

**7 Epiphany A**

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**Living Integrity**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens OH**

By the time it was released on Christmas Day, the movie *Hidden Figures* had already been praised by critics as one of the best movies of the year. It broke box office records, and has been nominated for several awards, most notably a Screen Actors Guild Award, two Golden Globe Awards, and three Oscars. While the film is a dramatized version of lives and contributions of three African American women who worked for NASA during the space race in the 1960's, much of the good the movie has done is to offer those of us who have seen the movie a look at the past from a fresh and valid perspective and to see for ourselves the remarkable ways even one individual can make a positive difference. It is more than just a feel-good movie, it is an inspiration, and helps us see how the words of Jesus in our Gospel today don't have to sound quite so impossible as they might at first.

Especially the very last few words in the Gospel about being perfect as God is perfect. If you had been squirming in your seat when you heard the parts about turning the other cheek, loving enemies, giving not just the coat off your back but everything you are wearing, going the extra mile and generally sounding like you are completely willing to be taken advantage of, then the last part about being perfect must have sounded like something no human could live up to. And in a way, if you felt like that, you are right. What Jesus is talking about in today's section of the Sermon on the Mount is not only hard, it does sound impossible. After all, how can any one person be like God?

Yet, as New Testament scholar and retired bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright wrote, these hard words of Jesus aren't meant to be impossible-sounding, because they are also Good News. Good News N. T. Wright saw when Jesus himself went through all those situations during his trial and crucifixion. He was struck, and he responded as he instructed in our Gospel today. Just as he responded when He was stripped naked and forced to carry his cross by Rome. He died forgiving those who were killing him. According to Wright, because Jesus lived the words he spoke on that mountain, we who follow him are free to live into them too. His words aren't meant to discourage his followers, they were intended to inspire them. Those of us who follow Jesus know that his death

wasn't the end, and as Rachel Held Evans said on Friday at the Church Leaders Conference happening at the Kanuga Conference Center in North Carolina this weekend, "God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life."

That faith is what can inspire us to follow Jesus in ways that lets that faith be seen by others. I know it still might sound impossible, and this is where I want to go back to the movie *Hidden Figures*. As an amateur astronomer and science lover, I have been interested in NASA all my life. I grew up watching the Space Shuttle lift off and land and used to listen to their missions live on line. I read about and watched movies and documentaries about those daringly exciting 1960's space race days of NASA and learned a lot from the administrators and astronauts. It seems to me NASA isn't just about space exploration; they are about exploring how to create new ways to work together when doing something that has never been done before. So, I planned on going to see the movie *Hidden Figures* because of my love of all things NASA and space exploration. It isn't always the drama of the exploration of the moon, or planets, or outer space that interests me; it is the amazing story of how so many different people with different skills, backgrounds, perspectives, and passions all came together to make it happen. To me, it seems it is a common core value that makes it all come together successfully. A core value that can be observed in the lives of the people. That shared core value is the very thing Jesus was talking about on mountain in his sermon when he talked about being perfect as God is perfect.

The word translated "perfect" from the Greek word *telos* in today's Gospel doesn't mean flawless or without mistake, which as Desmond Tutu has written is more a cause for anxiety than it is inspirational. The word *telos* means wholeness, completeness, and implies living what a person believes in what they say and what they do. Another word for that concept is integrity, from the word integrated, another way to describe wholeness. Integrity is the common core value I see in Jesus' words from this section of his Sermon on the Mount.

While all the women in the movie *Hidden Figures* exemplify integrity, this morning I want to lift up Dorothy Vaughn, because of how she inspired me.

Dorothy Vaughn was one of the women working as a computer at Langley Research Center, a NACA, later NASA facility in the days when complex mathematical equations were done by people before the digital computing machine that we take for granted was invented. Dorothy wasn't just good at math, she had been a teacher before working for Langley, and was very good with

people. She was the first supervisor of her department and had a genuine care for the women under her supervision. In the days of Jim Crow, Dorothy saw her work at Langley as an opportunity to help Americans achieve space flight and in doing so, show why segregation needed to end and to help end it, and take as many people with her as possible.

In the movie, which differs a bit from the book, which I am currently reading, I was struck by a scene near the beginning where Dorothy remarked how she felt left behind when her two friends, Mary and Katharine, were promoted to departments more directly involved with the goal of launching a human being into space. She said she felt glad for her friends, and while in theory the promotion of one was good for all the African American women working at Langley, it didn't feel that way. The plot of the movie then shifted to Mary and Katharine who with different styles helped make some amazing progress, even getting laws changed and ending segregated rest rooms. But all that time I wondered about Dorothy Vaughn and if she was really left behind.

A subplot of the movie is the installation of the first digital computing machine, intended to replace humans and human error that can be made. What impressed me about Dorothy was when she saw the machine coming in that would most likely replace her and the women under her supervision, she did not get discouraged. Instead, she got smart, and took it upon herself to learn the language of the computing machine AND to teach that language to the women she supervised. In fact, at least in the movie, I admit I haven't gotten that far in the book yet, Dorothy learned it so well she could work the computing machine better than the men who were assigned to do so. This advantage was seen not as a threat, but an opportunity, and led to not only Dorothy but every woman in her division being reassigned to running the machine that didn't replace anyone, but ended up helping them all do their jobs better so that America, now a slightly more integrated America, could send the first human beings to the moon.

Dorothy, an active member of the African American Methodist Episcopal Church, did not become hopeless or afraid when the new machine showed up. Instead she saw an opportunity to grow, which is what can happen when a person isn't afraid, and growth not just for her, but for the women she supervised and NASA too. In that situation there were no losers, only winners. Because that team that worked on the computing machine was not just African American, it was integrated.

Years later, in an interview about what it was like being an African American woman in that time and place, Dorothy humbly responded, “I changed what I could, and what I couldn’t, I endured.” To me, Dorothy exemplified what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel today because she lived as a person who believed every human being is made in the image of God, and lived in a way that reflected the love of God even when she stood up to the subtle and not so subtle racism in her workplace, as she did so with a firmness and fairness I envy. Through her life, she was courageous enough to let everyone see what could be, and that helped make the changes that made the seemingly impossible a beautiful, more whole reality.

So, if the words of Jesus sound impossible to you here today, I hope you take heart and I hope the life example of Dorothy Vaughn can help you see Jesus’ words aren’t meant to be lived by you alone. Jesus himself has already lived and died and risen, so that we can all have the courage to end that which needs to end in the trust that resurrection life will spring from that end. I hope we can all realize that the words of Jesus were never intended to keep anyone in abusive relationships or situations, be they racial, physical, emotional, or any other form abuse can take. That Jesus’ was empowering all his followers to end such devastating abuse not with violence, which can perpetuate the abuse, but with the love of God that sees beyond fear to opportunity, community, and hope. That is the kind of resistance that can lead to a better, healthier, and more whole life for all people.

Today I hope we can see that such wholeness is possible. It just isn’t always easy. But it is possible. And perhaps one opportunity for each of us today is to reflect on other people who have exemplified the core value of integrity like Dorothy Vaughn, the other African American women at NASA, or maybe a person you know who lives an integrated or whole life. Another opportunity today’s Gospel presents is to look for ways to live our lives with integrity, to end cycles of anger with forgiveness, to recognize an unhealthy situation, learn what we can, and try other ways so the situation can improve. Whatever opportunity presents itself, I hope you will recognize it when it comes, and if you feel it might be impossible, I hope you remember Jesus’ words and remember you are a beloved child of God, made in God’s image, and so is everyone else, and God is in the midst of the opportunity, waiting to work with you to help shine the light of God’s love, which can lead to the creation of beautiful, possible, wholeness.