

5 Pentecost 2020

God of Peace, the Great Healer, we pray today for your healing touch. For you are the One who forgives our sins and heals us. Wrap us in your loving arms and fill us with your peace which passes all understanding. Wipe away our tears, our weaknesses, our sorrow, and ease the pain. Comfort us and all those who care about us. For even through the pain and the stress, though we walk through the valley of despair, we will praise your name. For holy and great is your love. You will redeem all of our lives– the good and the bad – for your glory. Lord, heal us and make us new. Amen.

There are very few people who can read this particular section of Romans and not relate to what Paul is saying.

“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me”.

In my case, I know what I need to do; I know what I should do; but I end up doing the exact opposite more than I care to think about. To a certain extent, to blame sin as the root cause of what I do, and not myself, feels a bit too convenient.

So, what is sin?

According to Wikipedia, Judaism regards the violation of any of the 613 commandments as a sin. **613 commandments**. Imagine the size of **those** tablets.

For Episcopalians, the BCP defines sin as ‘the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship **with God, with other people, and with all creation.**” (BCP page 848)

Romans 3:23 says: ‘for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’.

1 John 1:8-10 says:” If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” (English Standard Version (ESV)

So just as Adam and Eve sinned by wanting to be on an equal footing with God, when we sin, we place our wills in opposition of what God wills. We put our desires first.

We are all sinners my brothers and sisters, however, I do not believe we are all evil. But make no mistake, evil does exist.

I think that the greatest evil present in our world today, is at its source, an outright rejection of God and all that God Is. As we are all aware, Jesus tells us that we are to love God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves. To truly care about and to love each other requires an understanding of God’s deep love for each of us. That is the only love that can last and overcome all adversities.

God’s love means putting the needs of others before our own. That is the difference between selfishness and selflessness. Watch the news, read the papers, and look at the Internet. It is mind-boggling how people are treating each other and the level of selfishness that is out there. “Normal people” and I use that term loosely, pulling guns on each other over trivial arguments; normally law- abiding citizens looting and destroying the property of others. Cellphone videos of Law enforcement using tear gas on peaceful protestors, and of course, we are all very much well aware of those who have been murdered in the name of justice. We all know what happened to George Floyd.

I have seen and heard those who discuss George Floyd's past and his character as if to say that he got what he deserved. No matter what his past may have been, he did not deserve the treatment he received.

The Rev. Louise Thibodaux, deacon at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, in the Diocese of Alabama, offered a reflection on how the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., echo today. She says; "I have lived for the past 45 years in Birmingham, the city where Martin Luther King penned his famous letter to clergy. These past few weeks, the phrase that has kept coming back to me is, 'if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.' What seems more obvious to me now is that the power of the church to define and orchestrate 'the solutions' is more closely related to 'the problem' than I had realized before."

Thibodaux continued, "Initially, I was one who took offense at the term 'Black lives matter.' I would respond 'No, all lives matter!' What I have come to see is that ALL lives won't ever matter until we own up to the ways that we have treated the people we have kept on the margins — kept them there for whatever reason. So, I'm not afraid to say that I personally have been part of the problem. I'm not afraid to challenge the institutional church to own that it also has perpetuated the problem. I look forward to becoming a better listener and a better observer of the world around me and an observer of the ways that God's kingdom may just be sneaking in." (end quote).

I can relate to what Deacon Thibodaux is saying. I used to also respond that All lives matter not because I was speaking from a standpoint of Love but often in a defensive posture to 'Black Lives Matter'. We cannot in good faith say that all

lives matter **until All Lives Matter. We cannot say that we are all in this together, until we all stand on equal footing. We don't.**

When I read that the words of Martin Luther King Jr are still relevant today, I am greatly saddened. And I think he would be too. As Christians, we should be ashamed that the situation today has not changed a lot since 1968. In fact, many of the issues then are the same issues we face today.

I don't believe that most of society is evil, but evil exists none-the-less.

And where do we stand as Christians today? How do we share the Love of Jesus with each other? Do we advocate for those who are disenfranchised? This is the 4th of July weekend where we celebrate our Independence. Not all can celebrate however.

Exactly 168 years ago today, on July 5th 1852, Frederick Douglas gave a speech addressing the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in Corinthian Hall. It was a famous critique of the federal government's support of slavery and the recently passed Fugitive Slave Act, where slaves could be hunted down and killed or returned in chains to their owners. I would suggest reading the entirety of his speech but what I wanted to point out this morning were his comments concerning Christianity of his day. He said: "The fact that the church of our country, (with fractional exceptions), does not esteem "the Fugitive Slave Law" as a declaration of war against religious liberty, implies that that church regards religion simply as a form of worship, an empty ceremony, and not a vital principle, requiring active benevolence, justice, love and good will towards man. It esteems sacrifice above mercy; psalm-singing above right doing; solemn meetings above practical righteousness. A worship that can be conducted by persons who refuse to give shelter to

the houseless, to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and who enjoin obedience to a law forbidding these acts of mercy, is a curse, not a blessing to mankind. The Bible addresses all such persons as “scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites, who pay tithe of mint, anise, and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith.”

He continues: “But the church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bulwark of American slavery, and the shield of American slave-hunters. Many of its most eloquent Divines, who stand as the very lights of the church, have shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the whole slave system. They have taught that man may, properly, be a slave; that the relation of master and slave is ordained of God; that to send back an escaped bondman to his master is clearly the duty of all the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ; and this horrible blasphemy is palmed off upon the world for Christianity.

For my part, I would say, welcome infidelity! welcome atheism! welcome anything! in preference to the gospel, as preached by those Divines! They convert the very name of religion into an engine of tyranny, and barbarous cruelty, and serve to confirm more infidels, in this age, than all the infidel writings of Thomas Paine, Voltaire, and Bolingbroke, put together, have done! These ministers make religion a cold and flinty-hearted thing, having neither principles of right action, nor bowels of compassion. They strip the love of God of its beauty, and leave the throng of religion a huge, horrible, repulsive form. It is a religion for oppressors, tyrants, man-stealers, and thugs. It is not that “pure and undefiled religion” which is from above, and which is “first pure, then peaceable, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.” But a religion

which favors the rich against the poor; which exalts the proud above the humble; which divides mankind into two classes, tyrants and slaves; which says to the man in chains, stay there; and to the oppressor, oppress on; it is a religion which may be professed and enjoyed by all the robbers and enslavers of mankind; it makes God a respecter of persons, denies his fatherhood of the race, and tramples in the dust the great truth of the brotherhood of man". (end quote).

A powerful speech in a time before the civil war. We, as Christians must not have the same said about us. Do Christians today respect the dignity of **all** of our sisters and brothers by doing all that we can to fight the systemic evils that still exist? I don't think so.

Out of all the possible ways we can work for change, I believe what we must do is to vote. I would never tell you who to vote for, but you must vote. Look for the candidates both locally and nationally who support Christian values and who support putting all people on level ground. Candidates who will work on eliminating poverty, eliminating systemic racism, who will support justice reform so that all will be treated equally and fairly, and who will stop the practice of incarcerating those seeking asylum and safety.

There **is** good news this morning my friends. Again, I say to each of you today, **we are never alone**. Despite the fears of COVID-19, the anxiety of all those affected by the economic turndown, the hunger pains of all those who are homeless and who suffer from food insecurity, or those who fear to walk alone in our neighborhoods; Jesus reassures us with His words of comfort:

28 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' Jesus surrounds each of us with His great love.

We are to be Jesus to those we meet. We are to love as Jesus loves. His words of comfort and reassurance must be our words to all of our brothers and sisters. May no one ever be able to say of us that we "trample in the dust the great truth of the brotherhood of man".

That would be a sad day indeed.

AMEN