

## SERMON “The Lures and Hazards of our Comfort Zone” 2/26/23

Dickens waxed pretty memorable with the best and worst of times. I’ve been thinking and feeling a lot lately about comfort. It ain’t what and where it used to be. Family and friend conversations have to be guarded. Banter, casual conversation in the public arena ditto. Comfort may apply to food and a quilt, but it’s not the aura or context we once thought protected us.

What does comfort zone mean to you? Home, sleep, complete safety? If you don’t already have one, or if you do, how many emails a week do you get telling you you have won a doorbell camera? Not long ago I took a wrongly delivered USPS package to a house three doors away and rang the bell. The doorbell said can I help you? I said your package came to our house by mistake. The doorbell says I’m a block away and will get it, so just leave it. So I say this is the neighbor who went looking for your runaway cat last week. Then the doorbell says, Oh, well I’m really in Georgia but my Mom lives nearby and will pick it up.

So if you think of comfort as home, the tech world abounds with safety measures to sell us and security concerns to keep us awake at night.

As much as we might say life is a search for truth, for meaning, we could also say it is a search for comfort.

Recent very common life experiences raised the issues of comfort for me. Trips through airports are right up there with trips to the dentist. If you are traveling to a place you equate with paradise, which must be often because you are leaving a place many do just that, WE LIVE IN PARADISE - parenthetically my most frequent Walmart greeter responds to my, I hope you’re having a good day, I don’t risk HOW ARE YOU for fear he will tell me - but his usual response is LIVING THE DREAM - to travel, to get to a place we hope will be comfortable after the airport and air experience, we comfort ourselves with IT COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE. (Like what? Crashing?)

Similarly we go to the hospital in any emergency to get to a more comfortable place. I am deeply grateful to Cleveland Clinic for my health episode late January. I went in with dizziness and associated mobility difficulty and after a night of tests I was admitted to a room that said FALL RISK on the door. It could have said BED ARREST because I learned by throwing my feet over the side half-rails, lights and alarms brought attention quickly. I was in a bed that told on me if I tried to get out of bed. That sign on the door could also have said WATER TORTURE because a drip was in my arm, mandatory hydration and when I needed relief, the nurse responded to disconnect my arm but not as quickly as the alarm going off.

Comfort as we age doesn't diminish in importance but seems more elusive. And we ignore signs at our peril, signs like fall risk and water torture. ***And we learn that comfort becomes hazardous to our health.*** One of my daughters recently gave me an Iwatch. Its intent I've discovered wasn't the timekeeping aspect, but the health monitoring. It sets activity goals for me every day and sends little caring messages like TIME TO GET UP AND WALK. So sedentary as welcome as it usually is is also a health hazard. Clearly on the road to ATROPHY.

Most of us I think would admit that DISCOMFORT was often the setting, the context of unexpected awakening, that proverbial light bulb going on that changed us, for the better. In 1996 I attended a Birmingham UK seminary for continuing education credit. A course choice was A GAY MAN'S GUIDE TO HEBREW SCRIPTURE. I knew I had residual homophobia from snacks offered me as a kid delivering papers. So the lecturer in 96 said "Let's open our sacred text to LEVITICUS." Leviticus is one of the least read of Hebrew scripture. It is a listing of laws, which bring condemnation. He reads a verse in Leviticus 11 that sounds like two men lying down together are committing evil. Three verses later, the verse "Children who curse their parents shall be put to death." He closes the book and asks, How many here believe that is holy writ for all time?

Two Episcopal giants, Bishop John Spong and Chaplain Peter Gomes of Harvard wrote in painful detail about the SINS OF SCRIPTURE(Spong's title) against gays, women, Blacks and Jews. THE SINS OF SCRIPTURE. Once you digest that, you can't read sacred writ for guidance, comfort and strength in the way you used to. In the way you hoped to be guided, comforted and strengthened til your end. Comfort requires some uncomfortable sorting.

We are at the end of BLACK HISTORY MONTH. When did our awakening about the blacks' history in America begin? Was it ROOTS? Ahas have come on a pretty random schedule. Juneteenth was mind-blowing because it brought home that many black families got left behind economically because their homes and businesses were destroyed AND NOT JUST IN TULSA OKLAHOMA. And now we keep seeing police misconduct toward unarmed folks of color and the outcry needs to affirm the need for good blue and the disproportionate lethal behavior of blue on black. There have been two cases caught on camera since that Memphis nightmare a couple weeks ago.

A word that makes me and many uncomfortable in the area of race relations is REPARATIONS. Who owes whom for the awful history of treatment of citizens of color in the century after the Civil War? That included rounding up black men for nothing crimes like jay walking to incarcerate them and make them a free labor force where needed, and housing discrimination plenty.

So last week an Episcopal priest and Oped writer Tish Harrison Warren published a title, *The Churches' Complicity in the Colonization of the world*.

Warren reports on the work of Ekemini Uwan, a co-author of the book "[Truth's Table: Black Women's Musings on Life, Love, and Liberation](#)".

Uwan's work centers on theology, culture, race and politics. She is also a charter member of the International Civil Working Group of the Permanent Forum for People of African Descent at the United Nations. Uwan's parents immigrated to the United States in the early 1970s from Nigeria. She is part of the Ibibio ethnic group and grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. In December, [Uwan spoke at](#) the United Nations in Geneva, asking that Catholic and Protestant churches be included in plans for global reparations. Warren talked with Uwan about her address, her work toward reparations and her Christian faith, which she understands to be the motivation behind her work.

**Warren:** Your speech on the U.N. floor was titled "Churches Owe a Debt." Why was it important to you to highlight churches' complicity in white supremacy and racial violence?

**Ekemini Uwan:** Because I am a Christian and because I love the church, it gives me more credibility to call the church to account. Love covers over a multitude of sins, absolutely. But love also holds accountable. Love also exposes deeds that are in the dark and brings them into the light so that we can have not *false* peace, but *true* peace.

**ADVERTISEMENT Warren:** What are some ways that the Catholic Church and the Protestant church were complicit in racial violence?

**Uwan:** Both churches were primary vehicles through which the trans-Atlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, colonialism and imperialism spread. This was done through theological and ecclesial malfeasance, via the [Doctrine of Discovery](#) — which is what laid the groundwork for the subjugation of Indigenous people in the United States and African-descended people and Africans. It was a set of legal principles formulated in the 15th and 16th centuries that governed European colonizing power.

In 1452, Pope Nicholas V issued the papal bull [Dum Diversas](#). That decree granted permission to King Alfonso V of Portugal to invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue all Muslims and pagans, anybody who was non-Catholic or not a Christian. It granted permission to Alfonso to subject these people to perpetual slavery.

The language it uses of "pagans" and "enemies" reveals the implicit and explicit dehumanization and denial of the image of God within African people. It viewed them as only worthy of exploitation via perpetual slavery. That is how we got the groundwork for the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism.

Katharine Gerbner's book "[Christian Slavery](#)" highlights how Protestant Christians weaponized the Christian faith and the Bible against enslaved Africans. Anglicans and Dutch Reformed and Lutheran slave owners in the Dutch West Indies — all the way up to Virginia as well — conceived of their Protestant identities as fundamental to their status as enslavers. They constructed a caste system based on Christian status in which "heathenish" slaves were afforded no rights or privileges.

Protestant enslavers knew that Christian conversion and baptism were incompatible with slavery, so they excluded the enslaved from the Christian faith. Then, if enslaved Africans did come to faith, they would say, "Your faith only frees your soul, not your body." So, your soul is free in Christ, but we get to own your body.

White slave owners did get reparations because they had to emancipate enslaved Africans. They were paid \$300 per enslaved person that they emancipated. That was a lot of money back in 1862. African Americans have demanded reparations since the colonial era. They petitioned for freedom dues. They sued former enslavers for unpaid labor and asked for land to start their lives as free people who wanted to thrive.

So this is not new. I'm carrying on a tradition that's been passed down to me, to our generation. This is something that has been happening in this country for some time. And it was the oppressors who were given reparations.

END OF WARREN QUOTE. Now I'm really uncomfortable about reparations when I learn that the SLAVE OWNERS GOT REPARATIONS for their loss of property and inconvenience and ***freed slaves did not***. And it was just published that FOR A CENTURY FRANCE FORCED REPARATIONS on the people of Haiti who fought for liberation and won, so the people and country of Haiti got freedom and perpetual poverty. And WE, France's ally since our revolution, HELPED FRANCE ENFORCE IT.

Comfort and discomfort need to be RETHUNK. Comfort is not always a good thing and discomfort is not always a bad thing. A couple people here have said to me recently, "Remember, don't believe everything you think." People today, it seems, are grouped in churches and on media, definitely on social media, to confirm what they think. A long time ago I was surprised to hear that the saying "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable" was attributed to newspapers, not to churches, not even UU congregations. So the news was once thought to contribute to awakening. THAT CERTAINLY SOUNDS LIKE news outlets and I hope religious outlets are capable of adhering to truth and in business so long as they seek it. Our ability to become smarter and better may hinge on our tolerance for discomfort.