listen to the story, no matter how hard it is. We need to hold firm, look the person in the eyes, and let the words sink in...that is what is needed. What scripture teaches us is that this work, as difficult as it is, is God's work.

One thing I know about this congregation, is that you are good at listening. When we could meet in person, I would often see you sitting together in the sanctuary or in the social hall, listening to each other's concerns. And now that we are apart, you have formed calling circles to check in on one another. Quietly and under the radar, you deliver meals to each other and listen; you talk to each other through windows; you call one another on the phone. And when you know someone is sad, isolated, lonely, sick, or injured, you reach out to them in order to listen to their griefs. Listening, witnessing, is one of this congregation's gifts.

I believe that being heard helped the Lakota elders who spoke with us start to heal, to some degree. Since then, they have often told us how those of us who are willing to listen to them have given them hope and helped renew their spirits. Knowing this, I told you this story because we can use what I learned to help heal divides in our own community. Right now, we are hearing story after story from our black and brown skinned neighbors about the pain that they have experienced. What they have gone through is different in many ways from what the Lakota have experienced, but it is profoundly painful. I believe that God is calling us to act as witnesses for them—to see their suffering, to hear their pain, to endure their anger. So, let us seek their stories together by watching videos like the ones I have listed in the bulletin, by reading books and articles written by our neighbors of African descent. Let us take these next several months to just listen. We are summoned, my beloved ones, to re-member and heal our broken communities. And this healing starts with brave people telling their stories, and with being heard. Amen.