

The Power to Make Change

By Rev. DeWayne L. Davis

*“ . . . to be forced to live in fear was a great injustice . . . I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and mysteries . . . And I had no sense that any just God was on my side. ‘The meek shall inherit the earth’ meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up on Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail. My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box.” —Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, p.28.*

Unlike many of today’s religious “nones” and “dones”, I find retreat into the church, its mysterious, and biblical and religious metaphors, not to escape the world but rather, to find meaning in a world that is brutal, unfair, and unjust. In his most recent book on the America’s building its empire on the idea of race, Ta-Nehisi Coates points out that religious metaphors appear to be vain and useless in light of the brutality and plunder visited upon African-American bodies and the savage means by which civilization is built and ruled. While he does not dismiss those who are religious, I feel like he is inviting me to a riskier and much more difficult task: to revisit and interrogate the religious metaphors I have embraced as the “answer” to oppression and discrimination. Did I embrace them because I was steeped in them all my life? Is the hope and faith I possess based in experience or are they aspirational? How do I know things will get better? Has my class and education privilege led me to adjust to injustice because that privilege has given me a slice of the American dream? People all over the world will die in poverty, slavery, deprivation, and oppression. Can the biblical and religious metaphors that we recite and invoke in our worship and in our prayers inspire us to act and create real change?

I believe that religious and biblical metaphors that give our life of faith and discipleship meaning can be more than poetic flourishes relevant only to our worship. When Martin Luther King, Jr. transformed the Jericho Road in the story of the Good Samaritan from a setting in the biblical story into a metaphor for one’s life journey, he invited us to imagine a new social, political, and economic reality whereby all people are safe and secure. In his capable hands, a biblical image and metaphor was not used to ignore and deny the reality of danger and violence. Rather, a new metaphor was proffered as the way to change the reality. It was now up to the listeners to act to make the new vision a reality.

I suspect that the reason many of our metaphors have turned out to be less than helpful to our present circumstances is that we have failed to reinterpret them in light of new knowledge and new experiences. Even when biblical and religious metaphors are relatively generative and liberating, many of us are so mired in the narrowness of our vision and predictability of our biases and prejudices that we cannot imagine creating a more just world. Frequent invocation of the bible’s more powerful images and metaphors, including “kingdom of God,” “the new creation,” “household of God,” and the “body of Christ,” has had no perceptible impact in reducing racism, sexism, tribalism, violence, and genocide throughout the world. Sunday morning still remains one of the more segregated times of the week, and the most hateful and vitriolic responses to the Supreme Court’s recent marriage equality ruling came from churches.

Our religious metaphors are neither facts nor lies. Rather, they are the images and symbols that can be used for good or ill. My hope is that we would use religious metaphors to

remind us to strive for that which creates more love, peace, freedom, equality, wholeness, and well being. There are many biblical and religious metaphors that can help us to imagine an alternative ordering our lives that stands over and against the cynicism of our politics and the brutality of economics. If our imaginations are not inspired by the biblical and religious metaphors that envision unity, justice, and reconciliation, then I fear they will be relegated to poetic niceties that have no impact on our lived experience. The metaphors we know and have relied on for so many years do not have to lie fallow. It is up to us to use those metaphors to envision a new way of being and to make change.