

Diversity, Unity, Harmony

Let me begin by saying that the sermon you are about to hear is not the sermon that I envisioned preaching a few weeks ago when I initially planned for this week. I had thought at that time that I could pick up on some of the things that Brian McLaren had to say about how the Holy Spirit brings unity in this week's chapter of We Make the Road by Walking. But the events of the last few days have made my thoughts about unity move in a very different direction.

Nor is this the sermon that I made notes for earlier this week. My intent at that point was to celebrate the diversity which gave rise to that unity in the Spirit. Luke includes in his narrative of that first Pentecost of the Church a fairly extensive list of the different nations, regions, and cultures represented by Jews and Godfearers who had come to Jerusalem for the festival. But multiculturalism looks rather different this morning that it did even a few days ago.

So, my process for this sermon did not and my delivery will not go as planned. This is not the sermon I'd expected to preach this morning. But it's what I need to say today and it's what I think we, me included, need to hear. It's not as cheerfully upbeat as I anticipated a month ago. You will hear anger from me today – not directed at any of you – but what I need to get off my chest. You will hear heartbreak, for the two are often part and parcel of each other. And, yes, you will hear hope. But it is a hope that relies on God and not human endeavor and it is a hope that is sought with eyes wide open to the injustice and hatred that seems to have the upper hand in our country this morning.

One of the themes I had planned to touch on this morning is one that is often raised up on Pentecost Day; that is, the miracle of communication. How amazing it was when the disciples swept into the streets after being touched by the fire of the Holy Spirit, that all those different people from the extent of the Jewish Diaspora of the time heard the Good News about the love of God as expressed through the life and work of Christ Jesus in their own languages! I was planning to go into some detail in a survey of the very different language families, languages, and dialects spoken by those Jews from around the Mediterranean world. Some of them, like some of Jesus' disciples, might have had a smattering of liturgical Hebrew, enough to understand some Psalms and prayers, perhaps enough to read the Scriptures. But most of them would have spoken the language of the place where they grew up, just as Jesus' disciples spoke Aramaic. And most who could read would have likely read the Scriptures in their Greek translation rather than in Hebrew. The communication that day, clear enough to bring the word of love, was absolutely miraculous.

But the reality of our time is not clear communication for all of the tools we've developed to make that a possibility. Instead, we live in an age of misinformation. This is not a new phenomenon. Those who control access to information of all kinds have always used that power to shape opinions. Information about wars, for example, has always been subject to censorship, slant, and spin and even outright lies. But with increased sources of information, thanks to the internet, has come an almost habitual warping of the truth. We have been misled by some on every point of the political spectrum. We have been fed bad information about those who are central figures in controversial stories. We who do everything possible to ally ourselves with the truth of God must remember that Jesus characterized the source of evil as "the father of lies." Given the rampant use of misinformation today, I find it hard to wax eloquent about how the Spirit opens the channels of true communication.

I had also intended, based on that long list of countries represented at Pentecost, to speak of the amazing unity that the Church found that day. On that morning, worshippers of the God of Abraham set aside their cultural differences to come together, first for the festival, then in belief of the new gospel. We must remember that it is human nature to absorb the culture of the place where we live, particularly if our families have been there for several generations. So, it would be expected if there was some tension between Jews from, say, Parthia and Elam, two ancient cultures that had dominated the land we now know as Iran at different times. But they came together.

As you might suspect, I find it hard to talk about multicultural unity at the end of not just one week but several that have seen revelation after revelation of racist violence and hate. Ahmaud Arbery, 25, was shot to death for the crime of jogging while black on February 23. But it was not until May 5, when a video of the incident showed up on social media, that the full horror of that crime came to light. Three white men had stalked and killed Mr. Arbery but local prosecutors had seen no reason to press charges against them. On March 13, Breonna Taylor, 26, an Emergency Medical Technician with no criminal history, was killed by eight bullets from the 20 rounds police fired into her home in what was later described as a “botched” narcotics raid. The police were at the wrong address, looking for a man who was already in custody, and, according to Breonna’s boyfriend and other neighbors, never announced themselves when breaking down the door of the apartment. It is hardly surprising that Kenneth Walker, the boyfriend, being awakened by this seeming home invasion, shot low in an attempt to scare off what he assumed were criminals and that is the sole justification offered by the Louisville Metro Police Department for the hail of bullets unleashed by their officers. And, of course, this week, we got to watch the video from Monday of a police officer choking the life from 46 year old George Floyd, by all accounts a “gentle giant” who had been active in ministry to young people in his native Houston and who friends remembered as a man who prayed over every meal and who prayed with them in times of need.

All of this comes on top of the ongoing travesty of our border with Mexico, where little children, mostly Latino, are kept in cages, separated from their parents. And the rise in racial violence directed toward Asians, exacerbated by tweets and statements from the President of the United States blaming China for the spread of the Coronavirus. And then there’s the situation in the Navajo Nation, which has the highest COVID infection rate in the U.S. The Indian Health Service has been underfunded for decades and high rates of diabetes and heart disease on a reservation that still has over 30% of homes without running water are an invitation to a health disaster.

So, I would love to talk this morning about the Pentecost Spirit of Christianity as best exemplified in our own Evergreen Association, where African Americans, Asian Americans of various heritages, Latinos, and Euro Americans have joined together to work together for the good of all, including ongoing work with the Duwamish people of Seattle, but those joys and aspirations stick in my throat. Because the overwhelming reality in our nation this morning is that of White Privilege, White Fragility, and outright White Supremacy. It is easy for those of us who are Euros in Evergreen to talk to our sisters and brothers in the other caucuses and to hear their stories of harassment for “driving while Black (or Brown, in case you’ve missed the Facebook posts from Rev. Doug Avilesbernal),” to hear their memories of being driven from

their homes and jobs during World War II to live in concentration camps in Montana or Arkansas, or simply to hear their stories of the constant fear that causes mothers to warn their sons not to behave as their White friends might do because they will be judged differently because of the color of their skin. Martin Luther King's dream for the little children of this land is a long way from being fulfilled. Nor is it hard to seek out the stories of the "Rez," just a 40-minute drive from where I sit this morning and even closer to some of you, stories of underemployment, prejudice, and despair.

I hope that all of us have paid attention to any of these stories that we've heard in person, on TV, or on social media. I hope that we have not fallen into the trap of thinking that those are problems that "those people" have brought on themselves, simply because they are problems that we are privileged not to bear. It's easy to judge the frustrated actions of a group that we are not members of. It was also Martin Luther King who had this to say in 1966: "I think America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so, in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention." Oh, and by the way, eyewitness accounts, including those of my children, are telling us that it is not peaceful Black protestors that are starting violence during protests but White agitators and police officers.

I am angry this morning and I am heartbroken. But as the follower of a poor, Palestinian Jew, who died at the hands of a European empire, I am called to remember several things. First, that Jesus called on us to love even our enemies and lived that out even as he died, asking his Father to forgive those who tortured and killed him. Second, the apostle Paul called on the Christians in Ephesus to "Be angry but do not sin..." Our anger must not lead to hatred. We must not seek to return evil for evil. We who follow the Prince of Peace must seek to follow him even more closely in these hate-filled times. On this Pentecost Sunday, we must pray for the Holy Spirit to empower us with the love and grace that come from our Loving Creator.

Even as our eyes take in the horrific images of the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd and the anguished or vitriolic posts and stories online or in the newspapers, we must stop to take stock of ourselves. As Jesus taught us, we cannot see to remove the splinter from our brother's eye if we do not remove the plank from our own. How have we contributed to what is going on in the United States right now? Even if we have not been consciously racist, has our passivity allowed others to nurture hatred unchecked? All of us bear at least some responsibility for not doing everything we possibly could to overturn the systemic evil of our culture. We are, thanks be to God, forgiven for our failings but we must all continue to grow in wisdom and in righteousness. And we must all be willing to speak the truth in the face of opposition, to speak truth to power, to speak truth to family and friends, and, very importantly, to speak truth in love.

I read a powerful article this week, reposted to Facebook from medium.com and written by Dr. Taharee Jackson. Dr. Jackson holds two degrees from Harvard, including a BA, *magna cum laude*, as well as a PhD from Emory University. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland. Her article is titled “I’m White and I’m Outraged by Ahmaud Arbery’s Murder: Now What? A Practical Guide for White Allies and Accomplices.” In it, she gives a six-step guide to what those of us who are White and wanting to stand in solidarity with the victims of White Supremacy can do. First, she writes, start with yourself. Although she does not quote from scripture, she says essentially what I just said. Next, she writes, start with a story. Learn from books or articles or, if you can, from friends of other races what their stories are of being oppressed, discriminated against, and frightened. If nothing else, learn those stories from your own heritage. Any of us who are of Irish decent should know the history of English domination of Ireland and of the “No Irish Need Apply” attitude in the United States. Any who are Scandinavian need to read the stories of how immigrants to this country were treated. Start with yourself; Start with a story.

Next, she writes, start with statistics. I know that for some of us numbers are scary but there are now plenty of reliable sites on the internet that both present and interpret numbers for us. Dr. Jackson writes: “Study the Southern Poverty and Law Center, which designates and tracks hate groups and crimes. Spend some time on the NAACP website, which has a trusted and longstanding history of regularly collecting and collating data on racism and racial disparity in America. If you are a policy wonk, visit the Pew Research Center and the Brookings Institution for thorough survey data, policy analyses, reports, and recommendations for racial equity. And by all means, avail yourself (of) the Antiracism Research and Policy Center at American University for numbers, tools, and research methods not just for studying racism, but antiracism and their effects on society.”

Start at home is Dr. Jackson’s next piece of advice. Talk to your children or grandchildren about racism, where they will see it, why it is wrong. And for those with living parents or grandparents, remember, if they can learn to operate a smart phone, they can learn to change old attitudes. Don’t forget to speak in love and respect but speak. As I’ve told you all before, on my last visit to my family’s home in Arkansas, I challenged my uncle not to use the “N-word” in my presence. He stopped – at least while I was around. For those of you who are still in the work force, even working from home, start at work. Don’t let those racist jokes and remarks go unchallenged. Finally, Dr. Jackson writes, “Start Somewhere – But Don’t Stay There.” Continue your education. Read. Listen. Enter into the cycle of continued development of your mind and your soul. Lean on the power of the Spirit to keep you going, even when it is hard.

Along with the link I mentioned earlier to donate to our Evergreen Association, I’m asking Connie to publish a couple of other links along with this sermon on our website. One is to another article entitled “75 Things White People Can Do For Racial Justice.” I suspected that you would be grateful that I not recite all 75 this morning but I hope you’ll check out the article. Another is from Sojourners: “For Our White Friends Desiring to be Allies.” I don’t expect anyone to implement *all* of the suggestions from these articles. But I do want us all to understand that there *are* things we can do to act to bring about the Beloved Community, even in these sorry and anguished times.

Some years ago, I was introduced to the writings of Steven Charleston by a friend from my university days. Steven Charleston is a retired bishop in the Episcopal Church and an elder of the Choctaw Nation. He publishes a regular, short meditation on Facebook, which I often find inspiring and helpful. I've quoted from him before. I want to conclude this morning by reading you one of his posts from this week. He wrote: "One man dies in the street, pleading for his life, and overnight those streets erupt in anger at the injustice, not only for that dreadful moment, but for a lifetime of oppression. One hundred thousand die from a virus, all innocent victims of a heartless disease, but a balance of color shows more die from one community than others. Racism breeds death, either visibly for all the world to see, or silently, hidden beneath the statistics and the excuses. May the Spirit empower us to face this reality and not turn away: racism is as virulent as covid-19, infecting people who seem to have no outward symptoms, until behavior reveals their disease. The vaccine for racism is justice, the cure is equality, and the prevention is love." I think that last line bears repeating: "The vaccine for racism is justice, the cure is equality, and the prevention is love." So, on this Pentecost Sunday, my sisters and my brothers, let us not lose sight of hope and love through our tears of sorrow and anger. Let us remember that we sometimes call Jesus by the name Emmanuel – God is With Us – and that he promised to send the Comforter who would fill us with power. Today, we celebrate the presence of the Comforter and her power in our lives and we pledge again that though we may be "Diverse in Culture, Nation, Race," we will be "a meeting ground where hope and healing love are found." Thanks be to God. Amen.