

What Summer Reading Has to Do with Our Faith

I love reading. I have loved reading for as long as I can remember—as a child I used to stay up late (long past when my parents had thought I had gone to bed) in order to finish the book, I was currently immersed in. At that young age I read to hear the stories of others, to learn about their experiences, their joys, their challenges—to feel connected to others in a way that felt somehow more vulnerable and real than the interactions that I watched adults around me engage in with one another. Reading was a way for me to seek understanding—it was a way for me to practice listening.

Today, as an adult, I still love to read. I enjoy all sorts of genres and benefit greatly from hearing about the world through the eyes of another. Reading has become a spiritual practice for me throughout my life—when I am overwhelmed, exhausted, bored, and am about to turn to my phone, computer, or TV, I turn instead to a book. When people I am friends with find out how much time I spend reading, they are often astonished—they wonder how I find the time, and sometimes imply that my time spent reading must equate to a habit of laziness. In fact, reading is not a silly habit that I need to actively make time for in my life—it is a practice of quiet time and reflection that I depend on in order to function holistically. Through hearing the stories of others, I feel closer to God. But if reading is my spiritual practice and my reading list only favors the voices of those who are like me, I am missing out on the vastness of God. I have been guilty of this on so many occasions. Of tending only to see or perceive as esteemed and worthy those authors who are like me.

As summer begins, this is the season of summer reading recommendations. Though it is not shocking, many of the posts that I see recommended to me are lists of white authors, or are fluffy stories deemed appropriate for ‘reading on the beach.’ These are lists of books to help folks who have privilege deny the pain of the world, avoid the reality of oppression that we participate in, and ‘escape from it all.’ The ability to ‘escape from it all’ in books is a sign of privilege. The ability to, in one’s free time, choose not to think about the hardships that others face (and the ways in which many benefit from that hardship), is a sign of privilege. This existence in a literary vestige to those who are like me brings me no joy. As I continually reevaluate my reading habits and watch for sinful patterns in my choice of books, I ask myself the question—why do I read? Do I read to feel good about myself? To ‘get away from it all’? To deny reality? The answer is no.

I read to hear the stories of others. I read to listen—to hear what another person sees in this world, to seek understanding. I read to hear in someone’s own words about their history, their experiences, their life. I read to feel closer to others, and subsequently to feel closer to God, and when I read only or primarily the voices of those historically privileged, I miss out on relationship with the fullness of God. I sinfully ignore the voices of so many who have stories to tell, truth to speak.

In this sinfulness, I feel separate from God. Hearing the stories of others, in all of their intricacies and complexities, makes me a more whole person. In the insidious world of division and hatred, the continuation of oppression and violent narratives about those different from us depend upon

all of us—all of God’s beautiful, unique, intricate people—not hearing one another’s stories. When we don’t hear one another’s stories, it becomes so easy to buy into false narratives of scarcity—to believe that we are in competition with one another, that our liberation is not interrelated and interdependent. The onus is on each of us to do the work of listening for the voices of those we have wrongfully and sinfully overlooked or deemed unimportant. In this work of listening, we will be encountered by the very voice of God.

So, during this season of summer reading, what will you read?

In peace, Pastor Marissa