



June 21, 2020 - Alive in Christ

Given by Rev. Mattei

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69:7-18; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

The State of Florida has just had its driest March on record, followed by record high temperatures in April and torching wildfires in May.¹ The potential loss of life and property has scared many homeowners in the proximity of the fires and seen a rising number of concerned citizens praying for their neighbors and the local wildlife.

The fiery reaction of some protesters to the violent deaths of four Black people in the last three weeks is evidence of the flammable level that our society has reached in recent decades.² Not everybody involved in protests engages in violent behavior just like not everybody responds to the same abuses in the same way. Society is on fire for change but not everybody resorts to looting, smashing of cars, and starting a fire.

Though I would refrain from using violent methods to express my anger and hopelessness, I also refrain from judging Black folks, knowing that I have absolutely little understanding and appreciation of their centuries-old compounded despair. I am committed to the Christian practice of non-violence and non-retaliation in the face of injury.

However, I suppose that if I were not listened to in my pain at having to prove my humanity every single day with methods that would not upset my oppressor, my rage would escalate to seek what works to get people's attention. Outrage at the abuses that an imperialistic culture has imposed on people of color has inspired many White people to become allies, march in solidarity, and push for reforms.

This has been true consistently since before the civil war. Yet, some White people still get easily upset when peaceful methods are used (like kneeling or raising the fist) and call those actions unpatriotic. The lynching of Black people has been going on for way

¹<https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/05/14/wildfires-rage-southwest-florida-torching-over-5000-acres-forcing-evacuations-shutting-down-parts-alligator-alley/>

² Murder charges have been filed for the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN. As of the writing of this sermon, charges have not been made for the homicide of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, GA. Investigations are still ongoing in the case of the death by hanging of Robert Fuller in Palmdale, CA, and Malcolm Harsch in Victorville also in CA.



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too long! Why would we, White people, feel offended if we are reminded that Black life matters? When will we understand that the way to peace is through justice?

In an article that appeared in the Christian Century, the Rev. Dorothy Sanders Wells, an African American Episcopal priest, reflects on the culture of oppression still evident and operating in our present days. She writes:

“There seem to be some inherent dangers to living life as a person of color in the United States. Perhaps those dangers have their origin in the days when it was legal for black people to be disciplined, lynched, reminded that we occupy a lower place in society.

The segregationist laws that allowed that kind of discrimination were struck down—twice, actually. When people who didn’t like the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution persisted in creating human laws that devalue human lives, we tried again, an effort that led to the sweeping civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

But over the years, we’ve learned that laws can’t end the danger of living life as a person of color.”³ She brings up the example of the murder of Michael Donald (AL, 1981) and the admission of his killers that they were out looking for a Black person to kill. Rev. Wells also reminds us of Trayvon Martin (FL, 2012); Jazmine Abhulimen (NC, 2018); Rodolfo Rodriguez (CA, 2018), Botham Jean (TX, 2020), and Ahmud Arbery (GA, 2020): all of them got killed because they did not look like they belonged.

Black people seem to have to go through the daily reminder that they need to justify their existence. They are not looked at as neighbors but as intruders. Awakened hearts of all colors join in to listen, to embrace, and to advocate.

We all want peace. We all want to be able to come to a worship service without being reminded of the ugly reality we see in the news every day. I get that.

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/reflection/ahmaud-arbery-s-lynching-begs-america-respond>



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And yet, I invite us to consider that although it is important to come and listen to the Word of God that instructs us in the proper behavior before God, we cannot neglect the second part of God's commandment that instructs us of the proper behavior towards others. In the Bible we read: One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."⁴

We cannot divorce our love of God from our love of neighbor, just as we cannot separate our life from our neighbor's.⁵ We show our commitment to a godly life by practicing justice and loving kindness as the Lord Yahweh has prescribed.⁶

Jesus did invite us to come to him for respite. In fact, he once said: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." And then he went on to specify how we, his disciples, will find rest. He, in fact, added: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:27-29)

Jesus did not endorse escapism and insulation from the suffering of others. He did not promise, "Follow me and you will be spared the troubles of the world." But he did say, "Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."⁷

⁴ Matthew 22:35-40; also Luke 10: 27

⁵ Deuteronomy 10:11-13; 26:13; Philippians 2:4

⁶ Micah 6:8; Deuteronomy 5:1-21

⁷ Matthew 10:38-39; see also Mark 8:33-35



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I interpret the denial of self as the transforming movement that needs to happen from an ego-centered and immature life to a life centered in Christ and in the practice of his teaching.⁸

None of us would choose to enter into a conflictual situation with other people voluntarily. As all the readings for today, including the psalm, testify, if we respond to the enticing love of God we are bound to taste suffering. Zeal for God's house, meaning zeal for the ways of the Lord is bound to suscite distress and people may react with hatred, mockery, isolation, and even persecution.

People have done that to Jesus, would they not do that to his disciples? Why be surprised when that happens?

Paul resorts to reminding the church gathered in Rome that when we get baptized we are also crucified and buried with Christ in his death. We give up the sin of self-protection, self-promotion, and self-aggrandizement that keeps us enslaved to the opinion, the eyes, the ire, and the anxious demands of others. When we follow the Lord, we give up any desire to be understood and loved by the world to which we are as good as dead.

But in him we also rise. We rise to new life. We are "alive to God in Christ Jesus." St. Paul assures us (Rom. 6:11). And that aliveness is work and gift of the Spirit.

On our own, we would walk away, we couldn't withstand the fire. But in God, all things are possible.⁹ Am I going to say to God "I don't care?" when I know that speaking up for the oppressed might elicit a strong reaction? Am I going to be protective of myself when I know other people are putting their lives on the line for justice? Am I going to exclaim, "Not my business" when Jesus wants to be acknowledged before others in the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner, and the desperate?

⁸ Colossians 1:28; 1Corinthians 13:20;

⁹ Matthew 10:19-20



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Fear will ultimately cause a failure of discipleship. Faithful proclamation and practice of the gospel inevitably puts disciples on a collision course with the powers of this world. They are sent as “sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matthew 10:16), they will be hated just as the world hated their Teacher. But so what? Living in the Spirit of God will give us the strength necessary to withstand the pressure. God alone has ultimate power. Endure, my friends.

In Roman times, those who picked up the cross were rebels and troublemakers. They were the ones who didn’t submit to Roman authority and disobeyed the unjust laws imposed by the Emperor and his occupying army.

He who was lynched to free us from sin, knew what his disciples will have to face, and so he instructed them: “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” (John 16:33)

May the Lord of peace accompany us during these difficult times. Amen.