“Same as You and Me: The Challenge”

On my very first day of seminary (way back in the fall of 2014), a question was asked of my class. Now, you can imagine that many questions were asked of us during seminary—right? I mean, that is the purpose of a seminary education—to get us to critically examine God and all things God-related. But this question was different. And this question has stuck with me since that day—this has been one of those challenging questions that has affected me in numerous ways.

The class was called Context Matters and it was one of our portal classes, those foundational courses that would provide the backbone for the rest of our studies—at its rawest level it was a combination of church history and pastoral theology and it was taught by two professors who could not be more different. One, who happened to honor us by preaching at my ordination service a few years ago, was younger and trained in a more collaborative approach to education and the other, who I only ever had for this particular course, but she remains one of my favorite people from Phillips Seminary, was “old school”. This professor was the sort who had the knowledge and you had to ask the right questions to get it out of her! This was (and is) a challenging professor and she was the one who asked this troubling and troublesome question. It was in the context of the early church and the apostles and what this new Christ-following movement was trying to accomplish in the world. The older professor stopped in her tracks—looked out at the class of eager seminarians and very simply asked us: “What would you die for”.

What would I die for? What would I give up my life for? I like to think that I would put myself between any of my family and friends and any harm they might encounter…but where does that

line end? I love this congregation, but would I die for any of you? Maybe? Probably? I don't know—and I hope we never have to find out—but it's an important question—especially when we are discussing topics concerning God's justice that profoundly affects other people—topics that anger people—topics that threaten people. It's dangerous to discuss God's Justice because there are many people who do not wish to see God's justice come to be. And some people will resort to violence to make sure certain voices are silenced.

Let's hear the stories of some brave people who worked to bring God's Justice to light—one was martyred, one was murdered and one was able to live to a good long age continuing her work for racial justice well into the last days of her life: HARRIET TUBMAN

Harriet Tubman was born around 1820 on a plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland. Her parents, Harriet ("Rit") Green and Benjamin Ross, named her Araminta Ross and called her "Minty."

Rit, her mom, worked as a cook in the plantation's "big house," and Benjamin was a timber worker. Araminta later changed her first name to Harriet in honor of her mother.

Harriet had eight brothers and sisters, but the realities of slavery eventually forced many of them apart, despite her mother's attempts to keep the family together. When Harriet was five years old, she was rented out as a nursemaid where she was whipped when the baby cried, leaving her with permanent emotional and physical scars.

Around age seven Harriet was rented out to a planter to set muskrat traps and was later rented out as a field hand. She later said she preferred physical plantation work to indoor domestic chores.

Harriet's desire for justice became apparent at age 12 when she spotted an overseer about to throw a heavy weight at a fugitive slave. Harriet stepped between the slave and the overseer—the weight struck her head.

Harriet's good deed left her with headaches and narcolepsy the rest of her life, causing her to fall into a deep sleep at random. She also started having vivid dreams and hallucinations which she often claimed were religious visions (she was a dedicated Christian). Her infirmity made her unattractive to potential slave buyers and renters, though.

In 1840, Harriet's father was set free and Harriet learned that her mother's owner's last will had set them all free. But their new owner refused to recognize the will and kept Rit, Harriett and the rest of her children in bondage.

Around 1844, Harriet married John Tubman, a free black man, and changed her last name from Ross to Tubman. The marriage was not good, and John threatened to sell Harriet further south. Her husband's threat and the knowledge that two of her brothers—Ben and Henry—were about to be sold provoked Harriet to plan an escape.

On September 17, 1849, Harriet, Ben and Henry escaped their Maryland plantation. The brothers, however, changed their minds and went back. With the help of the Underground Railroad, Harriet persevered and traveled 90 miles north to Pennsylvania and freedom where she found work as a housekeeper in Philadelphia; however, she wasn't satisfied living free on her own—she wanted freedom for her loved ones and friends, too. She soon returned to the south to lead her niece and her niece's children to Philadelphia via the Underground Railroad.

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act allowed fugitive and free slaves in the north to be captured (or recaptured) and enslaved. This made Harriet's job as an Underground Railroad conductor much harder and forced her to lead slaves further north to Canada, traveling at night, usually in the spring or fall when the days were shorter. She carried a gun for both her own protection and to "encourage" her charges who might be having second thoughts. She often drugged babies and young children to prevent slave catchers from hearing their cries--it's believed Harriet personally led at least 70 slaves to freedom, including her elderly parents, and instructed dozens of others on how to escape on their own. She claimed, "I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Harriet found new ways to fight slavery. She was recruited to assist fugitive slaves at Fort Monroe and worked as a nurse, cook and laundress. Harriet used her knowledge of herbal medicines to help treat sick soldiers and fugitive slaves. In 1863, Harriet became head of an espionage and scout network for the Union Army. She provided crucial intelligence to Union commanders about Confederate Army supply routes and troops and helped liberate slaves to form black Union regiments. Now there's an image for you! Harriet Tubman, spy!

Harriet had an open-door policy for anyone in need. She supported her philanthropy efforts by selling her home-grown produce, raising pigs and accepting donations and loans from friends. She remained illiterate yet toured parts of the northeast speaking on behalf of the women's suffrage movement and worked with noted suffrage leader Susan B. Anthony. In 1896, Harriet purchased land adjacent to her home and opened the Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Indigent

Colored People. Towards the end of 1910, Harriet's health began to deteriorate and eventually forced her to move into her namesake rest home in 1911. Pneumonia took Harriet Tubman's life on March 13, 1913, but her legacy lives on. Schools and museums bear her name and her story has been revisited in books, movies and documentaries. She even had a World War II Liberty ship named after her, the SS Harriet Tubman. In 2016, the United States Treasury announced that Harriet's image will replace that of former slave-owner, Andrew Jackson. Which it does. Think about that the next time you use a ten dollar bill.

Over 55 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and delivered one of the most influential speeches in American history. Over 200,000 people had gathered on the National Mall for the March on Washington, where King spoke of a dream in which "sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." While most of us are familiar with the powerful refrain King used to conclude his climactic speech, few will recall the unique circumstances by which the Atlanta-born minister arrived at those famous four words, "I have a dream." In fact, King was midway through his planned remarks when gospel singer Mahalia Jackson urged the reverend to "tell them about the dream." Can't you just hear her: "Tell them about the dream!"

He obliged, improvising the remarks that would go on to become firmly planted within the collective American consciousness: "I have a dream," Dr. King declared, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

It's been over five decades since King's historic speech, but as flagrant racism, rampant criminal justice inequality, and affronts to voting rights continue to dominate the headlines, the civil rights leader's words continue to seem as troublingly aspirational as they did in August 1963. Sadly, too, while many remember Dr. King's trademark four-word creed of black liberationist ideology "I have a dream!", not so many will recognize the more than 350 speeches King delivered during his lifelong campaign against inequality.

Ten days after delivering one of his most daring and controversial speeches, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," in which King objected to the injustices of the Vietnam War for the first time in such a public and unflinching way, he told a Stanford University audience of the injustices occurring at home. The reverend did so in a revolutionary way on April 14, 1967: by describing America as two separate nations, one in which "millions of young people grow up in the sunlight of opportunity," and another in which "millions of people find themselves living in rat-infested, vermin-filled slums." The reverend was talking about the injustice of segregation.

King's "The Other America" speech is characterized by scathingly honest lines, like, "I submit that however unpleasant it is we must honestly see and admit that racism is still deeply rooted all over America. It is still deeply rooted in the North, and it's still deeply rooted in the South."

We all know what happened to Rev. King—as often happens to people who speak out for God's justice. If they are not shamed into silence in one way or another, violence always remains an option for those who believe they are threatened by the bright light of truth. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr—martyred because he believed it when he was told we're all equal.

And then, on the night of February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida, George Zimmerman fatally shot Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American high school student. Zimmerman, a 28-year-old mixed race Hispanic man, was the neighborhood watch coordinator for his gated community where Martin was visiting his relatives at the time of the shooting. Zimmerman shot Martin, who was unarmed, during a physical altercation between the two. Zimmerman, injured during the encounter, claimed self-defense in the confrontation.

In that widely reported trial, Zimmerman was charged with murder for Martin's death, but acquitted at trial on self-defense grounds. The incident was reviewed by the Department of Justice for potential civil rights violations, but no additional charges were filed, citing insufficient evidence.

Trayvon was wearing a hoodie and had a package of "Skittles" candy in his hand. He was a boy who had gone to the store to buy candy and he was murdered. Murdered because of the color of his skin. How do we, as caring Christians, respond to the implicit hate and racism in "stand-your-ground" ideology? That's what killed Trayvon—the belief that one man had a right to be in the neighborhood and another man, boy really, didn't have that same right—even though it was HIS neighborhood, too.

A couple of weeks ago, in my own neighborhood Dillon's, a white man kicked and verbally abused a child of color, simply for being present in the Dillon's store. This man had numerous other issues, including reported mental illness, but he still felt completely comfortable attacking a young black child. Even in his decreased mental state, his default positon was racism.

So that's the challenge to all of us. It's easy to say that we understand that racism exists or that we want to do all we can to end racial injustices, but what are we doing about it? How do we change these default positions? We get it in our heads—but we don't feel it in our hearts. This is such difficult work—this belief that we're all equal—we're all the same. And as the lives of these three black human beings remind us, the murdered, the martyred and the one who went on to live a life doing her good work, black lives matter. Trayvon's life matters—Harriet Tubman's life matters—and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's life matters. How can we make them matter even more? How do we help God's justice come to life and remove barriers that prevent equality? I'm curious this morning--Would you die for a person of color to receive fair and equal treatment? And if not, what would you die for? We have members of this congregation who are daily, fighting racism, by their example and by their mere presence. I'm grateful for these examples.

If you are really interested in this conversation and in learning ways to fight racism, then I suggest you join one of upcoming house churches—these are safe places to begin dismantling the racism in your own world. I've also included 8 everyday ways we can all fight racism and listed them in the contemporary word. Simple steps you can take right now, today, to tear down walls that divide us—to open doors to conversation—to extend the hand of welcome--ways to build God's justice right here and right now.

Amen ***Please stand as you are able and sing our new closing benediction—"Weave"