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Yesterday, the first Saturday of September, the Kentucky Derby was run at Churchill Downs. Having grown up in Kentucky, this is so wrong to me because Derby Day has taken place on the first Saturday of May for 145 years. It is almost a sacred holiday in Kentucky, and so to run the Derby in September just seems so wrong! But that's the case for so much that has gone on during this pandemic year of 2020, so the lesson for me is that we all need to seek more patience and in prayer ask God to help us each one do what needs to be done so that we can get through this together and hopefully run the Derby in May next year as it should be!

Prayer: Merciful and loving God, as we gather this morning we hear your Word for our lives. May we find your love in that Word and live in the days to come in the light of that love. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Recently, in response to the protests for racial justice there has been a call for law and order. Of course, some of the protests have become lawless at points, there were riots and looting in about a dozen cities, and in a couple of cities the protests have been very intense and involve some very violence with the police. And now, in the past couples of weeks we have seen people showing up at the protests with firearms, and there have been shootings and the deaths of at least three demonstrators. All of this is just deplorable and must end soon. The scale of the looting and rioting, though, is less than in the nineteen sixties, thank goodness, but the calls for law and order seem to me to be much more intense than I remember from the earlier period of unrest. Perhaps most absurdly, however, is that some of the calls for law and order recently were made while completely ignoring the 1939 legislation of the Hatch Act, or to use the precise title of this Federal law, "An Act to Prevent Pernicious Political Activities," prohibiting some classes of Federal employees from engaging in partisan political activity. Ignoring the absurdity for a moment, if that might be possible, I do think the question of law and order is important, but I believe that we need to examine it very closely, because much actually rests on the point of whose law and whose order.

For us, as Christians and as citizens, I believe once more that it important to look to our traditions and especially to the Scriptures to see the inspiration and light they bring to us in this matter. Our biblical lessons that we have heard this morning go right to the heart of this matter: God's word to Moses and Aaron are the beginning of the commandments from God to the people of Israel. This is God's law and God's way. God's command to Israel to celebrate the Passover, first marked by the people of Israel as the prelude to their deliverance by God in the Exodus, is also the call for the yearly remembrance of this event, an annual recognition of what God has done for the people of Israel to secure their freedom. The commandments for this remembrance are specific and thorough, from how to cook and prepare the meal as well as how it is to be consumed, "you shall eat it hurriedly." One other provision in this law that strikes me as important is that it attempts to be as inclusive and egalitarian as possible, because if a household is too small for a whole lamb, they will join

together cooperatively with their neighbors, so that all can partake together in this celebration of Israel's freedom. With this commandment to Moses and Aaron and for the whole people of Israel, a new relationship is begun: God will provide the law, the Torah, for the people of Israel, a guide for them on how to live their lives in holiness and how to live in a manner that will be blessed by God. As the people move into their freedom, leaving the slavery and oppression of Pharaoh and the Egyptians behind them, God's law will instruct them on how to worship God in freedom and how to live in a justly ordered community, caring for each other in the fashion proscribed by God.

Centuries later, in the midst of oppression and the tyrannical rule of another vast empire, this same question of the place of law and order for the followers of God was once again an important issue: as the apostle Paul journeyed to Rome with the intent of then traveling on to the furthest reaches of the world, he reflected on the nature of law and order. As one who had run ins with the authorities of his day, one who had been jailed, summoned before the magistrates and eventually clapped in chains, Paul knew well that these issues are important. After illustrating to the followers of Jesus in Rome the nature of a true Christian community, one which was bound together in a mutuality of love, Paul writes in the 13th chapter of his letter to the Romans about the authority of earthly rulers and princes, knowing, of course, that he was headed to the capitol of the Empire and the seat of power of the Caesars. But while there might be an earthly power wielded by Caesar, the law of God was paramount in Paul's mind. This law was of a very different nature. Caesar's law, the law of the Empire was divide and conquer. God's law, as Paul says, is based on love. It is a love we owe to one another, a love that fulfills the commandments of God in a deep mutuality: love your neighbor as yourself. For Paul and for our early Christian ancestors, living fully in this love, the mutual affection of sharing and helping, of compassion and caring, this is the direction for our lives. Directed in the power of the Holy Spirit, filled with this love, our Christian community strives to walk on a very different path than our society. God's call to us is to follow this way, to follow in the love that God has given us in Christ Jesus. To Paul, even in the belly of the beast, even in the midst of the capitol of the great Roman Empire and under Caesar's nose, the power of God's love, the depth of this love manifest in the community of the followers of Jesus, sets out on a way of love that brings all humanity into a new mutuality of one with another in a spirit of love and freedom.

This Gospel lesson from Matthew also takes up these issues: as the early Christians sought to continue to live in the Way of Jesus, to follow Jesus' way of love, they sought to understand how they should act together. This Gospel passage reflects that, I think. Notice that Jesus talks about "a member of the church." Now of course, the church did not exist for Jesus. These words, I think, are the words of the community that has gathered in the Name of Jesus seeking to understand how Jesus' Way of Love will govern and rule their life together, to understand and interpret love for their day. This way of love takes in the mutuality of loving your neighbor as yourself, to show forbearance in seeking dialog and mutual understanding so that the community can continue to grow and carry out the mission

of God, bringing God's love into the world, seeking justice for the oppressed and caring for the ones Jesus calls the least of these.

So today, today as we hear calls for law and order it is important, I believe, to ask the Spirit of God's love to help us to make sense of what law and order should look like for our world: from our Christian perspective, it is a law of love, God's law of love that first and foremost is grounded in the love of God given to us in Jesus Christ. This is a love that seeks mercy and forgiveness, a love that goes beyond the self to include our neighbors. It is a law of justice, but justice rooted in mercy, seeking to affirm the basic humanity and dignity of all God's people, seeing everyone as a child of God and therefore fully loved by God and fully valuable to our human community. It is an order based on justice for the compassion and caring of the oppressed and those whom Jesus calls the least of these: to seek equality and dignity for those most marginalized in our society, to struggle for the full inclusion of all as we seek to open our communities and our society to all. In our day, this means, I believe, that we must work together to overcome racist policies and make this task of anti-racism central to our lives and our mission as the Church. In our day, I believe, this means that we must seek to bring as much compassion and care for the least of these as we can, showing the love of Jesus in carrying out God's mission of reconciling love in the world. In our day, especially in the difficult time of this pandemic, we are called to bring the love of God to those whose lives have been disrupted, the ill and the unemployed, doing what we can in our lives and with our community life together as the Church of the Good Shepherd here in Barre to promote the wellbeing of all of our neighbors. In following Jesus way of love in this fashion, directing our lives together in guidance with the commandments of God, and fulfilling this command by loving our neighbors as ourselves, we can find a deeper meaning for law and order in our day. It is God's law, a love rooted in mutuality, and God's order, seeking the welfare of all and promoting justice for the oppressed and the marginalized, that are given to us as the central principles for seeking the beloved community. In doing this, in seeking to follow on Jesus' way of love, we can live into the prayer appointed for this day, trusting in God with our whole hearts, knowing that God always resists the proud who confide in their own strength, and that God will always remain with those who have their confidence in God's mercy and grace. As we go forward in the days to come, as we seek to live faithfully, we join in the ancient song of Israel given voice by the Psalmist this morning, "Hallelujah! Sing to the Lord a new song; sing God's praise in the congregation of the faithful. Let us rejoice in our Maker and let the children of Zion be joyful...Hallelujah!" Amen.