

## **Enough of Contempt**

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**November 19, 2016**

**Readings: Psalm 123 and Matthew 25:14-30**

Mary was cantankerous. In her late 80's, she would make sure I knew who the matriarch in my first church was. Sitting in the back row, she stared forward with steely eyes, eyes I was sure had battled a thousand pastors and won. Sitting in the back was clearly a strategy. If she sat in the back of the congregation, she was the first to shake my hand at the end of the service. She would be the quickest to Piccadilly's for lunch and everyone in that small church would hear her comments to the pastor.

"I can't hear a word you are saying during the announcements!" she would say as she shook my hand at the end of the service.

"I'll see what I can do next week," I answered nervously. My mind went through all the things that could help me with projection that I had just learned in seminary.

If you had asked me where I would find myself on my first call, deep in South Louisiana would probably not have been one of my first thoughts.

"Going there is a big mistake" one of our professors told us. "With your views, Brian, we will find you someday floating in the swamps."

The need for employment overwhelmed our need to find theological compatibility, as it often does for many in our country.

I was excited. From my youngest days, I had sat in church outlining the pastor's sermons. I had found myself daydreaming about how I would preach sermons. The deacons of my church in Nebraska told me that I had "the calling" and since that proclamation I have always ended up attempting to fulfill that calling. My church was a poor, small congregation in South Louisiana that had grown during the oil boom and had declined after the oil bust. They felt responsible for

sociological factors beyond their control and wished that they could return their church community to the days when oil was king of their community.

Mary predated those days. Her father was a prominent city father and plantation owner. Mary knew all the stories and where all the bodies were buried in the church. It was not odd for Mary to begin a story spurred by one of the texts read on Wednesday Bible Study, much to the embarrassment of the rest of the group.

“Bear all things? I wish Rev. Garner had learned to do that. Meaner than a boar. He was fired from this church in the 1930’s. His dear wife was so longsuffering to that cad. Everyone knew he wore a toupee. His wife, what was her name, washed it and hung it out on the line to dry. Rev. Garner was so mad, he hit her. When the church found out, that was the end of Rev. Garner.”

Mary and I were destined to have problems, according to many esteemed members of the congregation. It happened in my first six months, on my first ever Pentecost sermon. Just so you know, Pentecost is for me the penultimate day on our liturgical calendar. The turning back of chaos, the bringing together of all voices to proclaim Jesus Christ, the witness of the Spirit embodying the church on the street corner, the beginning of the return of Jesus to his people...You get my point.

I remember the sermon well, because it is one I have preached many times. The fact is that prejudice has no place in the church because of the promise of Pentecost. People of all races, classes and diversity proclaim Jesus Christ resurrected. What a joy.

Unfortunately, I could see that Mary did not share my hope in Pentecost. Hustling to the front of the line, Mary made sure that she let her disapproval be made known.”

“Pastor, you are clearly not from here. I completely disagree with the premise of your sermon. You said that we should see blacks as equals. They are not even human.” She made the last sentence as a loud pronouncement, a declaration.

I was a young pastor and I wish I could say that I would make a different response today. I responded, "Mary, that is one of the most horrible things I have ever heard. I hope beliefs like that die when you do."

Impasse.

A wise African American minister told me, "You had better learn how to love Mary. She is going to die someday and you will have to say things over her grave."

So, I took his advice. Mary and I became very close friends. One day, I believe I probably saved her life when I took her smoldering slippers out of the oven when she had mistaken them for the lunch she was hoping to heat up. We laughed as those slippers smoked in the kitchen sink.

Even though our relationship grew, I could not get over her racism. I knew it came from her being raised by a father who was the local Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. I couldn't make sense of that with her stories of seeing all the Jazz greats play. Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Louise Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Bunk Johnson. All African American men. I settled into a sort of superiority, thinking that somehow we had evolved from the types of prejudices that this women struggled with. I pitied her weakness.

That all changed the day Mary taught me something valuable.

I was in Austin, Texas for a Pastor's Conference on 9/11/2001. I came into our friend's living room, holding my baby. Everyone was huddled around the television watching planes hit buildings. Carol and I hopped in our car and hurried back to our churches in Louisiana.

That Wednesday Bible study was a stunning silence. We had pulled the television into the room to watch as new information came in. I prayed and we read that week's passage. It was a listless and lifeless exercise. That was when Mary entered the room, huffing and puffing, clearly filled with emotions.

I braced myself as she plopped herself down and sighed. Her eyes were puffy from crying and her agitation was palpable. I was in no mood for this.

“Pastor, I am sorry to interrupt. I am really upset and I need you to answer a question. I have been upset about it ever since the planes hit the building.” she said and I knew this wasn’t going to be good.

“Yes, Mary, what is it?” I said as confidently as I could muster.

“That night, when the planes hit the building, my neighbors got together in our cul-de-sac to pray. We stood in a circle, holding hands, and each of us took turns praying. When it came to me, I didn’t know what to say. So, I prayed for the terrorists. You have told us that we are to pray for our enemies. My neighbors are all mad at me now. Did I do the right thing?” Mary was close to tears.

“Mary, I admire what you did. Most of us are not there with you, but you definitely did the right thing. I am not sure I could have done that.” I said honestly.

Mary was teaching me in that moment about mercy.

What is mercy? It is certainly not contempt. I do not know how to give you a definition of mercy. All I know is that I have experienced mercy more than I deserve. That is why I have no excuse, but to lavish mercy on others.

I am thankful for Mary. I am thankful for cantankerous women who don’t let me sanctimoniously think that I am better than them and that I have “evolved” to a higher spiritual plane but I am their equal.

Mercy is something we accept from our creator. I hope you find it in abundance. Happy Thanksgiving.