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Seeing in a New Way: A Meditation

Rev. Kara Baylor

Carthage College, Kenosha, WI

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KARA BAYLOR

Seeing in a New Way: A Meditation



To you, O Lord,
I lift up my soul.
My God, I put my trust in you;
let me not be put to shame,
nor let my enemies
triumph over me.
Let none who look to you be
put to shame;
rather let those be put to
shame who are treacherous.

Show me your ways, O Lord,
and teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted
all the day long.

—Psalm 25:1-5

When Psalm 25 is used in Christian liturgy, the refrain is taken from verse 4:

Show me your ways, O Lord
and teach me your paths.

The writer knows there are more ways to see the world than just one. The psalmist is asking directly for eyes that can see new things in a new way. There is a desire to take a new trail.

The Rev. Kara Baylor is the Director of the Center of Faith and Spirituality at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. She has a Master of Divinity from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and a bachelor's degree in social work from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. At Carthage, Rev. Baylor provides direction for campus ministry, works with the Division of Student Affairs to develop spiritual programs and service activities, and assists with crisis intervention and grief support. This meditation is a compilation of select devotionals that she gave at the 2019 Vocation of a Lutheran College conference.

You can read this as a brave ask of the psalmist or—as I read it—a nervous one. Show me your ways, but please, please, please remember that I'm in deep need of your compassion, love, forgetfulness, grace, and justice.

In the summer of 2018, when I was attending the Vocation of a Lutheran College conference and saw the 2019 topic ("Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion") printed in the back of the program book, I knew that an email or phone call would come with a request. You see, there are two non-white pastors within the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities: Pastor Hazel Davidson of California Lutheran University and me. I'm the only black campus pastor at an ELCA school and that is why I was pretty sure I would be asked to lead devotions at the "Diversity" gathering. I almost said no, because, well, sometimes it can all just be too much to be the token black pastor in the room.

"Non-white leaders need to be the ones to share their stories, which is our story."

So why did I say yes? Because the other side of "it can be too much" is the fact that, in order for the ELCA to move beyond privilege and into equity and inclusion, we need to get used to people of color being in front of the room. Non-white leaders need to be the ones to share their stories, which is our story. It is time to see people of color,

as Rev. Dr. King put it, not simply by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character—by their own individual stories that, although part of our whole story, can still stand on their own.

The theology of the ELCA, when we live it out, is so life giving that I can't stop proclaiming it, even when I think being a manager at the local Kwik Trip, sounds like a good option as my new vocation. Our theology, deeply rooted in having been saved by grace through faith, is so powerful that it overrides and out-shadows all the years that I have had to spend making folks in the ELCA comfortable with my presence as a black female pastor.

I share my story simply because it is what makes me me. I share it because we believe we can learn more about God in the world by walking in another person's shoes and seeing the world in a new way.



One of the most familiar stories in the New Testament is the story of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10:25-37. The story is so familiar that we sometimes implicitly identify with its lead character and forget to see in other ways, to imagine ourselves in other characters.

We all want to be the Good Samaritan. I want to believe that I have at times in my life actually been inspired to act rightly because of this text. However, I also know that I have been one of the folks in the crowd simply listening to the exchange between Jesus and the lawyer and wondering if it has anything to do with my life. Honestly, though, I have never imagined myself to be the victim on the side of the road.

I was blown away this past summer when I opened up and started reading Pastor Lenny Duncan's new book *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* Rev. Duncan helped me see this text in a new way. He writes as a black minister to his 96 percent white ELCA church:

White Supremacy is the system that separates us. Take for example, our reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan. I read it from the perspective of the one lying in the road, who has been waylaid by bandits. You see yourself as the Good Samaritan. Or, best-case scenario, you wonder why you keep

passing me by on the road. Our neighborhoods are being colonized by well-meaning hipsters, and our deaths are on display on social media for all of Jerusalem to see. We carry our lynching tree up the hill like our Savior before us. (17)

Today is about new eyes. We must see our institutions, classrooms, residence halls, dinning spaces, study areas, and worship spaces through the lens of students who are not coming from the place of privilege.

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I didn't read any writings by Rachel Held Evans until after her death this past spring. This past summer, I began reading her book, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water and Loving the Bible Again*. In it she takes an honest look at the painful pieces of scripture that you can't ignore. In her chapter on deliverance stories, she introduced me to the work of Allen Dwight Callahan and his book, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*. In that book he writes,

African slaves and their descendants discerned something in the Bible that was neither at the center of their ancestral cultures nor in evidence in their hostile American home, a warrant for justice in the world. They found woven in the texts of the Bible a crimson thread of divine justice antithetical to the injustice they had come to know all too well. (iv)

The Crimson Thread of Divine Justice. I was captured by the image when I read it. It made me think of the students who return from their J-term experience in India with Jim Lochetfeld with the red bracelet on their wrist, changed from the experience. It made me think of my Advanced

Heart Failure Specialist, who loves to travel, and has the red string around his wrist as well.

For Callahan, the crimson thread is the thread of hope, the thread of justice, the thread of freedom that oppressed people can so clearly see in the tapestry of scripture. What is more, in Hinduism and across India the crimson thread has many meanings. Red—the color of fire and blood—can point to energy, strength, power, and determination. It can ward off evil. It can drive away fiends and bind together new friends.

I ended my series of devotionals at the 2019 Vocation conference inviting participants to tie a crimson thread around their wrists as a symbol of our collective commitment to moving beyond privilege to work toward inclusion and equity in all that we do. I asked that it be a reminder to start a conversation or two at home institutions about the share valued of creating spaces on our campuses where all can thrive. As “Rooted and Open” has it, each of us is indeed called and empowered to serve the neighbor so all may flourish.



I'll close here as I closed each devotional at the conference—with a prayer. Two prayers, actually. The first was written for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy for *The Sacramentary*:

God of justice, you adorned the human race with a marvelous diversity, yet clothed each of its members with a common dignity that may never be diminished. Put within us respect for that dignity and a passion for the rights which flow from it, that we may always champion for others the justice we would seek for ourselves. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen

The second is in my own words:

God of restoration. God of reconciliation. Reflector of all humanity. We gather in these days to do hard work. We gather to challenge the ways things have always been done to open up new ways and new opportunities for all to thrive. We gather to build relationships that can be transformative to our hearts and minds, and to the work of education to which we are called. We gather to dare be a part of your healing work here on earth, where all people will be welcomed to develop their gifts and talents for the sake of the world. Open our eyes and hearts to the paths before us. Lead us in the ways that are life-giving to your whole creation. Amen.

Works Cited

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