

“Our Work To Do”

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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky

3rd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7C) – 21 June 2020

“Peaceful protest. Disturbing the peace. No Justice, No peace.”

These are all phrases familiar to activists during the Civil Rights movement, both in the history of our nation and today. Good Christian people of all races and denominations have spoken these words and employed these methods of action to bring about justice and change. The active non-violence of the reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee called at once for peace and for disturbing the peace. Activists were called to take up room in places that were not meant for them. Students were called upon to join marches that would disrupt the normal routines of whole communities and place themselves in vulnerable positions to protect those who were even more so. Christian Leaders were prevailed upon to speak out in ways that put their jobs, their reputations, and their very lives at risk. In working for peace, these heroes of history found themselves in the chasm of division.

If this sermon sounds familiar, that's because it is. Almost a year ago now, I gave a sermon on Luke's version of today's Gospel lesson, in which Jesus reminds his disciples that to choose the way of the cross is to choose risk, to choose to take a stand when others fall silent. To choose the way of the cross is to be divisive, political, a reformer of systems. Today, Jesus says to us, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” At the time that I last spoke with you about this warning from Jesus, the commemorations of several martyrs and saints of the Civil Rights movement in this country were at hand. We spoke about the familiar chant, “No justice, No peace,” that leaders of that

movement returned to between demands for reform and hymns of praise to God. That same chant has echoed across the generations to rest on the lips of the protestors and reformers of our time. Just as the demonstrations, boycotts, and organizing efforts of that movement brought discomfort, disruption, and even violence at times, we need only open our social media apps or turn on the TV to see a movement that is both new and renewed, that stands on the shoulders of past movements and crowns the heads of a generation who understand freedom to be their birthright and their heritage. Leaders and organizers of the Civil Rights movement in this country did not always agree, either on methods or on goals. The violent actions of a few were attributed to the ill intent of the many. Leaders like the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr were derided in the press as outside agitators and told to go back where they came from. They were arrested and jailed for disrupting the peace, for blocking traffic, for breaking the law. Civil Rights leaders that we teach our children about today were quite literally criminals by virtue of their work. Jonathon Daniels, a saint of this church, was martyred for keeping the wrong sort of company, for attempting to enter a store with young black protestors after they were released from a hot jail cell and desperately in need of refreshment. Many of Jesus's followers met the same fate after his crucifixion, martyred for their affiliation with a criminal.

What is happening now in our country is not different. It is all too familiar, especially to the family of God. There are those that will choose the way of death, either by physical violence or the violence inherent in so many of our systems. Jesus knew these people. These were the ones who rejected him as the Messiah, because he did not choose to take an earthly throne by waging war on the empire. They are also those who drove the nails through his hands on behalf of the same empire. There are those who will choose the way of comfort, masquerading as peace that allows oppression to continue, to preserve their own positions at the expense of the

oppressed. Jesus knew them too, the rich men who would not leave behind their earthly wealth and status to follow him. At times even his own mother and brothers attempted to silence him, to bring him home before he said the wrong thing in front of the wrong people. Their love for him led them to place his physical safety ahead of the Gospel cause. I have never understood more clearly how that fear and love could feel than after seeing photos of my father suffering the effects of tear gas while photographing the recent protests here in our city. If I thought I could convince him to stay home where its safe, in my most selfish moments, I probably would. But it wouldn't work on my stubborn Daddy, and appeals to safety surely did not work on the Son of God. The cause of the kingdom, the magnitude of the Gospel message, was too great to remain silent. It still is.

So if the faithful choice is not physical or systemic violence, if it isn't a comfortable status quo, if it isn't silence or safety or even peace- then how are we to be faithful disciples in a time when every choice feels like an obstacle, and every stance carries risk and division?

“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.”

Jesus was no stranger to division, or conflict, or discomfort. His followers have always taken it for granted that their message would upset people, even people closest to them. Many of Jesus's disciples, across time and across the world, have lost family, friends, financial stability and social status, even their lives, for the sake of their faith. Jesus identified closely with the long list of prophets before him who were vilified, cast out, and killed for criticizing the existing systems and calling God's people to their knees in repentance.

“Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

When our loyalties are divided, true discipleship is impossible. But when our sole loyalty is to God who we know in Jesus, our discipleship can then take shape within our families, our relationships, our work, even our politics. It is the privilege of the baptized to claim kinship in Christ, to die to self and be made alive in the body of the faithful. When this privilege seems simple, when it does not seem to require sacrifice or death to sin, we have missed the mark. When we as God's one holy Catholic and apostolic Church make peace with the suffering of others, when we fall silent in the face of sin, when we choose comfort over justice, we have failed to carry the cross we are called to bear. When we look within and close our eyes to the places we have divided our loyalties, when we kneel in confession and fail to name the ways we have fallen short of God's dream- the Peace of Jesus will continue to escape us. The Gospel is more precious than our comfort. The kingdom is bigger than our fears.

We have every right to be afraid, for any number of reasons. We fear for our brothers and sisters in uniform, both abroad and here at home, who have made promises to protect and serve us and this country. We fear for our black, indigenous, and latinx brothers and sisters who suffer under unjust systems and at the hands of violent individuals who fail to see that they are God's beloved children too. We fear for ourselves and especially our elders and vulnerable ones as this pandemic continues to claim lives and elude our health experts. We fear for our environment, as we continue to struggle to protect our fragile earth from our own appetites. But even in times of fear, the Gospel is still true. The God who created us and sustains us was born among us, died at our hands, and was raised to bring us forgiveness and newness of life. Out of death, God brings life. Out of divisions, God sows unity. Out of repentance, God grows renewal. Out of our fears, God raises us up to face injustice, so that one day there might be everlasting peace.

No justice, no peace. It echoes through our history, and through our own streets. We cannot have one without the other, and both are the work of discipleship.

Our work is only beginning.