

**Fall, 2015 Lectionary Reflections
Wisconsin Council of Churches
Peace and Justice Commission**

**September 13, 2015 16th Sunday after Pentecost
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 19/Holy Cross Sunday**

RCL Texts: Proverbs 1:20-33, Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Holy Cross Sunday Texts: I Corinthians 1:18-24; John 3:13-17

Theme: The Light of the Holy Cross

In the eyes of the world the Martyrs, who chose the way of the Cross were at the bottom of any caste system. And, they were the ones “of whom the world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:38). On this Feast of the Holy Cross, we look “to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). This, of course, is foolish and absurd to those who don’t see Christ’s wisdom (I Corinthians 1:18).

Jesus, on the cross, was not in any place of privilege, prestige, or power. That is exactly our cue. We live in a nation being torn apart by racism which is so institutionalized that we are becoming unrecognizable as a light on the hill, a beacon of justice and liberty. Rather, we are a society where you cannot drive (or walk) while black; a society not able to see the incredible suffering of people in Central America who yearn only to stay alive by crossing to the U.S., a society where, increasingly, hunger and homeless are no longer the responsibility of the state to address. And the litany of suffering and repression could stretch for pages. This is particularly a sad situation because we had always been a light to people escaping persecution, genocide, oppression, and debilitating poverty....Italians, Irish, Jews, Armenians...

The only way to be the light on the hill again is to climb up to Golgotha, from which the light of the cross still shines. In a sense, we are to become saints or living Martyrs... a people separated, detached from the need for power, prestige, and privilege. Bonhoeffer once described Christians as a people living in the shadow of the cross.

There are so many battles to be fought, e.g. prison reform, drug treatment availability, banning the box, making sure there is no homelessness. But further, as we stand with others under the shadow of the Cross, we must embrace the people around us as fellow travelers, loved by Christ.

On this Feast, let us look to the perfecter of the faith who “spread out his arms on the cross so as to embrace the Universe” (Armenian hymn). He did this because, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son: (John 3:16). He is waiting for us to ascend Golgotha to be with him.

Fr. Yeprem Kelegian, St. Mesrob Armenian Apostolic Church, Racine WI

**September 20, 2015 17th Sunday after Pentecost
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 20**

RCL Texts: Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Focus Text: Proverbs 31: 10-31

Theme: 'The Good Woman

For the woman in America, equality still remains an illusion. Every day we hear of the horrors that women endure in other countries; rape in Darfur, genital mutilation in Egypt, sex trafficking in Eastern Europe. We shake our heads, forward e-mails, or send money in an effort to help. We have no problem condemning the atrocities done to women abroad, and yet we ignore the oppression crouching on our own doorstep. We suffer under the delusion that women have achieved equality, and why not, it's a feel good illusion. We cry with Oprah, laugh with Tina Fey; we watch other prominent women and proudly sigh with relief thinking of how far we've come. But the truth is that women are still being raped, trafficked, violated and discriminated against; not just in the world but right here in the good old U.S.A.

We find it to be refreshing to read the text in Proverbs chapter 31, verses 10-31. It is here that we find women elevated to a place of prominence. Although women are discriminated against we find the writer of Proverbs depicting a woman to be a supremely excellent homemaker and the praise of her husband and children. Although this passage is not in keeping with contemporary views of equality and the sharing of family responsibility; it is relevant to us and improves on the role of a woman in social, political, and economic life of every community. Many women will read this proverb and feel that they can never measure up, that this woman is far above attainable reality. The truth is that any woman with the desire can reach this plateau.

The writer states that this woman, in spite of situation or circumstance, in spite of discrimination or marginalization, has a bounce back in her spirit. She is noble in character, she's loyal, and her love for family and friends causes her to be diligent and delightful in her work. It's no accident that she is called good. The text says that she has chosen to fear the Lord, and her choice is rewarded with the favor and praise of God. We may not feel worthy enough to gather the crumbs from under the table but he who fears God is wise. When we cast our cares on him he gives us the strength and the help. We look to him to create in us good character. Such character is not the life that one adopts, but the life that one possesses. A life that is resilient in struggle and bounces back in seeming defeat.

Rev. Joe Baring, Jr., St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, Madison, WI

**September 27, 2015 18th Sunday after Pentecost
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 21**

RCL Texts: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Focus Text: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10

[“Race Off”](#) (8.28.14), [“We Can’t Breathe”](#) (12.5.14), and [“Rage Against the Machine”](#) (12.18.14), are episodes of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* that use humor and sarcasm to deal with race and the systemic issues that led to the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner and

others. In “Race Off,” Jon states, ““Race is there; it exists. You’re tired of hearing about it? Imagine how [expletive] exhausting it is living it.”¹

Living as oppressed people, and using humor as a survival mechanism and a teaching method, is not new. The book of Esther, while written as a comedy, is a serious commentary on life of the Jews of the Diaspora. “It addresses the inherent problems of a minority people, their vulnerability to political forces and government edicts, their lack of autonomy, and their dependence on royal favor and the sagacity [*wisdom, discernment*] of their own leaders,” according to Adele Berlin.²

The story ends well with justice prevailing, but as people of faith, we must ask ourselves why this story continues to be experienced. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. asked and answered this very question in his speech “[Our God is Marching On](#)”, when he stated, “How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”³

We are called to be witnesses to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow his teachings. He came to free the oppressed. The prophet Micah calls us to be people “to do justice.” ([Micah 6:8 CEB](#))⁴ What steps towards justice will you take this day? How will you contribute to the end of racism and systemic injustice to our brothers and sisters of color now?

Rev. Ellen Rasmussen, Pastor, First United Methodist Church, Rhinelander WI

**October 4, 2015 19th Sunday after Pentecost
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 22/World Communion Sunday**

RCL Texts: Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Psalm 26 Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10: 2-16.

Jesus certainly makes it clear that ALL are welcome to come to him, unhindered! My text says that Jesus was “indignant” when he found the disciples were turning children away. We too need to find that indignation as Christians when God’s children are being turned away! So many times we turn a blind eye, we don’t want to get involved, we don’t want to offend, and we don’t want to SEE Jesus right in front of us! As we think about celebrating communion today with Christians around the world, think about the folks who don’t have that freedom. Think about the folks who have been so injured by The Church that they wouldn’t dream of coming to the table! Think about the folks that are missing from the banquet. And ask yourself why? What could we be doing to change that scenario for those on the fringes? We can’t pretend that racism is a thing of the past any longer. We as Christians have to be the ones to stand up and say LET THEM COME—LET THEM ALL COME, no matter their race, their sexual orientation, or their political beliefs. Let them come to the banquet table of grace. After all, our mission is to live God’s openness—and wherever we are—we are to welcome others and be generous with God’s love.

Cathy Manthei, Apostle Presbyterian Church, West Allis WI

¹ Stewart, Jon. *The Daily Show – Face Off*. Published August 28, 2014.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_98ojlZDI

² Berlin, Adele. *The Jewish Study Bible*, “Esther Commentary”. Jewish Publication Society. Oxford Press, 2004.

³ King, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, Jr. “Our God is Marching On.” Speech given March 25, 1965, in Montgomery, AL. Accessed 8.3.2015. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/our-god-marching>

⁴ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=micah+6%3A8&version=CEB>

**October 11, 2015 20th Sunday after Pentecost
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 23**

RCL Texts: Job 23: 1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4th 12-16; Mark 10:17-31
Focus Text: Mark 10:17-31

In Mark 10, Jesus turned the world of good religious people upside down. He welcomed little children--those immature, non-thinking beings--and said that adults should receive the realm of God as they do. A short time later, a solid, law-abiding man knelt in front of Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. The man did not like the answer he received. He had many possessions and to him they meant that God favored him. So, having Jesus tell him to give away all he had accumulated and give the money to the poor was met with grief. The things he had were what gave him privilege in society.

Today we still struggle with the idea in society that wealth is something that a person deserves, indicates approval from God and should bestow privilege. This idea leads to the opposite; that poverty is punishment from God and is deserved. Another version of this is the concept that a person's color indicates that person's values and value. A pastor friend told the story of driving to Milwaukee when she was a child (25 years ago or so) with her family. As soon as their father saw an African American man he told them all to lock their doors. They learned at a young age to fear anyone with black skin.

Our nation is steeped in the concept of what's called "White Privilege". Our justice system is full of examples of young black men arrested for "being black". Sojourners tells of a man from St. Louis who lived in extreme poverty as a child and decided to get even. He got involved in breaking and entering. This led to being arrested in a murder case in Memphis, even though he'd never been to Tennessee. He was convicted and put on death row. To survive he turned to art. And through a volunteer who coordinated an art show he told his story. It took 20 years, and the help of many people, but he was released from prison in 2012.

We may be one of the privileged in this country or we may be one of those who are poor or minority or who are marginalized for other reasons. And we may be some of each. What Jesus made clear is that we must give everything we have to ensure that all people are treated with justice and all have enough to live well. Jesus didn't say it would be easy, but he said with God it is possible.

Petra Streiff, UCC, New Glarus WI

**October 18, 2015 21th Sunday after Pentecost
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 24**

RCL Texts: Job 38:1-78 (34-41); Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45
Focus Text: Mark 10:35-45

I happened to be driving down Williamson St. in Madison just two days after a Madison police officer killed Tony Robinson. It was a Sunday afternoon and my wife and I were on our way to a social gathering with friends. I noticed that there seemed to be more traffic than usual for a Sunday afternoon and suddenly we came to a near stop. It took me a moment but then I realized that we

were passing the house and sidewalk where Tony was shot. Police were still on the scene and one could see bloodstains in the snow. Although long gone now, the image of the frozen blood in the snow continues to haunt me. Throughout Lent and Holy Week, as I reflected on the imagery of the crucifixion, I saw that blood in my mind's eye.

This week's gospel (Mark 10:35-45) immediately follows the third of Jesus' passion predictions in Mark. After each of them there is an incident that underscores the disciples' lack of understanding of who Jesus is and what it means to follow him. In this instance, James and John want to be preeminent when Jesus comes into his kingdom. It's likely they imagined that they were on their way to Jerusalem to initiate a successful revolt against Rome and restore the Davidic monarchy. Instead, Jesus promises that they will share his fate, death at the hands of the Romans.

For a white Christian to reflect on the crucifixion in light of racism, to see the connection between the cross and the lynching tree (about which James Cone has written with power and eloquence), requires us to acknowledge where we stand in this drama. Yes we are executioners, but we are also James and John, eager to pervert the gospel, eager to transform the suffering and death of Jesus into our power and glory.

Rev. Dr. D. Jonathan Grieser, Grace Episcopal Church, Madison WI

**October 25, 2015 22nd Sunday after Pentecost
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 25/Reformation Sunday**

RCL Texts: Job 42:1-6; 10-17; Psalm 34: 1-8, (19-22); Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10: 46-52
Reformation Sunday Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3: 19-28; John 8:31-36

If you're using the regular Sunday Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) texts, we need to confront a possible problem. These lectionary reflections focus on overcoming the barriers of race and systems of privilege, but the Hebrews reading (7:23-28) on being "separated from sinners" could be seen to promote division and elitism. Yet this is not endorsing our exclusionary tendencies. It's not about avoiding the messiness and complications of life, being above the fray, or—worst of all—believing ourselves to be better than the other.

That becomes clear when we recognize this "high priest" is the same Jesus who in the Gospel reading (Mark 10:46-52) seeks out those excluded and in need. Though his society tried to silence him, blind Bartimaeus keeps calling for assistance. Perhaps you ask how, with the God of Jesus, we hear the cries that our culture has disregarded. Or this may be an ideal occasion to address privilege as blindness, literally a failure to see how we benefit from skin color. Jesus is also working to heal this lack of vision.

If your congregation celebrates Reformation Sunday, church history would enable addressing questions of systemic privilege. From Lutheran protests against religious hierarchies entrenched in wealthy aristocracy to reforming voices that have been excommunicated or executed, through developments in this country as all of our denominations have continued to re-form our understandings of race, from slavery through civil rights to current events. That history binds us all and disproves our claim that we are always "free" (as in the argument with Jesus in John 8:31-36).

Among other readings, Romans (3:19-28) reminds us that boasting that casts blame is neither godly nor helpful. No racial group or segment of society has done right, for "all have sinned and fall

short.” Jeremiah (31:31-34) may be a reality check on the function of laws in civil society: one day, our hearts will be filled with love and we won’t need to be instructed, but we’re not living in that fullness of God’s kingdom yet. Amid turmoil and chaos and fear, from Ferguson to Madison to Baltimore and beyond, Psalm 46 proclaims God’s presence “in the midst of the city,” a “very present help in trouble.”

Rev. Nick Utphall, St. Stephen’s Lutheran Church, Monona WI

**November 1, 2015 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 26/ All Saints Day**

RCL Texts: Isaiah 25: 6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11: 32-44

Focus Texts: John 11.32-44; Revelation 21.1-8

Theme: Raising Lazarus and the New Jerusalem

When Jesus raised Lazarus (John 11.32-44), it displays Jesus as the source of new life. But Jesus is also an earthly manifestation of God. Jesus’ act of raising Lazarus thus reveals God as a God who restores life rather than taking life.

In other writing, I have explored a number of implications for the idea that God restores life rather than taking it. For this text, a sermon might explore new life in Jesus Christ in the context of the current tensions in our society around issues of racial justice. New life might focus on overcoming of divides between races and ethnicities. This dimension of new life might use Galatians 3.28 or Ephesians 3.14 as references.

The New Jerusalem (Revel. 21.1-8) uses a remarkable image to present new life today as it is found in Jesus Christ and the God revealed in the story of Jesus. Note that the New Jerusalem has no need of temple since the Lord God Almighty and the resurrected Lamb are its temple, and it needs no external sources of light since the glory of God and the Lamb are its light and lamp (vv. 22-23). Further, note that the wicked are still present—even though the city gates never close, nothing unclean will enter (vv. 25-27). This is an image of belonging and loyalty rather than a statement of physical movement through a gate. I suggest that the New Jerusalem is actually an image of the church in the world today, a display of how glorious it is to live in the new life found in Jesus Christ and the God of Jesus, who is the source of life.

*Dr. J. Denny Weaver, Madison Mennonite Church and Professor Emeritus of Religion,
Bluffton (Ohio) University*

**November 8, 2015 24th Sunday after Pentecost
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 27**

RCL Texts: Ruth 3:1-5; 13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9: 24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Focus Text: Mark 12:38-44

We have heard a great deal these last months about white privilege and American Christianity’s complicity in racism. As an Episcopal priest who lived in the South for many years, I know how entangled the history of our denomination is with the history of slavery and racism. But it’s not just the South. The parish in Massachusetts where I became an Episcopalian was founded by a ship’s captain who sailed between Jamaica and colonial Massachusetts, an active participant in the slave

trade. Mindful of slavery, Jim Crow, and redlining, reading this week's gospel is an uncomfortable challenge.

Jesus is teaching in the temple. He has already demonstrated his opposition to the temple establishment by overturning the moneychangers' tables. Now he criticizes the scribes for demonstrating their privilege. They wear long robes, a symbol of social power; they demand others greet them first in public; they want the best seats in the house. But that's not all. They devour widows' houses. In other words, they use their political power to extract every bit of economic advantage they can from the poorest and weakest in society.

We tend to view Jesus' words concerning the widow's offering as praise of her sacrificial giving. If instead of focusing on her actions, we read them in light of his criticism of the scribes, he is not so much praising her as lamenting her action. Having been victimized by the scribes and others in power, she comes to the temple and gives all that she has to live on, two copper coins, a tiny fraction of a day's wage, and a fraction of what she would actually have needed to survive for a day. She has lost everything to the religious and political elite, and still she voluntarily gives her last penny in support of that same institution.

Jesus' words condemning the scribes also condemn us. As white American Christians, we have been complicit in slavery, Jim Crow, redlining. Our actions and our privilege have oppressed African-Americans, squeezed them economically, and sentenced them to prison. Our religious institutions have been complicit in all of this and we have sought to neutralize African-American religion as well.

Rev. Dr. D. Jonathan Grieser, Grace Episcopal Church, Madison WI

**November 15, 2015 25th Sunday after Pentecost
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 28**

RCL Texts: I Samuel 1:4-20; Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25; Mark 13: 1-8
Focus Texts: I Samuel 1:4-2; Mark 13:1-8

In the OT lesson, Hannah, one of the wives of Elkanah has long been unable to conceive a child. As a barren woman, Hannah knows discrimination in a polygamist culture. By her gender and inability to produce heirs, she is outside the system of privilege in a patriarchal society.

Elkanah sees Hannah's plight but does not see his own role in it. His advantage as a male, keeps him from an understanding of what it is to be vulnerable. Elkanah soothes his beloved's pain by heaping double-portions upon her, which subject her to abuse from her rival wife. Hannah cannot protest Elkanah's gifts, or Penninah's abuse, without making the situation worse for herself.

Hannah controls the little she can. She refuses to eat and she prays. Eli doesn't fully understand her desperation in the temple, but he sees it and eventually pities her.

Hannah is surrounded by those who have the advantage of a 'system of privilege'. Sociologist, Allan G. Johnson, defines this phrase as "*a family, a workplace, a society [which] is organized around three basic principles: dominance, identification, and centeredness*".

Through the lens of this biblical model we can address our own society's system of privilege around race.

- How does white privilege put people of color in a 'no win' situation in our society?
- What are attempts to placate people of color, rather than looking to change the system of privilege?
- Can we eliminate the societal advantage of one group of humans over another?

The gospel lesson, Mark 13: 1-8, can help us find Jesus' perspective on structures that seem 'set in stone'. The OT scripture paired with Jesus' message of a life beyond the edifices of social structure we see as immovable, might enable us to see our way into more equitable relationships.

Rev. Staci Marrese-Wheeler, Lakeview Moravian Church, Madison WI

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November 22, 2015 Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday

RCL Texts: II Samuel 23: 1-7; Psalm 132: 1-12 (13-18); Revelation 1: 4b-8; John 18: 33-37

Focus Text: John 18: 33-37

Theme: The Power to Name

One activity people of privilege enjoy is the license to name with unquestioned authority themselves, and their experiences. "I'm a law-abiding, hard-working, productive and busy person." Unfortunately, the privileged also choose names and descriptions for others, and have expertly used those labels against them, sometimes half-consciously. News reporting has been quick to surface the drug habits and legal foibles of some people, while deciding they are private or inconsequential factors in other lives.

Notice the dynamic of naming at work in the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus in the Gospel lesson this week. Will Jesus claim the description of King? It would be a political designation that Pilate would deem illegal and thus punishable. Notice how Pilate took pains to disclaim the designation of "Jew." (When reading modern translations of the Gospels, we must remember that the word translated into English as "Jew," is better translated as "Judean.") At the time of Jesus, there was a distinction between southern Judeans and northern Galileans. The capital city, Jerusalem, was in Judea. The Temple was in Jerusalem. So Judeans looked down on Galileans as uncultured hillbillies. But the Judean elite had also been co-opted by the occupying Roman Empire. Jerusalem - and the Temple - had become Roman puppets - collectors of Roman taxes, and responsible for ensuring civil order. (George Hermanson, holytexture.com). The backstory implied by certain labels carried great weight.

The desire for control over reputation by use of labelling reminds me of the controversy raised when white Hollywood megastar Ben Affleck tried to exert his power to keep his ancestors' slave-owning history from being told on the PBS program, "Finding Your Roots." On the same program, white historian Ken Burns was ashamed to be linked to slave-owners, but delighted to find he was

Abraham Lincoln's fourth cousin. The exhaustive research of "Finding Your Roots" upends the privilege of telling one's preferred personal history, just as our ultimate kinship as created sons and daughters of God determines the essential truth of our equality, value, and worth.

Rev. Lisa Bates-Froiland, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Milwaukee WI