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With all the swirling of news in the past few days, in the turbulent times that surround us, every once in a while there is a story that grabs my attention: and this week it was from the *New York Times*. A columnist named Margaret Renkl writes regularly from Nashville, Tennessee. She is a wise woman and I enjoy her columns, but this week I found myself very moved by her description of a recent event; she wrote, “These Kids Are Done Waiting for Change: In less than a week, six Nashville teenagers created a march that drew 10,000 peaceful protesters and gave hope to a whole city.” These young women are 14 to 16 years old. They had never met before, “irl” in real life, as they say on the internet, but as tech savvy smart young women, they came together on Twitter, (and here I must say for the first time I’ve decided that maybe something good can come out of Twitter!), and in the space of five short days they organized the largest peaceful demonstration for racial justice in the history of Nashville. These six young women, and I want to name them because they deserve to be known, Nya Collins, Jade Fuller, Kennedy Green, Emma Rose Smith, Mikayla Smith and Zee Thomas, these six young women, African American and white, worked together as “Teens for Equality,” and unlike earlier protests in Nashville that saw civil unrest and setting fires at the courthouse and city hall, their voices were heard in peaceful protest, urgently demanding reforms in the Nashville Police Department. And those cries did not fall on deaf ears: this voice of youthful peaceful protest was met with the response from Nashville mayor John Cooper that the police will begin a program of mandatory use of body cameras and other reforms will be put into place immediately. And they are not going to stop; these young women are determined to work together in their community and throughout the nation to struggle against white supremacy and for justice for all. As Margaret Renkl concluded her column:

These young people are passionate about their causes and unwavering in their commitment to change. The world they have inherited is deeply troubled and desperately flawed, and they see with clear eyes both the errors of earlier generations and the hope of their own. Their power lies in the undeniable moral authority of youth: They did not cause the mess they have inherited, but they are rolling up their sleeves to clean it up. Above all, they are brave, enduring withering attacks by craven adults who hold no scruple against threatening children. You may argue that these activists are simply too young to understand the risks they are taking, but I think they know exactly what they are doing. What they are too young for is cynicism. What they are too young for is defeat. They are young enough to imagine a better future, to have faith in their own power to change the world for good. And that faith should give the rest of us more hope than we have had in years.

Prayer: O merciful God, as we come to you, gathering together in a spirit of prayer and worship, may we hear your Word for our lives and our world and may we seek your will in all we undertake. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Last Sunday I preached about this new season of the Church year for us, this time in the season after Pentecost, and I said that this is a time of developing our faith, a time to deepen our roots in the love of God and to grow in faith. I also mentioned that one of the lessons we heard was from Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, probably Paul's most mature and serious reflection on his faith and the faith for all Christians. In the lesson we heard last week, Paul says in a well known passage, "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.” With that lesson still in mind, and as I read the story of the six young women in Nashville and their efforts with “Teens for Equality,” I realized reflecting on the scriptures appointed for this morning that indeed it is hope that is central to us growing our faith in this season after Pentecost. I realize as I say it, that to even speak of hope, to dare to pronounce that little four letter word, in times like these may seem to be at best short sighted and at worse, just outrageous. Although we just passed the summer solstice yesterday evening, this past Spring has been like no other in living memory. As our Vermont winter mellowed out, the global pandemic of the coronavirus took over; took over our lives and took over our world. The fear and chaos, the tremendous loss of life, now with more than 120,000 deaths in our nation and almost half a million worldwide, as well as the economic devastation are well known to us, but the immediate future is still shrouded in a deep uncertainty. Our experience from this pandemic showed us some of the greatest acts of solidarity and kindness, even a depth of love, we do not always see, people taking public health very seriously and locking down, practicing physical distancing, no matter the inconvenience and cost, to keep others healthy and safe. But on the other hand, this pandemic exposed the vast inequalities, indeed the “savage inequalities” of our nation, as the author Jonathan Kozol terms it, in the devastating toll of deaths in the minority and poorer communities, especially for our Native American, African American, Latino and senior citizens. Those with the least have suffered the most. Even before this pandemic has run its deadly course, the issue of racial injustices in our society, especially with regard to law enforcement, have taken on a new urgency, so that even young people like those teenagers in Nashville refuse to remain silent. Since the murder of George Floyd on the streets of Minneapolis, both the peaceful protests and the civil unrest have revealed once more the deep divisions in our nation, the hard and difficult work yet to be done to bring an anti-racist culture into

bloom and into each of our lives. So any talk of hope might just seem premature or meaningless in these times.

The Scriptures do, as always, provide us some very good guidance for our times. As I mentioned last week, during this season after Pentecost we are called to look at the teachings of Jesus for the disciples, Jesus's guidance to them and to us, to you and me a his followers, to deepen our faith. In the Gospel lesson we hear this morning, Jesus acknowledges that those who follow will live in difficult times: but that in the midst of the troubles we might face, even the strife that may come to us and shake our world to the very foundations, God will be with us, just as even a sparrow is cared for by God and the hairs of our heads are counted. God's love, the love Jesus embodies for us and commands us to proclaim in our lives, this love will never fail and therefore we have nothing to fear. But perhaps the deepest account of God's never failing mercy is given to us in the story of Hagar from the Book of Genesis. Hagar, the slave woman is cast out into the wilderness at the behest of her jealous mistress Sarah, and is forsaken in the desert certain of her death, but even more painfully, certain of the death of her child. Yet in her utter abandonment and despair, God hears her cry, God tells her not to be afraid and God rescues Hagar and Ishmael. Professor Delores Williams, an American American theologian at Union Theological Seminary in New York City saw in the story of Hagar in the wilderness the plight of too many African American women, weeping for the fate of their children; but Professor Williams saw something deeper as well in this story. As she put it, the story of Hagar teaches us that, "God makes a way out of no way." God who has created all that is is the God who hears the cry of the poor woman, hears the cry of the dispossessed and God then acts, acts out of the deepest divine love to make that way out of no way. And this, this my sisters and brothers, this is the hope which we profess, the hope that gives light to our lives, the hope that in God's never failing love and mercy a way will be made for us. The

Psalmist sums up this hope beautifully, asking God to, “Bow down your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and in misery...be merciful to me, O Lord, for you are my God; I call upon you all the day long...in the time of trouble I will call upon you, for you all answer me.” This is a hope. So deep and so powerful, a hope that changes our lives and the life of our world.

This hope, this small flicker of light, just a “thing with feathers” as the poet Emily Dickinson called it, may not seem like much in times like these. People are dying, unemployment is at levels we have not seen since the Great Depression, and the civil unrest in response to the police killings of George Floyd and Brionna Taylor, and the modern day lynching of Ahmaud Abernathy, all these circumstances seem like fear and rage are much more likely to prevail in our times than a thin flicker and the dim light of hope. I believe that at this time, this weekend when we celebrate “Juneteenth” and remember the freedom so hard won by our African American sisters and brothers, a struggle that still continues, of course, it is appropriate to listen to the words of an African American biblical scholar, Professor Esau McCaulley, on the nature of hope and our Christian faith:

For Christians, rage (Psalm 137) must eventually give way to hope (Isaiah 49). And we find the spiritual resources to make this transition at the cross. Jesus could have called down the psalms of rage upon his enemies and shouted a final word of defiance before he breathed his last. Instead he called for forgiveness: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” he says in Luke 23.

It was not a false reconciliation: Jesus experienced the reality of state-sponsored terror. That is why the black Christian has always felt a particular kinship with this crucified king from an oppressed ethnic group. The cross helps us make sense of the lynching tree.

And Jesus’ resurrection three days after his crucifixion shows that neither the lynching tree nor the cross have the

final say about those whom God values. The state thought that violence could stop God's purposes. For the Christian, the resurrection makes clear the futility of the attempt. Further, Jesus' profound act of forgiving his opponents provides me with the theological resources to hope.

Dare we speak of hope when chants of "I can't breathe" echo in the streets? Do we risk the criticism commonly levied at Christians that we move too quickly to hope because faith pacifies? Resurrection hope doesn't remove the Christian from the struggle for justice. It empties the state's greatest weapon — the fear of death — of its power.

Hope is possible if we recognize that it does not rule out justice. It is what separates justice from vengeance.

Howard Thurman wrote in his classic work "Jesus and the Disinherited" about how rage, once unleashed, tends to spill out beyond its intended target and consume everything. The hatred of our enemy that we take to the streets returns with us to our friendships, marriages and communities. It damages our own souls.

Christians contend for justice because we care about black lives, families and communities. We contend for reconciliation after the establishment of justice because there must be a future that is more than mutual contempt and suspicion. But justice and reconciliation cannot come at the cost of black lives. The only peaceful future is a just future. And because Christians should be a people for peace, we must be a people for justice even when it seems ever to elude us. Too many black lives have been lost to accept anything else. (*New York Times*, June 14, 2020)

In this season after Pentecost, as we seek to grow in faith, following Christ more closely, living more deeply in Christ's love, may we seek justice for all and find the hope for our world in our faith, and may the God of Hope, the God who makes a way out of

no way, bless us and our world with the richness of God's grace.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.