

Dear Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Amen.

People are often asking these days, “so what do you think of all the riots?” A short answer I gave recently was “they are wrong of course. Rioting is violent, and violence is never the answer; they must be stopped.” But there is a longer discussion, and a more important question, which is: “What caused the anger of the riots; what are the conditions of the people that are so angry?” And for those who follow Jesus, perhaps the important question is what would Jesus do and how would Jesus feel?

Well the gospel lesson from this morning is fairly clear: When Jesus saw the crowds, restless, and “harassed,” he had compassion on them, for they looked like “sheep without a shepherd.” He had compassion on all the crowd. He knew there was unrest everywhere, and the crowds were hungry. He had compassion on them, which literally means that he suffered with them. In another place we hear that he wept over the city of Jerusalem. At the beginning of Jesus ministry, we hear words of compassion; at the beginning of Luke, Jesus states his mission clearly. Quoting Isaiah, he says “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to set free the oppressed, and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people!” ... the poor, the captives, the oppressed: setting them free is how the Lord will save!

Jesus then says, “this scripture has come true in your hearing.” In other words, I am here to begin the time, to make effectual the time of God’s salvation; the time has come! We heard in Carrie Newcomer’s song this morning, the insistent “If not now, tell me when!” This could be the opportune time that

systemic racism could be addressed and confronted seriously. Jesus knew about timing. He said in other places “the kingdom of God is at hand,” and “the kingdom of God has come near,” and we say in our prayer every Sunday, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Our faith is not principally something about what happens after we die. “Kingdom” for Jesus was a fairly political word; it was “Thy” kingdom, not the kingdom of the kings, not the kingdom of presidents, not the kingdom of the powerful. No, it refers to GOD’S kingdom, which means a society full of justice and peace.

So “Now” could indeed be the time for greater change. We know that the Chinese language has the same word-picture for crisis as for opportunity. I had a professor at seminary who was very clear about what he called the “transforming moment” in psychology and spirituality. He says that transformation usually starts with CONFLICT, that then leads to inner scanning, a scanning of many ideas. Then the third step is an insight, an “Aha” moment, an awakening, or divine light moment. The fourth step is resolution and integration. So now, at this time in our country’s history, it seems obvious to most that the killing of George Floyd by kneeling on his neck, recorded for all to see, has come to us as a great conflict and crisis. But it is also an opportunity, to learn from our history, especially the history of racism, and to recognize current day examples of pervasive racism. It is an opportunity to make changes in our ingrained attitudes and systems.

Jesus felt the pain of the people, and thus he had compassion on the people. We know that Jesus would look at current day looting and rioting with pain in his heart. Jesus would have compassion for the whole mess, but especially for

the cause of it all: the long history of blacks being oppressed, enslaved and murdered. Whether killed by a rope around the neck, or a knee upon the neck, or a bullet in the back, it is all inhumane and evil lynching. I dare say it is a different degree of suffering from that experienced if somebody’s store was robbed or some police station was set on fire.

As with any people that are marginalized or oppressed in any way, they need not only their own voices to speak up for themselves, and tell their history (such as the history of not being able to breathe), but they need the voices of allies; they need people not of their own group to speak up. And so in this era, like I said last week, we need to listen especially to black voices. They know their history better than the rest of us; we can’t really walk in their shoes. But we need the voices of white prophets also, and one that I turn to often was a great prophet back in the 80’s and 90’s, William Sloan Coffin. He was the preacher at the prestigious Riverside Church in New York City. He put it this way, some 30 years ago, in a little book called *Passion for the Possible*: “We believe that all people are created equal, of course, but the majority of white Americans cannot feel the monstrosity of the inequality that is so universally felt today by black Americans, so that racism remains bone-deep in American society. He speaks of it as an “American tragedy,” 400 years of continuous racial discrimination in our land. He continues: “Racial discrimination is the one thing most clearly wrong in our country.” Now I know that’s hard to hear; but in one of our most popular patriotic songs, “America the Beautiful,” Katharine Lee Bates says “God mend (our) every flaw,” and “May God (our) gold refine!” Of course we as a country need refining! Of course we need reforms! William Sloan Coffin also challenges us to change for the better, saying “in the

eyes of the world, our racial discrimination undermines our frequent claims to moral leadership in the world; it contradicts what we stand for.”

In regards to affirmative action, he says: “many white Americans do understand that there is a need for affirmative action. Why? Because it was prompted by years of negative action!” (more than “negative” action, it is years of murder, years of oppression, years of keeping people “in their place.” Years of negative action need years of affirmative action, to rectify, to reform, to repair, to set straight! Jesus’ mission was clear in the gospel lesson read this morning: “I have come “to set the captives free;” I have come to end slavery. As our sign out in front of the church says: we need to “fight for the powerless,” we need to “reject racism.” It is the work of reform, as Carrie Newcomer said in her song: “We will work until it’s done, every daughter every son!

All budgets need reform. It takes much work to reform a budget. Our national budget needs reform. Our church budgets need reform. Our personal family budgets need reform. Because budgets are “moral documents,” showing where we put our priorities. Certainly police budgets need some reallocation. Certainly our national budget needs reallocation ... reallocation towards more service (such as rehabilitative treatment). When we look at the percentage of the budget that is allocated for the military, it is astounding. It shows a bias to solve our problems with brute force. Where is the money and effort for things like Peace Corps? Let’s keep working to reallocate money for human services and peacemaking around our world.

The passage that we heard in Romans 5 talks about suffering; it says suffering will lead to “endurance.” What is endurance but working, working for something better. And it

says endurance will lead to “character,” and that character will lead to hope. Desmond Tutu has a wonderful saying about hope in “The Book of JOY.” He puts it this way: “We choose hope, and hope is to step forward firmly into the howling wind, bearing one’s chest to the elements, knowing that in time the storm will pass. There it is: to make that effort, and to work at it.

But then he goes on to talk about the way that hope ultimately gains its strongest force, by the relationships in the community, having hope with one another. He says hope is nurtured by community, nurtured by relationship. Tutu concludes: “Hope sends us into the arms of other people.” So he's talking about a hope that is merged with Love, doing things as a community.... Which sends us into the arms of other people. We remember that Dr. Martin Luther King said that Love is the most durable force in the universe. And notice he does use the word “force,” a durable force, for it is love when we work with each other, when we work hand in hand.

In conclusion, we are here to celebrate love and hope, that can have the power to transform, both ourselves and the world. And Paul in Romans 5 insists that “hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love is poured out into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit. Hope and love are intertwined. God’s love is poured out everywhere, and that's where we put our hope. So with love’s power, we will work together, in community, multi-colored and multi-cultural, towards greater justice and peace. Thanks be to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit, a divine and powerful spirit of love, that can transform and “reform” us, continually, our whole lives long. Amen.