

“No More of This!”

A Sermon for Worship with Communion on the Fifth Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

April 2, 2017

Text: Luke 22: 47-51

In her book *The Invention of Wings*, author Sue Monk Kidd explores the evolution of the abolitionist movement through an imagined look at three real individuals who lived through it. Two were sisters born into the privileged life of the antebellum South, Sarah and Angelina Grimke. The other was Hetty, also known as Handful, a slave at their family’s Charleston home. In the book, set in the early 1800’s, Hetty was presented to Sarah as a birthday gift on Sarah’s 11th birthday, complete with a lavender ribbon tied around her neck. Sarah though a child was already struggling with her feelings about slavery, not understanding how one person could own another. These were further exacerbated when she witnessed a slave being whipped to unconsciousness with 15 lashes. The incident left her unable to speak for months and when her speech finally returned, it came with a significant stutter.

In the book, Sarah took action, writing a letter of manumission – a letter freeing Hetty – because she had decided she could not, would not, own another human being, no matter what anyone else in her family believed. She awoke the next morning to find the letter, which she had left for her father, Judge Grimke, torn neatly in two and placed on the floor outside her door. Hetty was to remain her slave, whether she liked it or not. Over time the

two girls became close, spending hours together more as playmates than anything else. Sarah taught Hetty to read and write, keeping their efforts secret because to do so was illegal with horrific punishments attached, especially for the slave. When her younger sister Angelina was born, it wasn't long before she too followed in her sister's anti-slavery footsteps to the horror of the rest of the family.

The book tells the story of the growth of these three women into adulthood through parallel story tracts, in which first one and then the other's experiences unfold, recounted in relationship to each other. Most compelling in this extraordinary book is the way in which all three women over time reach the point where their abhorrence of slavery – whether as one enslaved or as one pushing back against it – overshadows everything else in their lives. “No more of this!” becomes the rallying cry of each, pushing Sarah and Angelina into fleeing North to join the Quakers in Philadelphia and, eventually forcing Hetty to decide escape from slavery once and for all was the only option remaining for her and her younger sister Sky even if death was the outcome.

Sarah and Angelina Grimke, two sisters of privilege who gave up everything to fight slavery, also became leaders of the emerging women's rights movement of the mid 1800's. These were real women who became famous rabble rousers in their own time and yet today they are scarcely remembered. Sarah was the

first woman to write a feminist manifesto which was published, becoming a foundational document for the women's rights movement. Angelina herself was a famed orator, the first woman to speak before a legislative body. Hetty the slave was also a real person but the record of her being given to Sarah as a gift is the only remaining trace of her in history. Hetty's sister Sky is a fictional character yet her story is equally compelling reflecting as it does the life experiences of so many forgotten slaves.

“No more of this!” was the rallying cry of the Grimke sisters who became passionate and highly effective leaders of the abolitionist movement. “No more of this!” was surely the wail of desperation which propelled Hetty and Sky and so many others to risk the horrors wreaked upon escaped slaves who were caught. No more of this! Powerful words which echo across the centuries still resounding with us today. “No more of this!” were also the first words of Jesus in Luke's version of Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane.

All four Gospel versions of Jesus' arrest have similarities in their descriptions of this crucial event in the final week of Jesus' life. All four stories take place in Gethsemane although it's identified differently amongst them. All four recall Jesus' agony over what is to come as he prays while the disciples sleep. All four describe the seemingly unavoidable confrontation between Jesus' disciples and Judas who arrived with the group of men charged

with arresting Jesus. Curiously, who exactly was in this group of men is one of the main points of difference between the four stories. Luke describes them simply as “a crowd” while Matthew and Mark say it was “a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders.” John is even more specific recounting that Judas is accompanied by a detachment of Roman soldiers as well as police from the chief priests and Pharisees.

This matters because the group of people accompanying Judas – whether it’s an armed mob or a detachment of soldiers – is what sets up the only violent interaction between Jesus’ followers and the people seeking to stop Jesus. Even more curious, all four accounts say this violent altercation was precipitated by the actions of Jesus’ disciples. One of them strikes first with a sword. This is surprising on the face of it since these men had just spent almost three years living and traveling with Jesus, a man whose message emphasized love, mercy and forgiveness. We can only assume the disciples were overwhelmed by a surge of adrenalin as the moment they had been fearing for months is finally at hand. All four accounts agree that the person struck and injured in this attack was the slave of the high priest with John’s Gospel giving him a name – Malchus. We do know he was seriously injured in all four accounts. His ear was cut off!

Only in Luke does Jesus respond to this act of violence by screaming “no more of this!” at which point he heals the man’s

injury. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus directs the disciples to sheath their swords but does not heal the man. Instead he tells the crowd that those who live by the sword will die by it. At least that's what Matthew has him say. In Mark Jesus is more concerned with reminding the crowd he is not a bandit so they should not treat him as one. In John, Jesus again gives instructions that swords be sheathed only in John this order is given specifically to Simon Peter, who was identified as the one who wounded the slave Malchus. But, again, no healing is recounted. What's up with that? Why does only Luke describe Jesus as healing the injured slave? Did the other three just choose not to include it? Or is something else going on here? It's a fascinating discrepancy between these four Gospel accounts and when we encounter this kind of discrepancy we have to ask why.

Of course, I don't know why Luke tells this story as he does any more than I know why the others tell it as they do. But I do find Luke's version intriguing. The key to understanding why he includes this part of the story when the others don't might be more visible if we consider the whole context within which Luke places this story. His account of the last supper, the major event immediately preceding this one, is very different from the others in that Luke includes a lot of details from the table conversation at that final meal. He talks about how the disciples had an argument about which of them was the greatest of the disciples. Jesus

listens and then patiently tells them they are missing the point, that it doesn't matter who is the greatest because all of them are expected to become the least, servants of God's mission even in dangerous times. Seemingly undaunted, the disciples move on to a discussion of how they are prepared to follow Jesus wherever his work leads him. Simon Peter especially says he will follow Jesus to prison and even to death if that is what's needed. Jesus says to him, "before the cock crows you will deny me three times."

Finally, they have a conversation about needing to be prepared for what lies ahead. Jesus reminds them that when he sent them out before he had told them to take nothing with them, relying instead on what they would receive from the people they would be staying and talking with. This time, however, he tells them to take "a purse and a bag." Even more curious, he tells them to sell their coats to buy swords. He says this, he explains, in order to fulfill the prophecies about him in the Old Testament. But still, this seems very odd and out of character. The disciples report to him that they already have two swords amongst them and Jesus responds, "it is enough." So, they proceed to Gethsemane where Jesus prays and the disciples fall asleep. Finally, the crowd arrives guided by Judas and the violent confrontation begins.

"No more of this!" Jesus shouts out, according to Luke. And he heals the injured slave. Why? I think this part of the story

matters so much to Luke because Luke sees Jesus as someone accessible to and caring for all people not just some of them. Theologian Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder argues that Luke ‘s theology “is grounded in a Jesus who comes not just to offer compassion to those who are wounded but also to speak to the evil of those who wound.” (DeYoung, et al, Editors) Nowhere is this more visible in Luke than in this story where Jesus confronts the violent behavior of his own disciple by stopping it in its tracks and then immediately healing the wound it created. Luke’s Jesus will have no part of violence under any circumstances, even when it comes to his own life and safety.

This leaves us with a question Luke’s version of this story poses for us every time we read it: How are we to respond when we are confronted by evil in any of its many forms? Are we to return evil for evil? If so, when does it stop? How does it stop? Who stops it? And where is God in the midst of such righteous violence? Luke’s story of Jesus’ arrest reminds us that Jesus confronts violence no matter who is committing it. He does not excuse it because it is his disciples who respond violently to the men who came for him. Jesus condemns violence and those who perpetrate it, no matter how justified they might feel it is. And that, dear friends, poses quite a dilemma for us.

We live in a violent society in a violent world. We live in a time when certain groups of people feel they are entitled to engage in

violence against others for all sorts of reasons, none of them justified. We live in a world where weapons proliferate while children starve or die of preventable disease. What will it take for us to say, “no more of this!” and then actually do something? What would doing something even look like? It seems like an impossible task for us as individuals and even for the church. And yet, this is exactly what Jesus is calling us to do. No more of this!

Sarah and Angelina Grimke did something. In a world that considered them invisible they wrote and talked to anyone and everyone who would listen. They were the original community organizers confronting a billion dollar industry which eventually collapsed because of their efforts and people like them. We too have voices to raise and letters to write whenever government falls short of doing its job. And we can do much more than that. We can make acts of kindness a part of our everyday lives, with those we know and those we don't because all those acts of kindness are cumulative. We can become loving caretakers of God's Beloved Community along with everyone and everything in it. We can find it within ourselves to shout out along with Jesus and the Grimke sisters, “No more of this!” as a plea for justice. Then maybe, just maybe, no one else will ever have to plead like Hetty and Sky, “no more of this” when a hand or heart is raised against them. What we do does make a real difference in the lives of real people. We know that. Let's do that. Amen.