

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Below are the readings and sermon for Sunday June 7, 2020. I hope they have reached you in good health and the Spirit of the Lord. Words cannot express how much I desire for us to be together in worship again.

In Christ's Peace,
Pastor Steve

John 1:1-4

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

John 1:14-16

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

Sermon

It is far easier to encounter Jesus Christ as **just a man**, who's entire life was devoted and ended because of an all-inclusive, anti-establishment message of life, healing and forgiveness in God the Father above. Just a man, a historical figure who "heard" a higher calling to reconnect and redeem God's creation. A man linked to the prophetic voices of the past, and having a comprehensive and authoritative grasp of his peoples historical text's. Just a man. A very compelling and beautiful story of the man Jesus, of Nazareth.

To encounter Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God is not all-together different than encountering him as just a man. Encountering him as both man and God makes even more sense if someone is but **willing** to consider how it could be this man is truly holy flesh. An admittance to not having the answers to life, and a hope for more than what just meets the eye, serve as linkages between one's heart and mind; between what is felt/experienced and what mentally and logically computes.

This is Holy Trinity Sunday. Three in one. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. All persons, not parts, equal. Three persons, one God. A relationship that has existed before anything existed, before anything had form. A relationship that exists for the purpose of relating to God's creation.

1st John is believed to have been written to a community in Ephesus. The author of 1 John is widely regarded as author of the Gospel of John. The similarities in language choice, literary technique and emphasis on Jesus divinity serve to support this belief. So, this congregation appears to be struggling with believing/understanding that the man, Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Christ, the Messiah, live in the flesh. There is an element of disbelief among them that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. Were the miracles Jesus

did too big of a stretch? Was it His radically new interpretation and inclusion of all into God's covenant that was causing them to deviate from understanding him as the Son of God? Was the resurrection just taking it too far? Or was it just the undermining work of evil, ever so present in their world causing their division? All of the above. They are a congregation deviating from **the** tenet of Christianity that separates it from all other belief systems...a God, that **so** loved the world that he gave his only Son to the world knowing that He would die a human death.

At the outset of this letter, or perhaps sermon, the author is making it abundantly clear that Jesus is the incarnation of God's mind. Jesus is the Christ. And that by way of what they have seen with their eyes, heard with their ears, and touched with their hands was indeed the very flesh of God. Revealed, to them so that they may testify to you. Why? So that they may have fellowship with them, and thus the Father, and the Son.

They have encountered the living flesh of a man, whose actions, caused reactions that inspired people to reevaluate their relationship to God and one another. As this man Jesus went about his teaching and preaching and healing those who followed Him, would seek to become more like Him. Those who followed him were equipped to process what truly sustained life. Those who followed Jesus were equipped to speak truth. Those who followed Jesus were told to pick up there cross of they truly desired to follow Him. Those who followed Jesus didn't hesitate to hope that there was more to life than meets the eye, including Jesus himself. He was there. He did stuff. Lots of awesome stuff. Not once to his benefit, but always to that of others. Jesus had unselfish spiritual swagger. His leading was never about him, or where he wanted to go.

It was always about where he needed to be. His leading was always about helping others evaluate their relationship with God as defined by what it looked like with one another. When the flesh of God hung beaten and dying on the cross it wasn't about God's anger and wrath, or insatiable appetite for blood. No, it was about God sacrificing, about God giving, intimately knowing the pain of being human. It was about love.

It was about God saying take a look here...because of My beloved Son's death, you know to what extent I will go for you. Jesus Christ, the living, breathing, fleshly presence of God's wisdom and grace.

It is good for us to be reminded of our faith's grounding in the Christ that walked the earth with us. Jesus knew emotion, joy, compassion, fear, anger. When he needed a break, Jesus would go off on his own to pray. Jesus was known to seek solitude, away from others. He healed the sick. He feed the hungry. He lifted up the lowly. He challenged the leaders of systems of His day to think differently. He challenged the people's belief system to consider an alternate way of being. Face to face. In the presence of God's people, His words, actions and claims stating consider this...to live in love. Here at the outset of 1 John, those who are doubting that God would come as close as God did in flesh, herein is a reminder that there was far too much evidence seen, heard, and touched by the man Jesus for him not to be the Christ. Far too big a witness of his resurrection from the dead to just brush it aside and label it a lie. Far too many people's lives were transformed because of Him. Far too big a glimpse of what awaits us in paradise was revealed for him to just have been a man on a mission. Jesus is the embodiment of God's mission to us so we may know fellowship with God and one another.

Fellowship with one another is key. Being seen and heard is key. Jesus' ministry wasn't done in a vacuum, insulated from us, speaking, teaching, healing...living...and dying at a distance. Quite contrary, He was up close and personal. The end goal of every interaction Jesus had when he walked this earth was to have people encounter one another in the image in which they were created, as holy. That was the goal. Often times those on the receiving end of Jesus words of truth, did not want to see or hear what must be said. At times His words were pointed and deliberate, wounding egos and threatening status quo. Whether it was, "repent", "forgive", or the thousand different ways he said "love thy neighbor", Jesus was guiding all to encounter each other as nothing less than their equal. Jesus' truths were very often hard for individuals, groups, nations of people to wrap their hearts and minds around. Jesus pushed people to the edge of their ability to love, and asked them to love more, to faithfully seek to understand what it looked like for them to love more. Reevaluate your relationship with God. Rethink your thoughts, words and deeds. Return to the Lord you God. I am the way. Follow me. Be redeemed. Everything Jesus was then, and is now is about directing us towards one another so that as 1 John, chapter 1, verse 4 says, "so that our joy may be complete."

Signs, slogans, posts on social media suggest our joy is not complete, our fellowship with one another is not complete. It seems to be we have been speaking past one another. Not seeing one another. Not hearing one another. It would appear that yet another grievous incident is leading the broken hearted to one another. Fellowship is finding life in a communal empathetic sadness, and cries of justice the world over. The Holy Spirit is at it again. Praise be to God. Though many of us may be quiet from inside our homes, our hearts still

roil with hurt and frustration over the calamity in our midst. What appears as a hopeful call for change to some may be seen and internalized as a threat to their peaceful life. You're not ambivalent, or apathetic, but perhaps just unaware. The truth has proved evasive. You aren't ambivalent and apathetic to the pain printed on poster boards, but yet, it has been hard for you to see and hear up till now...Me too.

How to enter this conversation of race as related to good police, bad police, systems that discriminate, education that lacks and the vicious cycle of poverty is beyond me. Like you, I have gone round and round about what to say and how to say it. Do I need to speak? Am I expected to speak? What if I don't? Finding the way to express what roiling about within me without being fearful of how it would be interpreted by those I love and serve, and live with was evasive. My heart told me I needed to be a part of the fellowship of pain that has been raining down on us these last couple weeks. I needed to know more.

On Friday, the mention of a possible protest early in the day was followed by a phone call inviting me to come and be present as a pastor at the corner of Military and PGA. These were the needed nudges. All week I had been talking and discussing the events all around us, with family and friends and coworkers, but now perhaps it was time to walk? My family was quickly on board to go and see. What difference would our presence make? What possible change for the better is this family of six going to experience?

Friday afternoon I headed home to get the family. While there I decided to change so that I would look more the "part" I was asked to be, as a pastor. While changing, my 8 year-old Mara walks in on me and says, "Why are you

putting on your Sunday outfit daddy?” Man did that question strike me as relative and oh so poignant at a time like this. At that moment, putting on my clerical shirt and collar had me think of how I was going to be perceived. It has never been my style to walk about town in my “Sunday Best”, signaling my vocation. Perhaps I should. I was going to this protest to signal love and peace in the name of Jesus Christ.

Upon arriving it did not take me long to realize I stood out. The clerical collar, the stole over my shoulders, the cross around my neck spoke volumes. Possibly more so to myself than to the few hundred whose company I was in. I had no sign in my hands. I didn’t need one. The organizer of the usual group that occupies the corner of PGA and Military talked to me. I listened. A couple people asked me to pray with them. I did. I joined the repeated chants of justice.

The whole time I was there I was asking myself why am I here? This is what I concluded. I was there because of my ordination vows. I was there because I needed to listen. I was there because a man died for no reason. I was there because my daughters faith remind me daily of how they “get” all-inclusive love and justice for all better than I do.

At one point, the news interviewed me as we walked to the market pavilion at the Gardens Municipal Complex. One of the questions I was asked was if I felt like I was making a change. I hesitated and said, “I have to believe that I am. If not for me, then for my daughters. I like to believe every generation tries to do life better than the next...” At this point he interrupts me and says, “We have been trying to do this for generations. Do you feel hopeful about now, this time in history.” I hesitated slightly, and replied “yes”.

I share this experience with you because I needed it. I had to draw close to the color of the noise and crowd to understand, albeit marginally better. It was a beginning for me. It was an opportunity to listen and reevaluate myself as a person, as a pastor, as a child of God. I am unfinished piece of God's work. I needed this so that I can be led better by God. I needed this so that I can lead us better. I read a quote recently that said, "Never ask anyone's permission to lead. Just lead." I'll add to that thought...

If done in the name of the unifying, not dividing name of Jesus Christ, the one who hears, empathizes and consoles so that we may hear, empathize and be consoled, then lead on.

My hope for you, is that you embrace opportunities to grow in closer fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ of all compositions and seek to understand how important it is be in fellowship with the grieved. Wherever you are in your faith. I pray that the Spirit of God supplants the ills of your body, mind and soul, and the images and sounds of injustice with hope. Don't hesitate to hope. For Hope has come to us. The man Jesus and his anointing as the Christ from the beginning has been revealed to us. Not just from afar, but physically in our midst, in one another to one another. You were created holy and beautiful, may you live as such with one another. Do so for sake of you, God's people and Jesus the crucified and risen Christ. Amen.

