

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

June 1, 2020

Mark 15 & Mathew 22-23, Prayers for Justice, Mercy, and Love

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Today we gather at the hour Jesus hanged on the cross and cried out in a loud voice, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ⁱ

And, as we, together, confront the murder of George Floyd and the unrelenting violence against people of color in our country, realize that some gathered for these prayers grieve his death from the cross itself ... *from the cross itself* ... fearing for their *own* lives and the lives of those they love. Thereby, they do not approach Calvary as mere passers-by, but they come to Golgotha as Mary – *as the innocent Jesus* under the threat of unjust authorities. George Floyd’s death, then, is not the death of a stranger, but the death of a son, a brother, a father – felt viscerally in ways and at depths I cannot fathom.

And, as we, together, confront the murder of George Floyd and the unrelenting violence against people of color in our country, realize that some gathered for these prayers grieve his death from the *shadow* of the cross ... *from the long shadow of the cross* ... realizing the power behind that torture is ours and the knee upon this innocent man’s neck bears the weight of our privilege – my privilege. Thereby, we approach Calvary smelling of sour wine, and when we finally declare “Surely this man was God’s son!” none can be clear whether we speak with mockery or fidelity.

A long time ago now, a mother, still grieving the death of her infant child years before, put a finger in my chest and commanded the care she needed and that she expected for those who suffered similarly: “You show up wearing beige,” she told me, her eyes flashing. “You knock before you go in. You approach the one who weeps with your sincerity and all the love in your blood. You look her right in the eyes, and you don’t turn away from what you see. You say, ‘I am so sorry,’ and you mean it. You don’t make excuses for God. You don’t claim to understand. You don’t presume that you share a grief that you can’t even begin to know. Offer prayer if you have to do that, but then set your casserole on her counter and leave.”

To all who are on the cross in these days and, yet, would still open your door to me, I come humbly, and I say to you, “I am so sorry” ... *I am so sorry*. I hope that this service and the life we share in our Beloved Community will honor your hurt, your anger, your grief – to which I covenant we will bear witness as long as you need, until, when you prefer a space that is your own, then we will make room for that, too.

In this afternoon's Gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus excoriates the powerful leaders of the Temple, and when he points to their sins – “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.”ⁱⁱ – all of us nod as we think of those whose transparent hypocrisies we spite.

Yet Jesus presses harder and slices deeper into their deceitfulness, until he cuts into our complicities, too: ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, [but] have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.’ⁱⁱⁱ See, Jesus challenges the legion ways we feign righteousness as a conscious (or unconscious) strategy to guard our sinfulness. Jesus challenges those superficial, ultimately inconsequential shows of fidelity that hide our neglect of God's highest hopes for this world.

In this moment, that challenge of Jesus calls to account the indignation rituals of liberal, white America, those that serve only to protect our entitlements to the cultural, economic, and legal systems that benefit us. Jesus' challenge calls to account our self-satisfying hand-wringing and our anti-racism-by-association that allows us to focus our restless energy on what will make *us* feel better – on what will return this “unrest” to the “normal” that serves our interests and keeps Black and Brown Americans under our thumb ... and, when necessary, under our knees.

People of God, in this moment justice asks every white American, “**What are you ready to change to end racism in this country?**” Be clear, Jesus and Justice do not ask what those wealthier than you must give up. Jesus and Justice do not ask what Minnesotans must begin to do. Jesus and Justice do not ask what those who vote differently than you must come to understand. *No*.

Justice asks, *What are you ready to change to end racism in this country*. And that transformation must begin with repentance from our insatiable claims to grief that is not ours and our using others' suffering as means to feel holier than our neighbors. That transformation must continue in the realization that the comfort due this moment of horror *is not ours* – not ours to seek, not ours to explain, not ours to compel or excuse or give. Ultimately, the transformation Justice asks of us in this moment must lead us to nothing less than that very same cross of the crucified Christ.

So as we, together, confront the murder of George Floyd and the unrelenting violence against people of color in our country, we gather: in our difference and in our brokenness, we gather ... in our grief and our anger, in our despair and our hope, **we come together as the people of God**. And what light we may discern in this darkness, we find in this complicated, unresolved, still-reconciling, *holy* Communion of souls we comprise – the very Body of Christ in the world.

Yesterday, The Episcopal Church's Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, spoke a word for all who gather in this spirit. In his *Washington Post* editorial, Bishop Curry proposes:

“Our nation’s heart breaks right now because we have strayed from the path of love. Because love does not look like one man’s knee on another man’s neck, crushing the God-given life out of him ... as [this] unarmed victim pleads for mercy.

“Love does not look like the harm being cause by some police or some protestors in our cities. Violence against any person is violence against a child of God, created in God’s image. And that ultimately is violence against God, which is blasphemy – the denial of the God whose love is the root of genuine justice and true human dignity and equality.

“[Yet] Our frustration [at all of this] must not lead to fatalism or despair, **for we are not condemned to live this way forever.** [Instead, if we choose, we can follow] a different path – *the path of love.*

“[And] Love looks like making the long-term commitment to racial healing, justice, and truth-telling – knowing that, without intentional, ongoing intervention on the part of every person of good will, America will cling to its original, racist ways of being.

“Love looks like all of us – people of every race and religion and national origin and political affiliation – standing up and saying, “Enough! [... *Enough!*] We can do better than this. We can *be* better than this ...

“Now is the time for a national renewal of the ideals of human equality, liberty, and justice for all. Now is the time to commit to cherishing and respecting *all* lives, and to honoring the dignity and *infinite worth* of every child of God. Now is the time for all of us to show – in our words, our actions, and our lives – what love really looks like.”^{iv}

That all of us would follow this path of love,^v I pray:

Holy and merciful God, we know that you sent your Christ to reconcile all people to you and to one another. So, too, we know your anger at our inequities, and we remember your prophets’ call for us to labor with you for a world of free of tyranny and exploitation, free of bigotry and brutality, free of schism and sin. We pray that you would strengthen us to confront every injustice, and, transforming our rage into righteousness, that all we do would witness the unconquerable power of your Love. We pray for your justice, mercy, and Love, Amen.

ⁱ Mark 15:34.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 23:4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 23:23. Jesus continues, “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!”

^{iv} Curry, Michael. “As a black man, I understand the anger in our streets. But we still must choose love.” *The Washington Post*. May 31, 2020.

^v Love is where Jesus begins his teaching in Matthew (22:34-40): “When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ [Jesus] 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.”