

The Good-Trouble Gospel

a sermon by Ashley Makar

In the waning days of his life, Congressman John Lewis was still working to nurture the light despite violence, to encourage revolutionary love, and to embed this planet with its goodness.

While his body was giving way to cancer, he wrote a letter that exhorts and encourages us: “Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble.”

In our gospel passage for today, Jesus is teaching us how to be good troublemakers. He likens the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. In order for it to grow and flourish, it has to be sown in the ground. I don’t have a green thumb, but I know that gardening is hard work. And cultivating the kingdom of peace requires us to trouble the structures of injustice that gird the powers that be. To grow a Beloved Community, we have to dig in the dirt and turn the earth below our feet.

The refugees in my life are my greatest teachers in the work of liberation. One of them is here with us today: Mariame Kazadi. Through your congregation’s partnership with Iris and with the Hamou family and the Kazadi family, you also know what a gift refugees are to their new communities.

“As newcomers, we are not part of the roots of American history,” Mariame said to me, “but we are the branches.”

Whenever I talk with Mariame, I make sure to have a notebook, because I want to keep going back to the insightful things she says. Especially now that I’m grappling with the roots of my history: My ancestors enslaved people. White supremacy has shaped me. It’s in the air we breathe. In late May, many of us were awakened to the brutal truth: Racism is still suffocating Black people in this country. What can we, who are part of the roots of American history, do for the health of the whole tree so everyone can breathe free?

The prophet Isaiah exhorts us to share our resources and attend to the needs of those who are oppressed. But this is not a matter of charity. It’s a work of love and mutuality: No one is free until everyone is free. How do we go about repairing the breach and restoring the streets to live in?

For me, it begins with repentance: reckoning with my history and my complicity in white supremacy and the ways I benefit from systems of racism that exploit and oppress people of color all over the world. Working to repair the breach takes a lot of perseverance and humility. It means joining Black-led movements for liberation, taking a back seat, and staying for the long haul.

I don’t know that I’m ready to practice what I’m preaching. I’ll need a lot of help from my refugee friends.

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Summer before last, I got to go on a civil-rights pilgrimage with the Iris youth group. On the bus from Richmond to Atlanta Mariame told me, “The Christian life is not a smooth ride. You have to be a warrior for love.”

We were reading John Lewis’s graphic novel *March*, the part that captures the Birmingham church bombing that killed four girls in 1963. In the illustration you see a broken stained-glass window, shard-shaped holes where Jesus’s face and heart would be.

Birmingham is my hometown, but I didn’t have a visceral sense of the violence of white supremacy, or the fortitude it takes to resist it, until I went on that trip. We set out on a bus from Iris to visit civil-rights sites in Georgia and Alabama. My co-worker Laurel and I, white women from the South, went back to where we were from with 12 young women who can’t go home: mostly Congolese teens who came to the U.S. as refugees. They may have arrived with visions of the American dream. But they’re witnessing the living legacy of slavery while they navigate racism, as women of color, in America.

Down 95 South, we passed cities where armed vigilantes still defend Confederate monuments. Lola led us singing a South African song from the anti-apartheid movement: *Freedom is Coming, Freedom is Coming. Freedom is Coming, O, Yes, I know.*

It’s hard to see freedom coming for the Black and Brown people who keep getting killed and incarcerated in this country. But I believe it—freedom is coming—when I sing it with people who’ve been on the long walk to freedom all their lives. “They’re constantly promising themselves that something brighter is coming,” Lola’s sister Gladys told me. “You have to keep practicing.”

Laurel and I may have been the chaperones on that tour through the Black freedom movement, but the refugee women were our guides. On that journey to the South—part road trip, part slumber party, part pilgrimage—we began to understand that liberation is a practice. It’s a work of love that takes generations, and it’s never finished.

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In Atlanta, we did a simulated sit-in at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. The interactive exhibit that asks “How Long Can You Last?” in a caption above a diner stool. The instructions direct you to put on a pair of headphones and lay your hands flat on the table. First, you hear menacing voices, then plates breaking. The taunts escalate, fury at your back. You feel a whap on the counter, then a simulated kick. Adrenaline and fear like a punch in the gut. I almost didn’t make it through the minute and 48 seconds of the track.

When I stood up, Mariame gave me a hug.

On the bus, we sang Beyonce. Mariame told me her dad doesn't like the music of today. He likes oldies, she told me. "Like UB40 and Madonna."

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At the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, we walked through a room called "Slavery Evolved." We saw a postcard from a lynching in Mississippi. You only see the victim below the knee: ragged pants legs and feet. There's a white crowd. People on what appear to be family outings. There's an old man with a hateful contortion to his face. Next to him, there are kids. One boy's eyes look stunned and unfazed at the same time.

"Those children, are they still alive?" Mariame asked.

"What a cruel place," Gladys said. None of the young women had heard of lynching before the trip. In school, they'd learned the white-washed broad strokes of the history of racism in America: Slavery, Emancipation, the Civil-Rights Movement. "But we didn't learn the hurtful part[s] of those stories," Gladys said. "All of us build history. That's why it's so important to tell the truth, even if it's painful," she said. "Telling the ugly truth gives people the responsibility to do their part to build a better future."

I don't remember when or how I first heard of lynching. In my mind, it was an unspeakable blip in American history, carried out under the cover of night by Klansmen who had nothing to do with me. But on that trip, I remembered a piece of family history I'd chosen to forget: My granddad went to a KKK rally out of curiosity. We're told he chose not to get involved. Two generations later, I'm only now beginning to unpack my complicity in white supremacy and to reckon with the violence my silence enables.

Until that summer, I had no idea that almost 5,000 Black people were lynched during the Jim Crow era. They were pulled out of hospitals & worship services. They were shot and burned before and after they were hung--from a telephone pole or a bridge or a high tree, so thousands of spectators could see; that postcards were made and sold at grocery stores and pharmacies. I had no idea that lynchings were often planned for Sunday afternoons, so families could go after church.

I didn't realize Jesus was lynched, until I read the late theologian James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. The gospels recount the cruel abuses of the mob, the prolonged torture, the violence of empire. The book of Acts makes it plain: "They put him to death on a tree." And yet white ministers have preached volumes on the crucifixion without mentioning the parallels with lynching. "What is invisible to white Christians is inescapable to Black people," Cone writes. "[T]he Black holocaust in America's history is still waiting to find theological meaning" in public life. "What happened to the indifference among white liberal religious leaders that fostered silence in the face of the lynching industry?" Cone points to the mass incarceration complex that currently brutalizes over a million Black and Brown people in a prison industry that profits from their labor and executes more people than any detention system in the world.

But Cone offers hope. “No two people in America have had more violent and loving encounters than Black and white people,” he writes. “No gulf between Blacks and whites is too great to overcome, for our beauty is more enduring than our brutality.” Cone is holding me accountable to the God who suffers with all crucified people, to the cross that ushered Jesus to the grave, to the way God makes out of no way, to liberation. Lewis and Gladys and Mariame are helping me look up from the brutal histories that keep repeating, to see how beautiful the lifelong march to freedom can be. As an African proverb goes, *when you pray, move your feet*.

Near the end of the Legacy Museum, there are shelves of mason jars full of soil. They’re part of the Equal Justice Initiative’s Community Remembrance Project: People from all over the U.S. are invited to go to lynching sites and dig up soil. “There is history in that soil that needs to be resurrected if we’re going to really be free in this country,” Bryan Stevenson said. “[T]he sweat of enslaved people is buried in this soil. The blood of lynching victims is in the soil. The tears of people who were segregated and humiliated during the time of Jim Crow is in the soil.”

I imagine collecting the soil to be a way of honoring the dead that starts like planting. Liberation is a matter of slow work in the dirt: Soil is where you bury and sow the mustard seeds. It holds living history, like the rings of a tree.

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Time seemed to thicken and slow down as we moved through the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. The main part starts like a graveyard where it’s hard to get your bearings: Steel rectangles stand staggered like headstones, each etched with the names of people who’ve been lynched and the county where it happened. Many of the lists of victims say *unknown*, over and over. You hardly notice how the ground slopes down as you walk into an open-air warehouse, until you realize the monuments are suspended above, and you are the witness, looking up.

“It bleeds rain,” Mariame told me. Rust comes down from the rafters when it rains, she’d learned from one of the docents. The floor is made from trees that were used in lynchings.

Near a ceiling corner, I found the place where half of my family is from, *Walker County, Alabama*. It was too high to make out the names of the victims. I wonder if their grandchildren and nieces and nephews still live in the place across from the Sipsey River my grandparents called “colored camp.” How can I repent of all the times I tolerated the n-word at their dinner table, because I didn’t know what to say?

Laurel found her county, too. She stood there saying the names, quiet as a prayer. There, we granddaughters of the white churches that lynched thousands, were able to practice remembrance alongside young women whose ancestors may have been enslaved by our ancestors.

Near the end of the memorial, we saw more soil from lynching sites. There, it wasn’t in jars, but in a display case the shape of a coffin. We stood looking at that glass casket full of dirt. Mariame gravitated to some soil that had fallen to the floor. She kneeled down to touch it. I did likewise.

As we were leaving, our feet moving across the wood of lynching trees, Lola started singing: *Oh, Freedom. Oh, Freedom. Oh, Freedom, over me. And before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.*

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Back in Connecticut, the Glastonbury MLK Committee invited us to speak about our trip in a community conversation. We got a tricky question from one woman in the audience: “As refugees, you’ve been through so much,” she said. “Why would you take a trip to visit the ugliest parts of American history? Why not go to Disneyworld?”

“The ugly past matters,” Gladys said. “We need to know it, so we can have a beautiful future.”

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These last few weeks, I’ve been immersing in the work of John Lewis. “As we participated in protest after protest” he wrote in *Across that Bridge*, “our faith was not dampened, as many people today, looking back on the history often wonder. It actually grew in power and strength. We felt that society had done its worst to us. It had beaten us, arrested us, and put us in jail, and still it could not silence the burning fire for freedom that was guiding our work.”

Recently, my mom told me that a cousin of ours was probably one of the AL State Troopers who trampled, whipped, and beat peaceful protestors on that bridge in Selma where Lewis’s skull was fractured in 1965.

People often asked Lewis how he endured so much aggression without striking his attackers back. “When people ask these questions,” he wrote, “they perceived that I was being abused, when in reality I was being freed...No one had the power to injure me. I had taken that power away by experiencing the worst they could do and discovering that it did not diminish me.”

Only one of Lewis’s attackers ever apologized. Elwin Wilson, who used to keep a Black doll hung on a tree in his yard, who beat Lewis bloody during the Freedom Rides, came to him 40 years later to atone. Lewis said, “I forgive you.” The two men started to cry and hug.

With that story, Lewis ministered to my revulsion at my history with revolutionary love. I’ve come to see the people beaten on that bridge no longer as victims, but as liberators with the power to heal their oppressors.

I think of young Lewis, with a fractured skull, marching for the Beloved Community, long as it takes.

I think of that 80-year-old warrior for love in his last days, writing a letter to encourage the present and future generations of the movement, and I believe it: Freedom is coming.

As Gladys said “Some histories are brutal. Doing the beautiful takes forever.”