

SIXTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST | SERMON

Mark 6:1-13 | St. Paul & the Redeemer | The Rev. Catherine Healy | July 4, 2021

A few days ago, we celebrated the feast day of Pauli Murray, who is honored as the first Black woman ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church. She¹ has been widely regarded for a long time—so widely, in fact, that in 2018 the church’s governing body voted to add her to the calendar of saints, overriding the rule that no one can be recognized as an Episcopal saint until they’ve been dead for fifty years. It was clear to the assembly that Murray’s legacy was already secure.

Murray was a true visionary—ahead of her time in every way. Her ordination happened late in her life; in her first vocation, she was a civil rights attorney. In the 1940s, she was the only woman in the student body at Howard Law School, where she graduated at the top of her class. As a law student and an early-career lawyer, she did groundbreaking writing on the legal implications of race and sex discrimination, which inspired the work of Thurgood Marshall and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. She won a fellowship that other Howard graduates had used to continue their studies at Harvard, only to receive a letter telling her, “You are not of the sex entitled to be admitted to Harvard Law School.”

Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown.

During her years at Howard, Murray used the phrase “Jane Crow” to describe the intersecting struggles of being a woman and being Black in America. Forty years later, the law scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw would introduce the term “intersectionality” into academia; sixty years later, we would all find ourselves talking about it. But at the time, Murray was dismissed by her Black male classmates and ignored by her white female fellow activists. She helped found the National Organization for Women, only to abandon it when it became clear to her that the other founders cared more about wealthy, white women than they did about liberation for all.

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Even as Murray was viewed as a woman, and treated like a woman, she never considered herself to be a woman. As early as the 1930s, when she was a young adult, she described herself as “one of nature’s experiments; a girl who should have been a boy.” She spent decades seeking testosterone therapy and asking unsympathetic doctors if they could help her better match her body to her brain, which she knew for certain was male. If all this is so, you may wonder why I use the words *she* and *her* to describe her. The answer is that these are the

¹ *There is much debate about the pronouns Pauli Murray would choose to use if she were alive today, and scholars variously refer to Murray using he/him, they/them, and she/her. As discussed later, this sermon text employs

the pronouns that Murray used to refer to herself during her years as a priest. Learn more from the Pauli Murray Center: <https://www.paulimurraycenter.com/pronouns-pauli-murray>.

pronouns Murray used most often to refer to herself. Gender is complicated and identity is messy. Those things have always been true.

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I would hope that most of us who call ourselves Christian desire to live more like Jesus. But for myself, I would rather become like Jesus in all the fun ways. To be renowned as a great teacher and healer; to be surrounded by trusted friends.

Nobody wants to be rejected by the people they should be able to trust. Nobody wants to be laughed off for sharing their vision of a better world. Nobody wants to speak the truth into an empty room—or a crowded room where no one is listening.

Being a visionary and a prophet is an extremely lonely calling. But this, too, is what it means to live like Jesus.

Today we will celebrate the baptisms of Ilsa and Soren, who are still at the very beginning of their journey toward living like Jesus. Their parents and godparents will promise on their behalf to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”

Most of us would make that promise, and most of us want to be the kind of people who can keep it. But respecting other people’s dignity doesn’t mean that they will respect ours. And striving for justice doesn’t mean that we will always be praised.

My prayer for Ilsa and Soren is that they will grow into the courage they need to be visionaries and prophets. That they will grow into true ministers of the Gospel, by virtue of their baptism, to which all

of you bear witness. To do that, they will have to speak hard truths, and sometimes be rejected, and sometimes be misunderstood. But they will be fortified by their faith in God, and the love of this church.

But that is only one side of the prayer.

All of us will occasionally have the chance to speak up as visionaries and prophets. Much, much more often, though, we will be the ones bearing witness: the supporting cast members who are standing around in the prophet’s hometown, hearing ideas that make us uncomfortable, sometimes from unexpected sources we would rather ignore.

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But we can change that.

We can change it by listening, really listening, to the people who are pushed to society’s margins—the youngest, the poorest, the ones we are taught to believe have nothing to say. Jesus’ childhood neighbors didn’t listen to him. Pauli Murray’s classmates and colleagues didn’t listen to her. We don’t have to make the same mistakes.

Murray was ordained to the priesthood in her late sixties, when her life and career had already been long and fruitful. In her autobiography, she wrote about that day:

Whatever future ministry I might have as a priest, it was given to me that day to be a symbol of healing ... Descendant of slave and of slave owner ... Now I was empowered to minister the sacrament of One in whom there is no north or south, no black or white, no male or female—only the spirit of love and

reconciliation drawing us all toward the goal of human wholeness.²

There are as many ways to minister as there are Christian believers, but we are all called to be symbols of healing. We offer that healing by bearing witness to the presence of Christ, who draws us all into that spirit of love and reconciliation—in the way we speak, and the way we listen.

Amen.

² Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage*.