

Sin and the Other—Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year C
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
September 25, 2016

What should I wear to a protest? I'm a little embarrassed by the question now, but I can remember standing in front of my closet almost twenty years ago, trying to figure out what would be the best outfit in which to get arrested. I hadn't protested anything before, and no one had given me a manual on what a person should wear.

Several of my friends, more experienced than I, had invited me to go and protest the manufacture of parts for anti-personal landmines by a company in Minneapolis. I'm not quite sure that, at 18, I understood what it was I was protesting. I didn't realize I was using my voice and my body to agitate for the immediate cessation of a practice deadly to millions of people—mainly poor, rural farmers. I learned those things later, but at the time, I just wanted to go be with my friends and to get out of studying for the afternoon.

I remember the protest vividly; there were nuns there, singing hymns to God and being arrested one by one as they tried to disrupt the work of the company. They had brought boxes of tiny shoes to remind us of the cost to children who live and play near fields seeded with mines. I remember the loudspeakers and the leaders of the protest telling us all where to stand and the rules and regulations for being arrested. I remember activists coming up to the microphone and telling the story of the impact these landmines had all over the world and why we should care. (I, incidentally, did NOT get arrested, mainly 'cause I had no interest in making that phone call home.)

What strikes me, so many years later, is that I really had no idea what I was doing there. It was a novelty to me. I had no emotional connection to the people who were impacted by the landmines. I didn't see them as my brothers and sisters. They were too different, too far away. But, when I look back, I see a great crowd of people who had seen something incredibly important. They had seen that the men, women and children killed and maimed when a government chooses to seed fields with landmines were not really that different from us. They raised crops to feed families. They loved their children and wanted a better life for them. They longed to practice their religions in peace and to rest at the end of a day of work. The people for whom we were agitating were just like us. Children of God. And they deserved the same care, concern and safety as did any inhabitant of our planet.

This recognition of our shared humanity drove those protesters to dramatic action for the safeguarding of those people—mainly more poor than us; non-English speakers; non-Christians. And in the case of my particular college, mainly of darker skin than us. The protesters, I believe, saw in the victims of violence a mirror, and our common essence sparked their compassion. It's beautiful when we can see the other as ourselves. It's not as common as we'd like.

Jesus tells a terribly sad and shocking story today about a man, dressed in fine purple clothes and living behind walls, who passed by the same destitute man year after year and didn't help. The

destitute man, Lazarus, was covered in sores and lying in the street. The man in purple refused to help. He was not able to see Lazarus as anything other than a nuisance, if he was able to see Lazarus at all.

I have no idea why the man in purple didn't help Lazarus. Was he completely inured to the suffering of his fellow human being? Did the two men speak a different language from one another. Did he hate Lazarus for some reason? Maybe the man in purple had a sick kid at home and didn't have any time or energy for Lazarus. I have no idea. All the story says is that he did not help.

The man in purple is blind to the suffering around him until he dies and finds himself in rather hot water with God. It takes a shock, a drama, to get the man in purple to see Lazarus as a brother. This story has kind of an Ebenezer Scrooge vibe to it—the wealthy man who needs supernatural intervention before he can begin to serve the poor, the sick, the suffering.

The suffering is real, my friends. I don't like standing here and pounding on the pulpit to tell you all that there is pain out there in the world. I'm pretty sure you all know that. And I'm pretty sure that you mobilize yourselves, your families, your money and your time to actively combat the forces in this world that hurt the vulnerable and the destitute. So, I know you all know.

And yet, even the most sainted among us can have a hard time seeing people in great pain as no different than us. When children are shot in Cleveland; when refugees cling to boats crossing icy waters; when our own city suffers from massive poverty and segregation—we are all wounded. We are all diminished. The people in pain are not other. They are us. And I believe that this story from Jesus is acting as a bucket of cold water to shock us awake on those days when we are asleep to the pain around us.

Lazarus is all around us. And, even with the finest of intentions, it sometimes takes a shock, or a warning to help us see that this story doesn't have two characters. The rich man in purple IS Lazarus. They are the same. All the things that seem to separate them in the story are just illusions. As long as there is a Lazarus calling out for help, we are not a whole people, a whole society.

My prayer today is that we don't need the shake up from God to be able to see one another—really see one another. My prayer is that we don't need the violent stories, or the lightning bolts, or more of the grievous headlines in the papers to shock us into working toward the kingdom of God here on earth. But if we do need to be shocked into helping, may God deliver the message clearly and soon that we can get to the business of inviting everyone to this Table in love and in peace. Amen.