Refusing to Wear the Garment

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Matthew 22: 1-14 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This past week I was in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina for Wild Goose Festival of Arts, Spirit, and Justice at Hot Springs campground. It was a gathering of fully vaccinated people and it was a very good event. In the opening, Brian McLaren was speaking and I was struck by what he said at the beginning about the pandemic. If you have been attending here somewhat regularly you will have heard me talk about moving to a new normal following the pandemic. Brian McLaren said, “I’m not sure there will be a new normal. There may be just change following change”. As we experience this forth wave, after hoping and expecting to be near the end of the pandemic this fall, I fear he may be right. Even with the pandemic eventually coming to an end, as we experience our country on fire, severe rainstorms, drought, systemic racism and polarization, the list could go on, there will probably be other things that we need to adapt to because of changes.

At the Festival I attended a pre-event called Justice Camp that was about Composting Supremacy as named by the resource people of Dr. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, Hispanic theologian, Hispanic pastor, Rev. Jo Luehmann, and Black pastor Rev. Lenny Duncan. It focused on supremacy culture that identified the three pillars of empire that Martin Luther King Jr. named as racism, militarism and capitalism. They named that addressing supremacy culture is like dealing with a 7 headed hydra, when you cut one head off another appears. So, the idea of composting supremacy is working to transform it to something different, to being different, disrupting it, to healing and wholeness for all, because we are all impacted, affected and hurt by it. Jo Luehmann talked about not feeling safe in white spaces – and I was surprised how white the Festival space still was, compared to the last time I was there in 2016. She said understanding supremacy is not enough, it takes action to heal the supremacy in ourself, to be safe space for others. It’s about using our privilege to give space and voice to the marginalized. The goal is to become accountable people. Luehmann said you can’t heal if you don’t feel safe. We often talk about the image of being at the table, who is at the table, who is missing from the table and making space at the table. Jo says this image is not helpful. We don’t need a bigger table or to have more people at the table, because the table is still limited. She offered the image of an expanding tent of safe spaces. It is about expansive inclusiveness. We might relate to the image of draw the circle wide.

The parable in Matthew today is often interpreted as an invitation to inclusiveness. The King is having a wedding celebration for his son. The invitations have gone out, and as is the custom, when things are ready the servants are sent to tell the guests that all is prepared, so come to the banquet. However, the guests don’t heed the message and some carry on with what they are doing, shunning the king, while others kill the servants. So, the king first destroys the murderers and their city, then gets the slaves to gather the poor and outcast of the community, good and bad, to come to the banquet. All were welcome. It was the tradition to provide a wedding garment to those who attend such a banquet. When one person is found without a garment, the king is outraged, and throws them out bound, into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This was all framed as this is what the kingdom of heaven could be compared to and the traditional interpretation is that God welcomes all to the banquet, and we need to take the invitation seriously and follow what is expected of us. However, as we read this story there are many problematic issues. If this is the kingdom of heaven, and the king is often then seen as God, what kind of God is this that takes revenge, destroys cities and throws people out into the darkness? This is not the God I know in the gospels, the God Jesus teaches and preaches about. So then, what is the kingdom like?

One morning at the Festival, I went to hear a friend who is now the pastor of GracePointe Church in Nashville, a progressive evangelical megachurch that is affirming of LGBTQ folk. I met Josh Scott at a gathering I went to in 2015, hosted by Brian McLaren of leaders discerning how to be church in our time. Josh preached on this parable from Matthew and as a white, heterosexual cis gender man, works to take a fresh view of the passage. He knows that we read scripture and anything from our lens of privilege. Josh works to read scripture with suspicion of the way he reads it, which would support his privilege. The traditional reading of this parable supports the system of power and privilege. We have a king who is in power and upholds it with violence and terror. I wonder if the first people did not come because they didn’t want to support this horrible tyrant. The poor people may have attended out of fear. Josh suggests that the person without the robe, is protesting the empire, refusing to participate in the system of power and privilege. What if this person was like Jesus? What if that is the message. Jesus challenged and refused to participate in much of the system of the religious and Roman authorities and as a result was crucified, very similar to being cast into darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. What if the invitation, the kingdom of heaven is to be like the one who refuses to participate in the system? That is a very different and challenging message and call for us.

I had an experience of this that day which I heard Josh speak. I was a volunteer at the Festival and was in the role of Venue Host. This meant I was the one who would welcome the speaker in the tent I was in, make sure they had what they needed and be their timekeeper – I had cards of 10 minutes, 5 min. and 2 min, each a different neon colour, to warn them that is how much time they had left. This day I had 7-50 minute sessions to host. I was in my 6th session, which was called *The Death of Clericalism, Whiteness and the Invitation to be an Everyday Practitioner* with the three folk who were part of the Justice camp a few days earlier – Dr. Robyn, Jo Luehmann, and Lenny Duncan. It was an incredibly powerful session. Lenny challenged the church systems that allow minorities to be ministers and speak if they check all the right boxes, but discourage them challenging oppression and so never feel fully welcome. He has resigned from being a pastor of the Lutheran church because he couldn’t stand their lack of action against racism, particularly their silence around George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, and how he was limited in what he could do and say. Jo named that clericalism is dying because it has always been white. She was very vulnerable in her sharing that she is exhausted being at the festival because she has felt hypervigilant of where she is and who is around her because she does not feel safe, dose not know who is safe, so she was also not eating because of the stress. It raises the issue and question for me of how do we create safe space, how can people of Colour and indigenous people know that I am safe? This is challenging work for us. Jo also named that as a woman of colour, she has tasted the sulphur and experienced the fires of hell, in the oppression she has experienced and having been there, does not want anyone else to experience that. They all lamented that the previous session with Brian McLaren and Franklyn Schaeffer, two popular white guys was jam-packed in that tent, but their session had a handful of people. Into this intense, important conversation among the three of them, I had to hold up a 10 minute warning, which I did. But when it came to the 5 minute and 2 minute warning, I couldn’t do it. What they were talking about was too important, so I refused to wear the garment of empire. A characteristic of Supremacy culture is the value of time and quantity over quality. The Festival was set up with 50 minute sessions and 10 minutes between each one, with no other breaks. It seemed incredibly unjust and insensitive to interrupt these speakers yet in the end I had to, 5 minutes past the time, when I said passionately to the crowd, “Supremacy tells us that our time is up” I then went over to Lenny and Robyn at the end (Jo had left) to apologize for having to do that – they understood and were supportive but it still felt awful. Then I had to get ready for the next session. It was an exhausting but clear example of how the system does not serve us.

Out of this I have committed to working toward being and creating safer space for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour. I have talked with Dr. Robyn and together we are going to plan a conversation of how to increase our diversity, and create safer space for Skylight Festival, Canada’s version of Wild Goose that I am on the planning team for. We will include Jo Luehmann, Anna Golladay who works with Dr Robyn, Drew Brown who participated in our Community Dinner for Black History Month (both Anna and Drew, have been to Skylight numerous times) and another leader I know from that gathering with Brian McLaren, Alicia Crosby who has challenged Wild Goose on these issues. I am sure this will be a challenging and fruitful conversation that will transfer to numerous areas of life and work, including our ministry together.

This is hard work, and hard information and you might wonder, where is the good news?

The good news is in the hope of those supporting life affirming theologies and communities.

The good news is in composting supremacy by amplifying marginalized voices, and working to create safe space.

The good news is in recognizing that we are bound together and there is no liberation until all are liberated, all our lives together depend on it.

The good news is in recognizing that liberation is wonderful and we want to create and experience heaven on earth.

The good news is in knowing that God is with us on the journey and will support us through the pain and joys of the journey.

The good news is that love is greater than hate, Jesus’ example shows us the way to new life.

As we move through these times, that may continue to confront us with change after change, may we have the courage to face the challenges with love and compassion, commit to creating safer space for all, and be willing to resist wearing the garment of the system when we need to in order to make life better for us all.