

2 Pentecost 2020

As we enter into this time of meditation on your Word, O God, we offer our gratitude that you are always present to us. Help us to listen with open hearts and open minds, that others might feel safe in our presence. Instill in us a spirit of serenity that others might feel accepted in your nonjudgmental grace. Allow us to lean into mercy and kindness and help us to love and accept others. Amen.

I believe that most pastors do their best to preach about the love of God, the love of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We know that God is always with us and that He has given us Her grace, both free and undeserved for each of us. The light of Christ is always present no matter where we find ourselves today, no matter our struggles, no matter our fears; no matter how much darkness surrounds us. We hear this morning about how Jesus responded to the crowds who came to find him.

” When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”. When I thought about this verse, were the crowds of people harassed because of the Roman occupation, by illness, by hunger? Were they feeling lost? If so, it is not hard to understand why they felt helpless and that helplessness certainly **could** elicit a feeling of compassion. But what is compassion? Compassion is defined as: “sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.” I don’t know about you, but If someone comes up to me and says; “I pity you”; it almost feels demeaning or coming from a perspective of superiority. I didn’t envision Jesus as feeling **pity** for the crowds. But when I actually looked up the word ‘pity’, I was a little surprised. It is “the feeling of sorrow and compassion caused by the suffering and misfortunes of others”. This definition elicits a much different feeling for me.

Another definition of compassion comes out of UC Berkley: "Compassion literally means "to suffer together." Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering."

So, I could certainly see Jesus having compassion, pity, and even empathy for the crowds. For Jesus, these feelings would have come forth from a source of deep love.

Having compassion includes a desire to help however we can and whatever that might look like. Having compassion should lead to action.

So much is going on right now in our communities, our State, and this Nation. We are focused on our Black Brothers and Sisters for good reason. Since the first ship arrived to the colonies, with two to three dozen slaves in 1619, Blacks in this country have suffered persecution, oppression, suffering, and death from the hands of those who enslaved them and by white supremacists. That oppression continues today.

On September 15, 1963, a bomb exploded during Sunday morning services in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls: Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14) and Carol Denise McNair (11).

The church bombing was the third in Birmingham in 11 days after a federal order came down to integrate Alabama's school system. Fifteen sticks of dynamite were planted in the church basement, underneath what turned out to be the girls' restroom. The bomb detonated at 10:19 a.m. during that day's worship service. More than 20 other members of the congregation were injured in the blast. Three days later, Martin Luther King Jr. gave the Eulogy for the Martyred Children. In part, he said:

“This afternoon we gather in the quiet of this sanctuary to pay our last tribute of respect to these three beautiful children of God. They entered the stage of history just a few years ago, and in the brief years that they were privileged to act on this mortal stage, they played their parts exceedingly well. Now the curtain falls; they move through the exit; the drama of their earthly life comes to a close. They are now committed back to that eternity from which they came.

These children—unoffending, innocent, and beautiful—were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity.

And yet they died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. And so, this afternoon in a real sense they have something to say to each of us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents with the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. They have something to say to a federal government that has compromised with the undemocratic practices of southern Dixiecrats and the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing northern Republicans. They have something to say to every Negro who has passively accepted the evil system of segregation and who has stood on the sidelines in a mighty struggle for justice. They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy, which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.

And so, my friends, they did not die in vain. God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. And history has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city. The holy Scripture says, "A little child shall lead them." The death of these little children may lead our whole Southland from the low road of man's inhumanity to man to the high road of peace and brotherhood. These tragic deaths may lead our nation to substitute an aristocracy of character for an aristocracy of color. The spilled blood of these innocent girls may cause the whole citizenry of Birmingham to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright future. Indeed, this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience.

And so, I stand here to say this afternoon to all assembled here, that in spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. No, we must not lose faith in our white brothers.

Somehow, we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all human personality". (end quote)

He gave that eulogy **57 years ago**. How far have we really come since then? Not enough far in my opinion.

Martin Luther King Jr. had compassion for those who suffered. He had the skills and ability to tell it like it is and to motivate people to action. This is something that sadly I have not done in the past. I have been a preacher safely hidden behind the stained glass windows. I have stood on the sidelines to watch. Our black brothers and sisters are taking to the streets; taking to letter writing; taking to social media, to tell it like it is and that enough is

enough. The voices of **all** people of color have been hushed by White privilege. The problem is that those with white privilege either did not have the ability to listen because of that privilege, or they chose **not** to listen. And I was no different, not all that long ago, because I did not recognize my white privilege. I like the post that was on Facebook this past week:

In thanks to Lisa Gilmore:

“If you want to be an ally in the fight against racism, start by acknowledging your white privilege. Then take action that supports the Black community. We talked to educators, activists, therapists and professors, about the things white people often say that highlight their privilege without them realizing it.

1. “It’s not my job to fix racism because I’m not racist.” What you’re essentially saying is that because the systemic racism doesn’t hurt you personally — a privileged position to be in — you don’t need to be involved in the fight against it. White people must step up to the plate, act as allies, and use their privilege for good.

2. “I don’t see color.” Refusing to acknowledge the color of someone’s skin is also a refusal to acknowledge the struggles they’ve endured and discrimination they’ve faced because of their race.

3. “There’s no need to worry about the police if you’re not doing anything illegal.” The way white people perceive and interact with law enforcement is far different from the way Black and Latino people do. “White people tend to feel an innate sense of safety and security from the policing policies that racially profile and target Black people, in many cases leading to the use of excessive or even lethal force,” said anti-racism educator Myisha T. Hill. “This is a prime example of white privilege.”

4. “I don’t want to post about racism on social media because I’m scared of the backlash.” If the fear of relatives unfollowing you on Instagram or leaving “all lives matter!” comments on your Facebook posts prevents you from speaking up at all, your priorities are out of order.

5. “I don’t have white privilege.” For white people to dismiss the benefits they’ve reaped because of their whiteness only goes to show how oblivious — and privileged — they really are”.

White people have grown up with white privilege no matter their social or economic status. This is different from white supremacy which involves an attitude of being superior to any other race and the presumed privileges that go along with that attitude.

I would like to close with part of a sermon that was preached 8 years ago at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, Ind., on July 7, 2012.

“We need some crazy Christians. Sane, sanitized Christianity is killing us. That may have worked once upon a time, but it won’t carry the gospel anymore. We need some crazy Christians like Mary Magdalene and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Christians crazy enough to believe that God is real and that Jesus lives. Crazy enough to follow the radical way of the gospel. Crazy enough to believe that the love of God is greater than all the powers of evil and death. Crazy enough to believe, as Dr. King often said, that though “the moral arc of the universe is long, ... it bends toward justice.”

We need some Christians crazy enough to believe that children don’t have to go to bed hungry; that the world doesn’t have to be the way it often seems to be; that there is a way to lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside; that, as the slaves used to sing,

“there’s plenty good room in my Father’s kingdom,” because every human being has been created in the image of God, and we are all equally children of God and meant to be treated as such.

In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea,

With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:

As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,

While God is marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah!

God’s truth is marching on” (end quote). The preacher’s name is Michael Curry.

Does all of this seem overwhelming? It sure can. But if you are looking for ways to start, look at the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan website and you will find a myriad of ways to get involved.

We read from the Talmud: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do Justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

One step at a time but always moving forward. Compassion must lead to action. Love leads the way.

Amen!