Pentecost 4, June 21, 2026

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Last Sunday in my homily about the tragic accident that claimed the lives of two precious children, Oliviah and Rylin and has left our Deacon Jonathan critically injured and both he and Chelsea in deep grief, I spoke of the words one of my theology professors used, that our faith is in the God who makes a way out of no way. Professor Delores Williams, and I have to add I've always been proud that she also was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, as an African American feminist theologian found a great deal of meaning in the reading we just heard from Genesis: a slave woman, Hagar, unfairly cast out into the wilderness, seemingly at the end with nothing for her in the future except for the death of her son: but God hears the child and the cry of Hagar's distress, and in those divine words of assurance, God says, "Do not be afraid, God has heard the voice." And God provides for them, and the child grows to become the leader of a great nation in his own right. As Professor Williams says, this is the God who makes a way out of no way. I am also struck by the way this story of God's rescue of Hagar and Ishmael is a precursor to the story of the Exodus of the people of Israel: these descendants of Abraham and Sarah become slaves in Egypt, under the bitter tyranny and oppression of Pharaoh. In their bondage and in the genocide Pharaoh practices against them the Israelites cry out to God, and God hears the cries of the people and leads them out of the slavery into freedom. Indeed, that is the meaning of the word, "exodus," the way out: God makes a way out of no way and brings the people of Israel out of bondage into freedom.

This past Friday we remembered "Juneteenth," the day when the news of emancipation finally came to the last population of enslaved African Americans in Texas, ending their bondage and setting them free in that promise of freedom enshrined in our Declaration of Independence, written nearly a century before "Juneteenth." Elizabeth heard an interesting program on Vermont Public Radio about a "Juneteenth" concert taking place in Greensboro at the Highlander Center for the Arts. We attended this concert and I learned so much: prior to the end of slavery on Juneteenth at the conclusion of the Civil War, there had been over a 1000 slave revolts and of course, the courageous work of those in the Underground Railroad, defying human bondage and the immoral laws that

would keep it in place. And there were songs, songs sung by enslaved people and songs popularized by the abolitionists that set this ideal to music and summed up the aspirations of the people, that working together, struggling together, with courage and perseverance they could make the change they sought, that they would be the change they sought: they would be free by their efforts and their faith in the God of freedom. Professor Kathy Bullock of Berea College in Kentucky and Bennington College here in Vermont has assembled a wonderful chorus, "The Jubalo Singers" to bring this music that was suppressed back to our national life to inspire us in our day to that same deep faith in change that we can make in our lives and change that is possible through our faith in the God of freedom and into the light of living fully and faithfully in that freedom together.

Jesus also speaks today in Matthew's Gospel of this call to expose the evil, tyrannical and corrupt ways of the leaders, and to bring to light the truth, even if it means risking our lives and causing division, because it is only by bringing this truth and light that the love of God can shine through. Jesus tells us not to be afraid, but to give all that all might be freed in his name. Yes, a difficult and a hard message for us, but like those enslaved people who acted to bring the change they sought into the world, so Jesus loving leads us as disciples in this same direction. This is the cost of discipleship, to use the phrase made popular by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis for his opposition to their genocidal policies in the holocaust and for his anti-fascist activities. I mention Bonhoeffer because during communion some Strong women in our congregation, Marjorie, Christina and Josie are going to sing a communion anthem written by Bonhoeffer, as requested by Phyllis Bristow-Johnson. But Bonhoeffer is also quite fitting in this sermon because he was a strong believer in the the power of the Church as a community of Love. In his book, Life Together, Bonhoeffer lays out a case for the Church as the fellowship of those who care for each other, that we are to be present and in solidarity with each other both in joy and sorrow. As Bonhoeffer understand it, Christ brings us into unity in the Church and in that unity we care for each other and care as well for the world in which we live, loving our neighbors as ourselves and tending for creation itself as good stewards. This was the basis of Bonhoeffer's deep opposition to the Nazi regime and to the German pastors of his time who made alliance with the fascist cause.

As we gather together this morning, indeed, as we continue our life together, we seek to live as the Church that is a community of love in the terms Bonhoeffer set out. We have experienced a deep and painful wound in our life together with the horrific news that we lost two children of this congregation, that our Deacon has been critically injured and that he and his wife Chelsea will never completely overcome this loss. A community of love is one which supports them in prayer, in acts of love and kindness, seeking to walk this long path with them, knowing in the depth of our souls that our faith in the God who makes a way out of no way is always present with us. In this deep solidarity, in this grace that abounds even in the midst of tears and heartbreak, we join together, we have life together in this solidarity, this deep unity Christ brings to us as we seek to live as the body of Christ. As we began our worship this morning, we implored God that we might have a perpetual love and reverence for God's holy name. I find that notion of having perpetual love and reverence resonates deeply with me right now, even in the midst of this grief and mourning. What makes this resonate ever deeper in my soul is the rest of that prayer: that God never fails to help those God sets on the sure foundation of God's loving-kindness. This is the faith of the God who makes a way out of no way, the God brings us into freedom by helping us to stand against the tyrannical oppression in ages past and to stand against the corrupt powers of our own day, this is the God who brings us into unity in our life together in the Church, to share the joys and sorrows of life, but to bear each other's burdens in the name of the Good Shepherd of us all. Thanks be to God for this Crace abounding in our life together and praise be to Christ for the loving-kindness that brings us together in the Spirit of Love. Amen.