

Go to the Margins

While reflecting on this week's powerful and challenging Scripture readings, Tuesday evening I stopped at Barnes & Noble and picked up Jon Meacham's newly released biography of John Lewis: His Truth is Marching On. Reading the Introduction, it struck me: John Lewis – in so many ways – is the personification of the central meaning of this week's Scripture.

In the Introduction of the book Meacham writes:

“Lewis rejected the tragedy of life and history; dismissed the suffocating limits of pragmatism and instead embraced the possibilities of realizing a joyful idea. He seemed to walk with Jesus himself, who called on his followers to give up everything to the cause of the poor and the downtrodden and the oppressed. The injunction of the Gospel is to take up one's cross, not to take it as it comes, to lose one's life in the service of others, not to keep one's options open.”

Sisters and brothers, what do the ancient words of Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus say to us in the summer of 2020 as we move toward the most critical election in modern history?

Well, let's look out our window:

In the midst of the coronavirus global pandemic, Biblical Scholar, Carol Dempsey – in a new article in the National Catholic Reporter – writes:

“Everywhere people take to the streets, marching in solidarity against racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, gender and orientation discrimination, police brutality and militaristic law enforcement. The margins have had enough! They rise up once again and push against the seemingly impenetrable boundaries of power that privileges the few and disenfranchises the many. The margins made their presence felt. They expose the myriad of injustices that have plagued, riddled and marred the human community for eons — leaving the web of life tattered, torn and tottering on the threshold of extinction. The margins speak truth to power. The press in on comfort zones. They will not accept being silenced, pushed aside, discounted any longer. The margins resist!”

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Brothers and sisters, this Sunday's readings invite all of us to go to the margins:

Jeremiah provides a window into prophetic engagement. His message and work put him on the margins. As much as he wants to ignore this call – which makes him an object of ridicule to his own people – he moves forward confronting injustice. Justice inflames his heart, ruminates in the marrow of his bones – giving him no inner peace... . He carries on... .

Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, offers a timeless challenge to allow ourselves to be transformed as we work for the transformation of structures, mindsets, attitudes and policies that have caused – and continue to cause – systemic oppression. Conformity to discrimination in any form is unacceptable. Paul calls for a renewal of mind. Today the experience of the climate crisis, Covid-19, the raising-up of the margins and death within all human and nonhuman communities on the margins should shake us to realize that we can no longer think the way the dominant culture thinks. Renewing our minds in a global context for the 21st Century is no longer an option — it's a necessity!

In today's Gospel Reading, our Jesus who lived on the margins, invites us to become uncomfortable. The Jesus of the Gospels challenges the political, social, cultural, and religious structures of the day... . His *work for justice* brings about his death by crucifixion — and today's *acts of injustice* crucify people on the margins: George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, Jacob Blake and the list goes on... ..

Sisters and brothers, the temptation for those of us who, in so many ways, are privileged, is to remain comfortable. But Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus call us to act prophetically, to be *dis-placed* to the margins.

As homework for the coming week, I'd suggest a question for reflection as we digest the challenging readings of this Sunday: "What burns in my heart and what runs through the marrow of my – our – bones?"

Secondly, I'd suggest that we read John Meacham's book. Meacham shares the following description of the commemorative visit back to Selma which John Lewis took in March of this year:

"Lewis mused to his fellow pilgrims about what had come to pass and what lay ahead. 'We took a little walk to try to dramatize the need for the rights of all of our people to be able to participate in the democratic process,' he said. 'In an orderly, peaceful, nonviolent fashion, we were walking, not saying a word. We were beaten. Tear-gassed. Bull-whipped. On this bridge, some of us gave a little blood to help redeem the soul of America. Our country is a

better country, we are a better people, but we still have a distance to travel, to go before we get there. I want to thank each and every one of you for being here' – and with this his voice rose almost to a shout, which in the Bible signifies a great call to action, often redemptive, miraculous action — 'for not giving up, for not giving in, for keeping the faith, for keeping your eyes on the prize. You're wonderful. You're beautiful. All of you look so good.'

"A voice from the crowd called out, 'We love you, John.'

'I — I love you, too,' he said. He paused. The breeze blew. The clouds shifted. 'We have a lot of work to do,' Lewis said. 'So don't get weary! Keep the faith!' Falling into the vernacular of the old days, he called for forward motion, for marching feet: 'Keep picking 'em up,' he cried, 'and puttin' 'em down.' It was, after all, what he'd always done."

Amen.