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Jesus and his disciples are in a boat. The weather threatens, the lake is dangerous, and it is night. Gentiles live on the other shore. And still Jesus says, "Let us go across to the other side."

It's not safe. Jesus knows that it's not safe. Jesus' disciples know that it's not safe. And yet, they get in the boat and head toward the other side. Partway through their journey, a storm pummels the boat. Jesus is asleep. He is sleeping during the storm. We can't really blame him; just imagine how tired Jesus must have been, what with everybody and their brother needing him all the time. Well, the disciples need him now. They wake him up. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" they ask him. And Jesus wakes up. He stills the storm.

My sisters and brothers, we are in the midst of a storm. Nine people died this week while reading the holy texts of our faith in the place where they worship. They were the targets of a terrorist act, gunned down by a white killer because they were black.

And we can act surprised and angry; we can be sad.

But the truth is that this act of violence is just one incident in chain of violence perpetrated against black people. This chain stretches back to very beginnings of the country where we make our home.

The disciples ask Jesus, "Do you not care that we are perishing?" And Jesus showed them that he did, in fact, care. More than that, he brought his disciples safely to the other side.

Do we care that our black brothers and sisters are perishing? Do we care that the life expectancy in black neighborhoods of Baltimore is 20 years shorter than it is in white neighborhoods? Do we care that blacks go to prison for nonviolent drug crimes at rates that are ten times that of whites? Do we care that so many young black men have lost their lives to police brutality that it hardly seems like news anymore? Do we care that nine black followers of Jesus Christ were murdered in cold blood after welcoming a stranger to their Bible study?

Jesus Christ cares that they are perishing. I am convinced that if Jesus physically walked the earth today, he would make his home among black folks. Look at the people with whom Jesus kept company. They were people who were reviled. People who were lepers, people who were bleeding, people who held jobs that made them hated in their communities. Jesus lived and moved and ate dinner with the people who had already lost almost everything. He made his home with the people who bore the brunt of society's abuse, and with the people who lay trampled at the bottom of the ladder.

I am white, and thus I occupy a privileged place in our society. I live comfortably in a town filled with mostly white people, near a university that was financed by people who made their fortunes off slaves, in a county that was the first in Tennessee to secede during the Civil War. I moved to this place from a northern city, and lest you think that I believe that racism is only a sin of the South, I will tell you that Milwaukee, the place I last called home, is now the second most racially segregated city in the United States, after Detroit.

Because I am privileged, I rarely worry for the safety of my children or about the way that people will treat them, or about educating them about systemic racism for their own protection. I can go to the grocery store in sweatpants without having people blame my race for my sloppiness. It is easy for me to find children's books with pictures that resemble the people in my family. If I go to the ER for a medical problem, I don't have to worry about whether I will be treated poorly because of my race.¹

I did not put the systems of racial privilege or discrimination in place, but I certainly benefit from them. And I will confess. Before Trayvon Martin, before Michael Brown, before Eric Garner, before Tamir Rice, before Freddie Gray, before Charleston, I never really spent much time thinking about myself as a racial person.

I didn't have to think of myself as a racial entity. White people usually don't. As a white person, I have always had the freedom to embrace, dismiss, fear, neglect, or remain oblivious to anything outside the culture of which I am a member. I've also always had the advantage of being able to criticize my own culture without significant repercussions.

God cares about those who are perishing, and in this country, we have to own that a disproportionate number of the lives that are being lost, of the lives that are being taken, are black lives.

We are in the middle of a storm. We can't see our way out of it. Confronting our own privilege is scary stuff. It's messy. It's challenging to everything that we've ever known, and it is woven into the very fabric of our society. It makes us feel as though we are not safe.

But Jesus is with us in the storm. He invites us to go with him to the other side. Following Jesus has never been safe. If we want to follow him, we have to look at our own sin. We have to repent of that sin. We have to turn around and get in the boat and ride with him into the storm. I can guarantee that it will be painful, that it will involve sacrifice, and that people who hold power will think that we are crazy.

In the face of deep sadness and deep struggle in the world, I used to pray for Jesus to come back soon. I still hope that he will, of course, but I'm tired of waiting, and I believe that Jesus might be tired of waiting for us. Because when he returns, I'm not convinced that we'll recognize the one whom we're supposed to be following.

¹ This list is adapted from Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack."

He has shown us who he is. He is the one who brings justice to those who are oppressed, who sets the captives free, who opens wide the doors of the banquet to those who never received invitations.

And yet, we keep asking Jesus to be with us, in whatever it is that we feel comfortable doing, instead of listening to Jesus, who calls us to go with *him*.

After Jesus calmed the storm, he asked his disciples, “Why are you still afraid?”

I believe the disciples were afraid because they were beginning to come to grips with the person they had decided to follow. He led them straight into the storm. And while he had shown them his care, his protection, and his power, the boat was still pointed toward unfamiliar territory. They were beginning to understand that even when he brings them through the storm, Jesus is not safe.

But here’s the hopeful part of the story for me in light of the week’s events—In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus doesn’t seek out followers who are heroic in their faith. He doesn’t seek out disciples who will understand everything that he says, or who can follow him perfectly, or who aren’t afraid of what comes next. He wants people who will follow him. That’s it. He asks them to stick with him, to be present, to go with him, even to the cross. He knows it will be messy, and he calls them anyway.

This week, I’ve heard a lot of my fellow white people say that they just don’t know where to begin when it comes to admitting their own complicity in the problems of race that we face today. Meanwhile, Jesus’ blood is still being spilled. Every time one human takes the life of another, every time we try to blame racial violence on other things, every time we allow hatred and ignorance and bigotry and privilege to go unchecked, Christ’s own body suffers. Jesus knows it will be messy, and he calls us anyway.

Jesus calls us to go with him into the storm, but he also leads us through the storm. Jesus calls us to go with him to the cross, but he also leads us to the empty tomb. In him, the worst thing is never the last thing. Black bodies, white bodies, brown bodies, we are all members of his resurrected body, and he longs to make us whole.

Prayer:

We need you now, Jesus. We need to you to guide us to the other side, out of our comfort zones, to the place where your mercy and your justice meet. We fear this might be dangerous. Help us to trust you. Give us eyes to see the ways in which racism is built into the structures of our society. Give us ears to hear the voices of those who suffer as a result. Make us humble. Make us repentant. Make us willing. Convict our hearts, that we might work to build the reign that you have promised. Amen.