

Susan Gascho-Cooke

March 25, 2012

Psalm 51:1-12

John 12: 20-33

*What do you do when a seed falls to the ground?*

In the past several months of my life, I have been regretfully neglectful of current events and the news in general. My commute isn't long enough to get in much NPR, and Annali is not shy or quiet about stating her preference for "Go Monkey Go" over "All Things Considered." We don't own a television, either, so I have found that the news I get is definitely a limited by my perseverance – I read about whatever headlines I click on, instead of being forced to hear a story about something I'm less interested in before they get around to the one(s) I really want to hear.

All that to say, it's only in the last week or so that I've become aware of the story of Trayvon Martin. Trayvon was a Florida teenager who was killed last month in his own neighborhood, walking home from a convenience store. He was black, he was walking and talking on the phone while wearing a sweatshirt with the hood pulled up. For this suspicious behavior, he was fatally shot *by the Neighborhood Watch*, allegedly in self defense, which is legal in the state of Florida apparently. Turns out he was on the phone with his girlfriend, and carrying Skittles candy in his pocket. Hopefully you're not hearing this story for the first time this morning.

The story of Trayvon – both the tragedy of his death and the bizarre situation of his known killer not being arrested for it – are just building steam this week. The hoodie he was wearing has come to symbolize the story – in large part because of the comments of some saying that the hoodie made him the one to be feared. In the words of Geraldo Rivera, "The hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon's death as George Zimmerman" [i](the man who pulled the trigger). Much like the argument that the clothes a woman chooses to wear could justify aggressive sexual behavior toward her. So, folks are uploading pictures of themselves in hoodies, saying, "I am Trayvon" in solidarity. Some folks, anyway.

For the most part, the folks I've found who are talking about this story or posting about it online, are my black friends. Without exception, my black Facebook friends have been posting about it, and commenting on others' posts about it. I gotta say, I've not seen much white traffic about it. A few folks have posted on it, a few commented, but mostly we have been going about life as usual, it would appear. I'm not saying that a person can be judged by what they do or don't post on Facebook, (I certainly don't post about everything I notice, or everything I care about, support or protest) but it is an interesting comparison.

*What do we do when a seed falls to the ground?*

In the past week the case of Tyler Clementi has also returned to the media. He was a young, gay man – a freshman at Rutgers – who was unknowingly recorded on webcam kissing another man in his dorm room, by his roommate. Tyler committed suicide not long after, and his roommate is in the legal process to defend his actions.

*What do we do when a seed falls to the ground?*

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says, "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground, dies, and is planted there," it cannot bear fruit. He was supposedly speaking of his own impending death.

What could it mean? For Jesus, responding to death and violence was very important. He often chose to stand between people and the stones the world would try to throw at them. When it comes to Jesus' own death, I think sometimes our liberal churches give up on trying to find the meaning. We don't like the implications of a God who would have a role in his son's death. We don't like theories of atonement, or any idea that blood could be part of a sacred transaction. But I think there is incredible significance to this passage about fallen seeds bearing fruit. I would be one of those people arguing that God can surely *not* mean for us to have learned from Jesus' life and death that blood is a magical agent, or that God requires sacrifice to be able to forgive us for being the fallible humans we were created to be. But seeds do fall to the ground. Death happens, sometimes violently. Jesus' death was violent and unjustifiable. Like Trayvon's. Like Tyler's.

Maybe one lesson from the Easter story is that we are meant to bring life from death. We are meant to tend the legacy of the fallen, and transform the flawed realities that cause wrongful death into life-giving realities where the vulnerable can legitimately feel safe. Maybe it's not a feel-good, reassuring message that good can come from evil, but a challenge, a mandate, a calling *to* bring good from evil, light from darkness. If we cannot keep ourselves from doing evil ... and as a whole we cannot, as the Psalm for today laments ... then go on, as the Psalm says, to be transformed – be open to learning something new *in our secret heart*. Not just pay lipservice to the politically correct thing to say. But have a *willing spirit* to be given wisdom in our most *secret places*.

What would it mean for us, here, in Lancaster – where we are supposedly more content with where we are than any other group of people in the United States, according to the recent *USAToday* story? [ii] How do you think people of color here responded to the survey? What would it mean for us, as a primarily white group of people? And many of us care deeply about racism, want to *be* ANTI-racist. But how is that workin' out for us? I certainly wonder for *me*.

I thought about wearing a hoodie this morning, or posting a photo of myself on Facebook with a hoodie on and up. But I couldn't imagine it making any kind of statement other than looking kind of ridiculous. There's just nothing dangerous-looking about a middle-aged white woman. I've often thought that spy movies have it all wrong. The best possible person to get away with something, unnoticed, is an average-looking, overweight, middle-aged woman, not a Bond girl, or Angelina Jolie.

But maybe the point isn't whether or not I could look like a dangerous person. It's that I can easily look like a victim. Think of the history of lynching in this country, and how often the perceived vulnerability of a white woman was part of the story in some black man's death. (which is not to say that white women shouldn't be cared for as victims, but that we are seen as worth protecting or avenging more quickly than others).

One of the mothers I'll quote this morning also shared this:

*I learned in law school, and it is still true today, that it is the color of the victim, not the perpetrator, that is the one of the greatest determinants in criminal sentencing. The harshest penalties are given for crimes against white women and the least harsh, even for the same crimes, are meted out when the victim is "only" black.* [iii]

Maybe the question for today is, *What do we do when the seed that falls to the ground is black?*

I remember singing the song that Beth just led when our congregation was reeling from the news of Glen Lapp's death. I think we instinctively know what to do with seeds that fall to the ground when they are our own. We allow them to change us, grow in us, give us the nudge we needed to move out of ourselves into a stance of world-changing, to honor what has been lost – to protect the seeds we still carry. Our martyr tradition as Mennonites has deeply formed us, to this day.

I think of the fact that today, March 25, is remembered in the church calendar as the time of remember Mary's Annunciation – when an angel announced that she would conceive a son, God's son. March 25-Dec 25 – nine months til Christmas. The planting of the seed that would fall to the ground. Another mother of a vulnerable, brown son who was seen as dangerous.

I think of the stories I've been reading in the news as black mothers reflect on their sons. These are stories I've heard before, in one form or another, from my friends of color. It's come up in conversation between Teman and me, in how we interact with our daughters, who are "of color," and who the world will likely see as only black. I want my daughters to know of love and acceptance, and to instill that confidence that any dream can be achieved. That's what my parents told me. But there are *"talks that black parents have with their children.*

*Sometimes the talk goes like this, "Can you believe how silly this is: some people will not like you because you are black. Isn't that crazy? You just ignore them and keep on doing your thing, child. You are my child, you are black and beautiful and fabulous. And I love you!"*

*Sometimes the talk goes like this: "Baby, you will have to work harder, be more superior in school and at your job in order to get ahead. That is just the way it is." [iv]*

*Or: "You are bright. You are funny and smart and sometimes silly... You are capable of being anything you want to be in this life -- even President of the United States one day. But when you walk out of the safety, protection and loving arms of our home, you are walking while black, and only our prayers can protect you then. [v]*

*And then there is this one: "You better smile, nod, and be quiet. Don't look those people in the eye; they will think you are sassing them, and they might kill you. Just because you are black." [vi]*

If I'm honest, in my *secret* heart I thought that lesson was a leftover of old fear, of times gone by. Sure, people still discriminate, old prejudices die hard, there is still racism, but real peril? Real danger? Surely a boy in a hoodie is just that, a boy in a hoodie. Surely my daughters will not need to be given such a talk. Surely you can trust the police, the Neighborhood Watch. Surely these are just tragic exceptions that don't add up to a rule.

After hearing black men I know describe hearing the clicks of automatic locks as they pass a car on the sidewalk, or seeing white people cross to the other side of the street at dusk or night time when they see them approaching ... I should have known.

Having worked in the ERs of Atlanta, and seen the bodies of far too many young black men lay lifeless after brushes with violence; seeing their family members be far less surprised by these outcomes than I expected, I should have known.

Seeing the disproportionate number of people of color in prison in this country, the increasing disparity in resources and household incomes ... I should have known.

Maybe the hoodie did kill Trayvon... not his. Ours. The cloth we put over our own heads to willingly keep out the full picture, the peripheral vision which might be hard to compute as a white person in a world where things are often going pretty good if we focus on the right places. Cloth we put over our heads because we fear others, and fear (whether legitimate or not) can justify the most violent of actions. Especially when the one in fear is the one with the power, the one with the gun.

What is it about the hoodie, his and ours, that we allow to make us strangers, to hide from ourselves and one another? Mother Theresa once said, "Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other - that man, that woman, that child is my brother or my sister."

*What do we do when a seed falls to the ground?*

So, how do we move beyond confession? Do we really want our *secret heart* to be schooled? Do we really want a willing spirit, when being willing might open us up to acting in ways that might make us look like fools? It can feel foolish to talk as a white person about problems of racism. Believe me, I know!

Drew Hart, a black, Anabaptist blogger wrote one suggestion this week, and it's deceptively simple:

*My challenge is for White Christian leaders (particularly those who have stated verbally their desire for racial diversity) to make solidarity with their systemically vulnerable black and brown brothers and sisters, standing with us as we expose and shame these atrocious acts. Please, research it yourself, then talk about it within your own sphere of influence, deciding how you can best make a stand in solidarity for love, justice, peace, and reconciliation in your communities and nationwide. [vii]*

I'm not sure what being anti-racist looks like as a Mennonite church. I have some guesses. I know that serious work has gone into exploring that question here at CMCL over the years. I'm guessing it's a question we won't be able to answer ourselves, but in conversation and then in partnership with churches and people of color here in this community.

So, I close with Martin Luther King, Jr. These are words from his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" to the white southern clergymen he had expected support from, only to be disappointed:

*If I have said anything ... that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me...*

*Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.*

[i] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/23/geraldo-rivera-trayvon-martin-hoodie\\_n\\_1375080.html?ref=mostpopular](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/23/geraldo-rivera-trayvon-martin-hoodie_n_1375080.html?ref=mostpopular) -- an interesting read, as Geraldo argues he is simply giving a version of "the talk" to parents of children of color

[ii] Daniel Klotz, "Well-Being Is Higher in Lancaster Than in Any Other U.S. Metro Area,"

February 28, 2012, [www.lancasterblog.com](http://www.lancasterblog.com)

[iii] Frances Cudjoe Waters, "A Mother's Reflections on the Death of Trayvon Martin." [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frances-cudjoe-waters/trayvon-martin-black-boys-mothers\\_b\\_1369971.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frances-cudjoe-waters/trayvon-martin-black-boys-mothers_b_1369971.html)

[iv] The Rev. Jacqueline J. Lewis, PhD. "Trayvon, Emmett and Dangerous Black Bodies." [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-rev-jacqueline-j-lewis-phd/trayvon-martin-emmett-till-and-dangerous-black-bodies\\_b\\_1374019.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-rev-jacqueline-j-lewis-phd/trayvon-martin-emmett-till-and-dangerous-black-bodies_b_1374019.html)

[v] Frances Cudjoe Waters, "A Mother's Reflections on the Death of Trayvon Martin." [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frances-cudjoe-waters/trayvon-martin-black-boys-mothers\\_b\\_1369971.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frances-cudjoe-waters/trayvon-martin-black-boys-mothers_b_1369971.html)

[vi] The Rev. Jacqueline J. Lewis, PhD. "Trayvon, Emmett and Dangerous Black Bodies." [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-rev-jacqueline-j-lewis-phd/trayvon-martin-emmett-till-and-dangerous-black-bodies\\_b\\_1374019.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-rev-jacqueline-j-lewis-phd/trayvon-martin-emmett-till-and-dangerous-black-bodies_b_1374019.html)

[vii] Drew G. I. Hart, "Trayvon Martin and the White Christian Leader's Response," March 19, 2012. <http://drewgihart.com/2012/03/19/trayvon-martin-and-the-white-christian-leaders-response/>

\*\*\*\*\*

Susan Gascho-Cooke  
Lead Pastor  
Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster  
332 West Orange Street  
Lancaster, PA 17603  
(717) 392-7567  
[www.communitymennonite.org](http://www.communitymennonite.org)