

“The Iron Quilt Lifted”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21A) – 26 & 27 September 2020  
Philippians 2:1-13

Sometimes, my soul feels heavy, weighed down by powerful forces beyond my understanding, much less my control. It’s oppressive, hard to breathe. A sense of confusion and helplessness steals in, and I wonder what to think, what to do. Here lately that sense has grown stronger, and it’s no consolation to me that many others are experiencing the same thing. Better to be alone in this than to see people you love suffering, too. In fact, perhaps the most frustrating part of it all is not being able to protect the people we love from this crushing weight that oppresses the soul.

That weight comes from many sources, welded together like an iron quilt. A lethal pandemic still rages, and even the best and brightest among us can do little more than guess about when it will end. Jobs, businesses, homes, and a huge number of lives have been lost. Relationships have been disrupted, communities separated from one another, great sacrifices made by those who tend to the sick and dying. Millions are mourning loss, yet many have rejected reason and resorted to absurdity, still calling Covid-19 a hoax, which is a cruel insult to those who have lost so much, and those who have given so much to heal and save. My soul feels heavy.

The West has been burning, the Gulf Coast drowning, and a fierce argument raging over why. Our national hurricane center went straight through the alphabet in giving names to storms for only the second time since it started in 1953. So now, as we did in 2005, the same year as Hurricane Katrina, we’ve resorted to using the letters of the Greek alphabet to name them. This argument about why these fires and storms have been more frequent and intense in recent years –

both the argument's outcome and how it's conducted – will have serious consequences for our future.

Now science does require a measure of skepticism, but that skepticism needs to be rooted in evidence to be taken seriously. How many times in the past have we trusted science for a healthier world? Do you remember acid rain? Some scrubbers in smokestacks took care of that, and the forests revived. When the ozone layer in our atmosphere began to disappear, we put heavy restrictions on the use of chlorofluorocarbons, or CFC's, and the ozone returned to normal. We stopped using leaded gasoline when we realized it was poisoning our children. I can remember as a child when President Reagan's Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, went on TV to declare a definitive link between the use of tobacco and cancer, but for decades, many people denied it. Increasingly, we see people take the stance that reality is what they choose it to be. Reason is relative, science suspect, denial rife. My soul feels heavy.

We're in the midst of an election season that could be the ugliest and most dangerous in American history. Faith in democracy is being actively eroded. Foreign powers connive to help both sides, and there is a legitimate concern that for the very first time, our nation might not enjoy a peaceful transfer of power. Whatever the outcome of the election, we will remain severely divided, with great enmity, even loathing among people. I think our Commonwealth's motto, emblazoned on that beautiful blue flag is true. "United we stand. Divided we fall." Our status as a great and benevolent world power is more threatened now than it ever has been. Sometimes, my soul feels heavy.

Then there's the controversy over racism in this country, especially when it comes to how officers of the law use deadly force, and this is especially poignant for us here in Louisville with the grand jury passing its verdict this week over the death of Breonna Taylor. Some feel that her

shooting was the result of criminal recklessness motivated by latent racism. Others feel that the police fired in self-defense and that her death was a tragic accident. It could be a combination or both.

But to say that racism is a sin that's limited to just a few on the fringes of society is like saying that greed or envy is a sin that only afflicts a tiny percentage of the population. Everyone is vulnerable to temptation. No one is immune to the lures of greed or envy, nor is there anyone perfectly pure when it comes to the sin of racism. Just as we can be completely blind to our greed and envy, we can be oblivious to racism infecting our hearts.

If we do not deal with the scourge of racism with open and humble hearts, our society will never be whole, never healthy, doomed to an ongoing cycle of conflict and inequality. Yet we have the opportunity to follow the command of God delivered through the prophets, to do justice and walk in mercy. If we summon the moral courage to do this, then we will shine as a light to the world, a witness to how love can conquer prejudice even when it is well-hidden. It starts with a simple but very sensitive conversation where we listen with the same intensity as we speak, where we risk being vulnerable for the sake of truth and the hope of reconciliation.

These issues are a mere handful of the panels on that iron quilt. Many others could be named, and even more remain unspeakable. Sometimes, my soul feels heavy, and I'm sick of it, and I know that I'm not alone. But how can we lift the burden, shove off the weight and breathe freely again?

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” That's the wise counsel of Paul to both the Philippians and us. We're not sure exactly what was going on with the church in Philippi, but there are ample clues in the letter Paul sent that they were dealing with external pressures and internal conflicts, both of

which were taxing their unity, threatening the coherence of their community. Their souls were heavy, pressed down hard enough by the iron quilt of their day that Paul felt it necessary to write them a letter.

To “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” means practicing humility, and being humble means obeying God, and our obedience to God involves fulfilling the purpose for which we were created, just as Jesus did. He – the Son of God – came to Earth in human form. What could be more humble than that? Jesus endured all the many trials we do. He felt hunger and thirst, pain, exhaustion. He knew rejection and betrayal, withstood vicious criticism, lived under threat of arrest and death, and dealt with disciples who were often inexcusably clueless and faltering.

In the end, Jesus gave his all, the last full measure of devotion, dying in agony and humiliation on a cross, abandoned and exposed. And he did it so that we might be released from the power and sin and death, so that the heaviest iron quilt of them all would be ripped apart forever. Jesus “emptied himself” of life so that we might live, so that we might be found through his sacrifice of self to be worthy of God’s mercy: justified in God’s sight; sanctified and reconciled. And he did it without a single ounce of “selfish ambition or conceit.” His whole life was lived as a free gift, with his death the greatest gift of them all.

Jesus did not ignore or deplore those who were cast out and ostracized, the notorious sinners, like tax collectors and prostitutes, judged inferior and hopeless by their peers. He showed them mercy, offered them grace. Jesus used his divine power not for his own benefit but to heal the excluded and downcast – body, mind, and soul. He dined with them, despite the scandal it caused. He loved them as fiercely as anyone ever has or ever could, and he loves us, too.

When we open our hearts to that love, we find, to use Paul's words, "consolation" and "encouragement." We share "in the Spirit," which fills us with "compassion and sympathy," "enabling [us] both to will and to work for [God's] good pleasure." In that love, we receive peace, the heavy iron quilt lifted, or at least lightened, which sets us free to do as God desires. We begin to perceive that the risk of trust is both possible and preferable, that even in the midst of our harshest disagreements, we should not simply throw away relationships. We learn that every judgment we pass, every moment we pretend to be superior, comes at great cost because it blocks us off from the love we need to live.

In a world where pride has been elevated from vice to virtue, we need to witness to the world now more than ever the true joys of humility, of being released from illusions of superiority, empowered to dwell in the one true reality, God's – a realm of peace, hope, joy, forgiveness, freedom, and love, in which we receive by giving, and give without any expectation of return. Those dedicated to the path of wisdom and release that humility brings can expect resistance. So brace yourself for it. To many the humble seem ridiculous, and the proud will not be sparing in their ridicule. But love doesn't care, or perhaps more accurately, love cares only for how reconciliation with the proud can be achieved, despite their ridicule.

Right now, my soul feels lighter, because we are gathering in worship to praise our loving God, and that helps pry off that iron quilt. Celebrating the love of Jesus makes it easier to breathe. Private prayer helps, too, as do works of mercy, the exercise of compassion – in thought, word, and deed – and resisting the temptation to judge. We have a way out here. It's called the cross. Let's take it, and bring as many people along with us as possible. That's our God-given purpose. To set free with love, as we have been set free. Amen.