

Hard Truth

Summer Saints Sermon Series: Lillian Smith (June 21, 2020)

Friendship Presbyterian Church

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

(Luke 4:16-30, NRSV)

Today we continue our “Summer Saints” sermon series, running until July 26. If you have been around Friendship for a while, you may remember us observing this special series over the last two summers. For several weeks at a time, we have jettisoned the lectionary and taken up some outstanding lives, most Christian, some not, but all with something to teach us if we’re willing to listen.

The “saint” for this Sunday is one that many of us, here in 2020, have never heard of: mid-20th century Southern writer and social critic Lillian Eugenia Smith. I have to confess that I had never heard of her, at least before two Friendship members introduced me last summer to her life and work. I am deeply grateful that they did, for not only have I

been inspired and motivated by her life and example over this last year, but now I can share her story with you!

Lillian Smith was born into a large, well-off family in Jasper, Florida in 1897. Her family moved to Rabun County, Georgia, in 1915, where her father had recently acquired property on Screamer Mountain and where he soon opened the Laurel Falls Camp for Girls. At the beginning, Lillian worked with her family to create the camp, but she then spent most of the next decade pursuing her own life ... receiving further education at Piedmont College and at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. She even spent a few years in China as the Director of Music for a Methodist girls' school, where she studied Chinese philosophy and internalized lessons that would stay with her in her future life's work.

However, her father's poor health forced her to return to Rabun County in 1925, and with his blessing, she soon became Laurel Falls' owner and director. Working closely with her life-partner Paula Snelling, this institution continued until 1949 and developed quite a reputation for being a progressive and well-rounded camp for young women.

For all that was accomplished there, Lillian Smith is best known today in historical and literary circles as a writer (of both fiction and non-fiction) who emerged in the 1940's, at the forefront of the southern debate over racial segregation – if one could call it a “debate” at the time.

Her 1944 debut novel, *Strange Fruit*, was an enormous commercial success, finishing as the year's #1 fiction bestseller, even though banned by booksellers in Boston and Detroit. It was the shocking tale of a secret interracial love affair set in a small Georgia town in the 1920's, and it ends with a lynching – depicted with such realism and pathos that, as one critic put it, it makes readers “as sorry and frightened for the lynchers as for the victim.”

She had found her voice. *More than ten years* before the Montgomery bus boycott, she stood virtually alone as a white southerner calling on her people to face the hard truth, and to put an immediate end to segregation laws and practices.

She followed this commercial success in 1949 with *Killers of the Dream*, a brilliant psychological and autobiographical work warning against the evils of segregation and Jim Crow. It *really was* hard truth, and easily the most courageous and insightful critique of the pre-1960's South by a white author. And its incisive brilliance was rewarded with ... *shock* ... and then *silence*. It so offended even those prominent southerners considered racial moderates, that reviewers and critics largely ignored it, and the effect was such that Smith was thereafter largely silenced as a writer, and nearly universally socially ostracized – seen as a traitor to her race, class, and region.

The great African-American writer James Baldwin said of her, “Lillian Smith is a very great, and heroic, and very lonely figure. She has paid a tremendous price for trying to do what she thinks is right. And the price is terribly, terribly high.”

Despite this ostracism, Smith would in the 1950’s and 60’s publish several more books, fiction and nonfiction, and numerous articles and essays on social justice and racial equality, all of which were written from her home on Screamer Mountain. She stayed connected with others in the struggle, including Martin Luther King, Jr., and worked tirelessly for justice until her death in 1966. She is buried next to the stone chimney left behind from the old theater building where girls from her summer camp would gather.

In our gospel text for this morning, we see the story of another who comes to his own people with some hard truth. It is the story of the formal inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry, following his baptism by John and his temptations in the wilderness. It is him going back home, to his own neighborhood, to his own deep roots of family and memory. You might imagine that what Jesus chooses to say in this moment, to declare his mission to the world, might be definitive, that it be a decisive clue to the meaning of everything to come. And so it is.

Jesus opens the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads from what is today chapters 61 and then 58. He claims the anointing of one who is to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the proclamation of the year of the Lord’s favor.

This is no private message to the solitary sinner – it is a *public* revolution ... It is the bold declaration of a Great Divine Re-set that addresses the *whole* of society and the bondage which has held it fast for so long. As such,

- It is *Good News* to the victims of power and those simply left behind ...
- It is a restoring forgiveness and reconciliation between peoples, on *God’s* terms, not ours ...
- It is a breaking free from resignation to “That’s just the way it is,” that insidious mantra that can justify any familiar cruelty or inhumanity ...
- It is literally a declaration of a divine Jubilee, an economic reckoning in which debts are cancelled and lands are returned to those from whom they were unjustly stripped!

It is, all together, the glad proclamation of the Kingdom of God – of God’s Dream for the whole world. And we today, as followers of Jesus Christ, look for and work for that day when this Dream will be manifest reality for all humankind.

But that’s not really how people first receive it. It seems that wired into the human heart is a tendency to assign the blessing of such promises to ourselves and our own kind first. We naturally assume that *we* are the ones primarily being addressed.

The good folks of Jesus' hometown are prize examples of this. With Jesus choosing to make this proclamation *here*, to his own people, to neighbors who knew his family, surely it is THEY who are in for the greatest blessings of all in this new order of the world! Jesus had already worked wonders in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, known to be the home of many Gentiles. And if he could spare that for *outsiders*, how much more does the Kingdom belong to his own kind of people?

But here's the thing. Last week, I said that Jesus always sides with the victims of oppressive power. And today I say this: Jesus *always* pushes back against those who think they have some kind of special claim on God's Love. Such folks have not yet discovered the motto of Jesus' ministry: "The first shall be last, and the last, first."

And so, on this day, we see that these *entitled* ones, gathered to hear the reading, are not really even the ones being directly addressed. It is the *marginalized alone* who can hear and receive this good news with an open heart and in the right spirit ... those who are now *excluded* from the center of community life ... even the center of this religious gathering ... whether by gender, or ethnicity, or age, or poverty, or impurity, or physical condition.

That this is Jesus' intention should be obvious from what follows ... that he compares his own mission with that of Elijah being sent by God to a Zarephath widow alone (a woman, a widow, one without a son, and a non-Jew to cap it off!). He compares his mission with that of the prophet Elisha healing only one leper in Israel, just *one*, but besides being an untouchable *leper*, that one also being a non-Jew, a Syrian officer, and an enemy of the people!

It's the home crowd's angry reaction to these words which reveals the saddest part of all. As those who *are* part of the regular life of the community, who *do* gather regularly to hear the Word of God and worship, they *must* know that God loves them, that their standing is not in doubt, but somehow Jesus' modest insistence that there's a special place in God's heart for those who have been pushed aside ... that "Marginalized Lives Matter" ... that the divine work for this day and time is to *seek* out those who have been *kept* out, and so welcome *everyone* home ... somehow, *this* is beyond the pale, and they want to throw him over a cliff!

The more I sit with all this, the more it all seems eerily contemporary. Lillian Smith's fellow southern writer William Faulkner once wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Indeed, it's not. Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Jesus speak across time – their words still able to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," inspiring others in every age, and in ours, to pick up the mantle of Justice. Lillian Smith did so in her own time and left a lasting legacy which can nourish our own work still today.

Years before others, she saw clearly the hard truth that the system of racial segregation had nothing to do with justice or true “law and order.” it was a system that by *design* pushed its black citizens to the margins, and that was legitimated by a Christianity, by a Church, that had long ago abandoned its prophetic roots. And in doing so, it had not only abandoned the most vulnerable brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, but had also impoverished the souls of the very white folk whose interests it was protecting.

In one of the most poignant passages in *Killers of the Dream*, Smith writes these words:

“Something was wrong with a world that tells you that love is good and people are important and then forces you to deny love and to humiliate people. I knew, though I would not for years confess it aloud, that in trying to shut the Negro race away from us, we have shut ourselves away from so many good, creative, honest, deeply human things in life. I began to understand slowly at first but more clearly as the years passed, that the warped distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child also. Each is on a different side of the frame but each is pinioned there. And I knew that what cruelly shapes and cripples the personality of one is as cruelly shaping and crippling the personality of the other” (p. 39).

This is why today we speak of *systemic* injustice. The sin of segregation was something that far transcended the sin of individual human hearts, and like it, the persistent yet elusive evil we are coming to confront today is greater than the sum of its parts. This pervasive distortion of humanity itself is like a spell that can hold an entire society in its grip. It is a bondage that still would hold us back, but it is also a bondage that the gospel of Jesus Christ is meant to break.

The gospel’s claim on us today is clear: to challenge us white American Christians to come to terms with some hard truth ... to come to terms with our own whiteness – with what it has meant, and with what it often still means. And to do this with integrity, we have to be willing to listen to the voices of those on the margins, those wounded by injustices we have for too long ignored. We have to do it, even if for now, we don’t completely understand what we hear, and so doing this won’t be easy.

We will hear some hard truth that hurts sometimes, because humbly owning up and accepting responsibility for our own part, our own complicity, and learning what a heart-felt repentance means for us is *never* easy. But it can also be a truth which releases us from those distortions of the human soul which keep us from being free as Jesus was free. It can be a truth that in God’s grace makes us ever more fully alive – to the glory of God!