

Pentecost 2 June 14 2020

Prayer: Most merciful God, as we move deeper into this new time in our Church year, a time for growth and for following Jesus more closely, may we hear his word and may our faith grow and deepen its roots in our lives, this we ask in the name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Although the past couple of weeks have seemed as if we are looking through a whirlwind as a nation, with the protests about George Floyd's murder and the subsequent calls for racial justice in our land and the new emphasis on making sure that all people hear the message that Black lives matter, Think that at this juncture it might be wise and perhaps useful to take a step back and to catch our breath and see where we are. In the space of the couple of weeks that the protesters have been on the streets, a number of cities and towns, as well as some states as well, have reviewed and revised their law enforcement policies, especially the regulations about the use of force. Seeking ways in which to prevent further incidents of the police killing citizens, and especially finding the ways to end the sessile use of force that is directed at the African American community at much higher rates than against the white community, the voice of the protesters in our street are certainly being heard. Now, of course, the movement has also begun to start a historical reckoning, looking at the 401 year old legacy of African Americans in this land and seeking to look toward the manner in which

the high values we share, liberty and justice for all, can be put into action in a more effective, and especially in a more just, way. This is difficult, very uncomfortable questions about white privilege are rising up that as people who have gained some advantages one way or another, we all have to grapple with. There are also ways in which our collective consciousness and our values are beginning to shift as well: for example, with NASCAR, the car racing franchise banning the use of the confederate flag, there is a huge shift in how many of our fellow citizens are starting to view the Civil War, and coming to a new and deeper understanding of the horror of the slavery the southern states sought to protect. All of this, police reforms, historical reckoning and cultural change is coming at an exceedingly fast pace. I have to say it makes my head spin. But one thing I am seeing through this is that the leaders of this movement are very young. As I mentioned to Elizabeth as we walked with the Black Lives Matter march in Montpelier, it feels like a children's crusade. But I believe that it is because of the younger people being leaders in this movement, that they are bringing a fresh perspective into the problems we face, looking at the systemic issues that need to be addressed, and the fierce urgency of the young that these issues must be given serious consideration, that the problems are so urgent now is the time to make a change. I must say, I am encouraged with what I see going on. Yes, the pace is so fast I feel I can't keep up, but that's what happens when a younger generation takes over.

These young people have moved us further ahead as a nation toward racial reconciliation in the past two weeks than the older generation of leaders has done in the past four decades! It is remarkable and I think our prayers are called for that we keep moving forward to find the path that enables our values to be shine through more brightly than ever. Yes, we will need to step back and take a deep breath every once in a while, because the pace of events and the change comes more quickly than we usually see, but thank God these changes are now happening, moving us toward a more inclusive nation, a nation where we can really become, “we the people.”

I think that this time in the life of our country pairs up quite well with our movement in the Church year. Because of the coronavirus pandemic this year, it has been hard to mark the passage of time. In our Church we have gone from Lent to Holy Week, from Easter to Pentecost and now we enter into the long season after Pentecost. This is a time when we are called to listen closely to Jesus’ teachings, to find the ways in our lives to follow Jesus more closely and a time for our faith to deepen and become stronger for our lives. The trouble is, this is not so easy as it appears, because Jesus’ teachings can be so difficult for us. Just like the reckoning we are making as a nation now, learning the hard lesson that white privilege must be acknowledged and must be overcome for us to move forward together, Jesus’ lesson is that we will live in a time of conflict, brother against brother, but that this conflict is

the way through for us. Just as Jesus calls the first twelve, people who must never have expected that the circumstances of their lives could change so greatly, so indeed, Jesus calls us at this time as well. Maybe we don't have to give up our livelihoods, maybe we don't have to wander with Jesus around the dusty countryside of Galilee, but Jesus does call us now to the hard ways of changing our lives and the lives of those around us, by struggling and grappling with the hard questions surrounding us right now, the hard questions the youth are putting to all of us. But I think if we look to the context of Jesus calling the first twelve, if we look back to that dusty Galilean countryside, we hear that Jesus saw the people with compassion, that Jesus saw that they were harassed and helpless like lost sheep. I've always been struck by that phrase. It seems to me to capture the way we feel much of the time, harassed and helpless, often overcome by all the difficulties of keeping life together, and these words describe quite well the difficulties we are all undergoing now as a nation, even as the people of the world, living through an unimaginable global pandemic and the economic crisis and now the social and political upheaval it has unleashed. I for one, and I believe that really for all of us, find the the changes we've experienced over the past few months are a time when harassed and helpless seems almost an understatement of the feelings we have had. So how can our faith grow and develop? How can we live more closely by the teachings of Jesus and find the manner for our fish to grow and deepen?

I found that as I was reflecting on this sermon this week that the words of the Psalmist were a comfort. This psalm gives a powerful sense that we are not abandoned as we move into this new world: the Psalmist's faith is strong, a statement that God is ready to hear us even before we are able to call upon God: "I love the Lord because he has heard the voice of my supplication, because he has inclined his ear to me whenever I called upon him." The Psalmist embodies the deep faith of Israel, the deep faith that God hears the cries of the oppressed and the downtrodden, that God Almighty has acted in the past and is ready to act again, even in the midst of our feelings of being harassed and helpless, to deliver us. This is the faith that God has created us, created us in divine love and graciously showers that love on us, even we are not aware of it. The depth of that love, being heard, love that inclines the ear of God toward us, this is love that bears us up even in the depth of the greatest crises that arise in our lives and in the life of our world.

And finally as we pause here a moment, before we continue to gather once more in prayer and rear to go forward in this time to act faithfully as followers of Jesus to make God's love known in our lives and in our world, it is good to remember some of our spiritual ancestors who took up this same call in their day. Paul, in his letter to the small community of Christians in Rome, there gathered in the shadow of the great Empire, there gathered as a community undergoing the sufferings of the present age, as he termed it, a community that also must have felt

harassed and helpless, Paul wished to remind them of the hope they shared, a hope of the glory of God. As Paul lovingly tells the early followers of Jesus in Rome, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” It is remembering this love of God, remembering the divine love that is poured out upon us and our world, the love stronger than any other power in the cosmos, which is the direction for our lives. Even in this present age, the call of Jesus is clear for us, a call to live in as we embark on this new season of our church life together. This is the prayer as we move forward this morning, that God will keep us as the gathering of the faithful, “in your steadfast faith and love,” that through the power of God’s grace and love, “we may proclaim God’s truth with boldness and minister God’s justice with compassion.” During the days and the weeks to come, in these uncertain and topsy turvy times, may God’s grace continue to deepen the compassion of our hearts, helping us to see the pain of the world and to bring the reconciling love and mercy into action in our lives and for our sisters and brothers. This compassion, the compassion that characterized the life of Jesus, the compassion that opens up the hope of a world that lives in the power of God’s gracious spirit, is the basis of our life in this world. In this new season of the church year, may we all grow in this compassion and may God’s love

deepen our faith. Thanks be to God for this Spirit of love and compassion in our lives and in the world and thanks be to Christ for embodying this spirit of compassion for us. Amen.