

Pastoral Letters from the Executive Presbyter

June 8, 2020

Friends:

Over the weekend as I looked at some of the images of peaceful protests around our region, I was captivated by a picture of one man wearing a t-shirt with the words, “know justice; know peace.” We have participated or witnessed in the numerous protest responses drawing attention and focus to the ongoing concerns of racism in our society and its particular manifestation in the abuse of authority and force by some of those commissioned to serve and protect.

“No Justice; No Peace,” the people chant and cry out. These words reflect the many mixture of emotions of frustration, anger and sadness. While for some it may seem like a threat and if your interest is in the status quo, that may be correct..... For others, the reminds all of us of the long way there is still to go.... For others, the words cry out as a lament to our God. And when we cry out in this way, whether on the street or in our neighborhood, at the courthouses or in our sanctuaries, we pray with those who have prayed before us in the Psalter. Their words become our words even as we call upon our God to intervene.

Yet, as David Taylor, in Open and Unafraid, comments that unfortunately “many Christians, do not see this as clearly as the psalmists see it.”

“The psalmists see structural injustice within society, where Christians, perhaps especially evangelicals in the West, may see only personal guilt. The psalmists see wickedness that pervades institutions and cultures while Christians may see only the need for the forgiveness of individual sins. The psalmists see powerless people who are oppressed by the powerful, and so they pray for justice. Christians see only Psalm 51 with its pleas for mercy. Writes C.S. Lewis, “Christians cry to God for mercy instead of justice, they (the psalmists) cried to God for justice instead of injustice.”

“But while many Christians give justice half the attention they give to mercy, the Psalter devotes twice as much space to justice as it does to mercy. This is not because mercy matters less than justice but because a world that violates justice violates God’s fundamental purposes for that world.”

When these words become our words, these thoughts our thoughts, then perhaps, God’s actions will become our actions. For as God’s people, we know both that we do not control the bringing of God’s reign of justice and righteousness AND yet, we have been commissioned by the ONE who embodied mercy and justice to participate in God’s mission. It is both our obligation and our privilege. We are invited into the redemptive activity of God who is and will make things right. Given our own participation in all of these acts of injustice past and present, the first and most important redemptive action will be to listen. Listen to the pain and the effects of injustices enacted and even caused with our own tacit permission. We must confess our sins, for the problem has not merely been external to us. We will need to join with others as those who not only cry out, but those who will learn from others in order to respond as partners in God’s mission.

Many days from now, when the anger subsides and outrage dissipates, there will be the temptation to let life slip back into “normal.” When the memories of video images fade, and our individual lives are once more caught up in the daily responsibilities demanding our attention, even then and maybe more importantly then, the words should still ring forth in our hearts and our lips, not just “no justice, no peace,” but “know justice, know peace.”

For the peace that we seek is a shalom. This shalom must be grounded in the certainty of justice for each one but goes even beyond the minimal requirements of justice in our social relationships. Shalom reflects restoration in all of our relationships with God and with each other, but it cannot and will not be real as long as justice is delayed or denied.

It is this vision that must continually be before us. For we cannot nor should not be satisfied with any anything less. God’s desires for love and justice, mercy and righteousness must animate our worship and

our advocacy, our prayer and our action. And yet, we know the cries for justice and peace are more than a petition, they are also the promises of our God as expressed poetically by the Psalmist in Psalm 85:10-11:

*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace (Shalom) will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

Let us go forth with both that expectation and longing as we act. So, whether on a t-shirt or a chant, may our every desire be God's desire. May our words and our deeds embody and act upon God's coming realm in this world. May our personal relationships and our public policies exhibit the qualities of God's love and justice for our neighbor. May we and all those around us "know justice, know peace."

Blessings.

Rev. Richard "Skip" Noftzger
Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk
Presbytery of Redstone

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Micah 6:8

(Most of us tend to focus on only one or at best, two of these, but let us seek to be people who pursue what is "good" and what the Lord "requires," by embodying all three of them)

May 31, 2020

Friends:

During this season of a pandemic where we have witnessed the loss of life like we have not experienced before (even if we were not personally affected). We have sought to be protective of one another for the long term by staying "safer at home." Though some of the restrictions are being lifted, the mission to eradicate the virus and its effect is far from over. So, in this "new normal," our ongoing vigilance is required, and I encourage you to stay the course in health and safety practices for each other and for your neighbor.

In recent days, we have witnessed another type of disease that is prevalent in our world and in our country. Racism with its varying expressions was visually represented in a variety of videos culminating in the first hand witness to the senseless death of George Floyd. Seeing such events for ourselves brings us face to face with an experience that may have been unacknowledged otherwise. Yet, what if there was no video? What about all the other times there is no social media posting? Will we be able to see for ourselves the ways the tentacles of racism may permeate our society and our own participation reflected in our assumptions, our behaviors, and our institutions.

After several cycles of such events in recent months and years, pent-up frustration and anger found expression in peaceful protests this weekend. Sometimes, stoked by extremism, they boiled over turning destructive. Yet, let us not be distracted from the necessary diagnosis. Confronting the power and effect of racism in our lives and in our society is a redemptive responsibility of Christians who pray "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

As the body of Christ, we must do better. In Christ, we must be willing to acknowledge our own sin personally and among the people we live. We must move past seeking to justify ourselves to actively seeking justice and righteousness for others in our world. As those in need of God's grace, we know our own sin and that of our predecessors and we must be willing to respond in penitence for our own complicity. As a targeted area of our faithful discipleship focus in the Matthew 25 initiative, we seek to eradicate structural racism by advocacy and action in the name for the sake of Jesus the Christ.

It is relevant that on this Sunday, we celebrated the Spirit of God poured out upon God's people beginning a new work in founding the Church. The universal nature of that gift fulfilling Joel's prophecy was confirmed. The barriers of language overcome by God's presence among young and old, men and women, slave and free. Yet, the story of those earliest days did not stop there. Soon, those outside the older covenant would now be included in this new promise and not only included, but brought in without needing to become part of the old. For God's Spirit was evident in them and "who could hinder God?" We celebrate this story, this movement of God's Spirit transcending our own limitations. And we must learn from it anew.

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