

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Below are the reading and sermon for Sunday June 14, 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

1 John 1:5-2:2

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

²My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Sermon

Please pray with me...Dear Heavenly Father, may this meditation on your Living Word unite with the hearts of those listening and light our way in love, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning I want to faithfully explore with you the state of affairs in our country, truthful fellowship, and how a theological doctrine of Martin Luther provides a framework for understanding how one is to live as a subject of a governed nation (left kingdom) while at the same time living as a faith driven subject of God's creation (right kingdom). These two guiding bodies of our lives are not distinct from one another. They form our ethic for living life. I hope this will work as an aid in stoking your faith in soulfully demanding times, like now.

Citizens of the United States of America are calling out the citizens of the United States of America for not walking in the light of truth and justice. **They** would say, *The American way* has lost its way, or rather, that she was never really on the "lighted" way to begin with. **They** would say, embedded systems of racism have managed to dodge exposure to the light of our self-evident constitutional truth, that **all** are created equal. **They** would say we may be created equal, but that equal access and opportunity to the ideological American society is woefully lacking for them. **They** would say racism is alive and doing well.

This is what we are seeing and hearing everywhere we turn. We cannot dismiss the fact that many black Americans are deeply discontent with their version of America. Their pain and disenfranchisement is real. Tens of thousands of people of all varieties do not march in protest of disproportionate deaths of persons of color in this country unless there is good reason to. Education, solid family unit, equal paying jobs, access to healthcare, good schools, and respect from the racial majority are all essential factors in realizing, and grasping hold of opportunity in this country. All the aforementioned factors lend not only to the advancement of Black Americans, but also serves to demystify them in the eyes of whites as anything other than an equal child of God, and ultimately, hopefully, negate any fear of them. We have come far since 1861, and 1964, but obviously not enough.

The outrage aimed at police is a symptom of a much larger systemic issue, more-so than just race. Anger is. Hurt is. Distrust is. Not just race fueled, but life fueled. Police are bearing the brunt of an atmosphere charged with political and societal anxiety. Not to mention an atmosphere infected with uncertainty. Police are the enforcers of the law, and the protectors of peace. They are at the front lines bearing the brunt of all that gets pined up within us. When not dealt with a healthy way, it can ugly. Police keep us safe from each other when we disrespect one another, from petty theft to murder and everything in-between. Unfortunately, and to their detriment, they are asked to keep us safe from one another when political and socio-economic systems fail to tip the scales of justice and inequality.

They are caught in the middle, policing those who are set up to fail. Black Americans outnumber White Americans 5 to 1. Set up to fail. The enormity of this is so much more than a 10-15 minute sermon. History, unfair economics and education have all contributed to a hazardscape for blacks in America. Far be it for me to be an expert on civil rights and equal opportunity for our black brothers and sisters in Christ here in America. I am a white male. Enough said.

But here I am with a pulpit in the midst of societal race-fueled unrest, with a health pandemic to boot trying to figure out how to contextualize what is occurring in our country by way of our faith. It seems everything is political these days. Skepticism of agenda plagues us. Truth of all matters seems to be questioned. Our fellowship is threatened by a collection of voices/false gods clamoring for our attention. It doesn't matter which false god is working us over, to our decline they all seek to control our spiritual well-being and fellowship with the One true God. This very topic of race and opportunity, which I have only begun to wade into will either have you draw us closer in fellowship, or maybe not. Like you, I am simply trying to grasp hold of the cross of Jesus Christ in the midst of all this to faithfully seek to understand and listen. It is our responsibility as forgiven and redeemed members of Christ's body.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not permit us to look away from what is at hand. We can be angry at the violence of the police and the rioters, but the fact is, broken people break people. How do we speak peace into the volatile airspace of racial divide? Knowing that God will move us, will we let go and let the Spirit drive us to empathy, comfort and change? A lot of what 1 John would call anti-fellowship behavior is in our midst. He writes in verse chap 1:6, *If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true*; Fellowship in the name of Jesus Christ is not puppy dogs and rainbows. This passage of 1 John makes no bones about the connection between acknowledgement of our ability to sin and walking/living in the light. Deceiving ourselves, by claiming to walk in the light, but yet not living in it...trivializes the gracious gift of Jesus Christ's life for our life, our healing and our forgiveness.

Fellowship with one another is fellowship with Jesus. Walking in the light, is walking with Jesus and one another. Fellowship is leaning into and challenging what vexes us. Fellowship is political and biblical interpretation coexisting for the benefit of the greater good. Unity and harmony has a place in the midst of diversity if we are willing to name it. The self-evident truth of being created awaits, and listens for the voice of the advocate's love from you and me. Our fellowship with one another is being tested by darkness. Politics lurk in the shadows of everything. Wanting to be the light, but ultimately as divisive as ever. How does one exercise their faithful conscious and have not be understood as inauthentic political posturing? We can chose to be divided or we can chose to united.

Luther's theological doctrine of Two Kingdoms...the left (government) the right (the church). Our country was founded on the premise that church and state shall be separate. Meaning, the United States government cannot impose a religious belief system upon its citizens. This has led to a misunderstanding that the church should have nothing to do with politically engaging its

government. In this manner, social ministries of advocating on behalf of the least of those among us is left to the work of the government. It can be argued that government is best suited for being run like a business. The work of the church is to be the voice of those without a voice. The work of the church in the realm of governance is for decisions not to be just numerically quantified but humanly qualified.

Dr. Craig Nesson's writes in his paper *Reappropriating Luther's Two Kingdoms*, "It is crucial that we begin with a clear assertion that finally there is only one kingdom of God." (Amen!?) Jesus was clear that all He was, and He said and did was the in-breaking of God's kingdom upon this world. Healings, miracles and all, were proof to the fact that God had arrived in Jesus Christ. (Amen!?) God was here to disrupt the powers of Satan. If anything, the two kingdoms are that of God and Satan engaged in battle for control of souls.

Long thought of as odd bedfellows, church and state are actually two different divine activities engaged in two strategies whose goal is to thwart injustices and powers of division and oppression. Nesson writes, "God uses two hands in the battle against Satan: i) a right-hand strategy that involves the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the administration of the Holy Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper and 2) a left-hand strategy that involves the establishment of just order in society through the institutions of the state, economy, law, education, family, and church. Always these two strategies complement one another. Never are they in competition with each other. God is ambidextrous and very coordinated in the use of both hands to save and preserve the world. Both strategies serve God's purpose in establishing the one kingdom of God in the world." Nesson continues, "*God's left-hand strategy (government)*, provides just structures that promote life in the face of Satan's attempts to divide, oppress and conquer. In this strategy, God also employs the law, this time not in its theological use of convicting sinners, but rather in its *political use* for ordering the world justly."

Nessan concludes, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ declares the forgiveness of the sinner at the heart of the right-hand strategy, who is set free from bondage to sin and for genuine interest in the welfare of the neighbor. Christian freedom propels the forgiven sinner into service through both the left- and right-hand strategies; on the left hand through, among other activities, political engagement and on the right hand through evangelism. The baptismal vocation of the Christian is to be lived out via the several stations afforded to each by God: through relationships with members of the family, through work, in fulfilling the duties of citizenship, and at church.”

After explaining his rationale for mass communicating the long-buried truth of God’s Biblical Word to the church-state Holy Roman Empire, Martin Luther famously said, “Here I Stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.” Luther was shedding light on truths of God’s Word and work in Jesus Christ as being self-evident. He interpreted the word of God for the people of God so that those of his day would know the freedom afforded a Christian. Luther’s stand was about righting the church-states fellowship with its people, and its people with one another. Speaking and standing in God’s truth into matters civil and spiritual was the work of Jesus Christ, Martin Luther. Speaking, standing and doing in the truth of God’s love for all the brokenness of creation in Jesus Christ on the cross is in our faith and civilian/political DNA.

I have heard it said that “evil depends on good people being quiet”. We cannot be fearful of evil. We cannot be fearful of speaking the truth of God’s justice into political and civil realms because we are fearful of failed fellowship. Our passage in 1 John makes it clear, that there is **no** true fellowship outside of our fellowship in the life, death and resurrection Jesus Christ. The cross is made trivial, devalued and cheapened when we are quiet, when we are fearful of ramifications. Evil gains the upper hand when we don’t speak, stand and express on behalf of Jesus Christ.

This is an opportune moment for the church to gather up all the broken pieces of humanity all the broken systems and proclaim the Prince of Peace, the healer of every ill to the world. From the cross and in his dying breath, Jesus asked the Father to forgive them for they know not what they do. We know better. We know the rest of the story. We know the resurrection. We know power of life over death. We have received the promise. It is ours to possess and to give. We know what to do. Our true fellowship in Christ informs us. Heavenly father forgive us for what we don't do, yet know what to do. Have us to not be silent and fearful, but outspoken, bold and beautiful, for you, for your people. Here we are Lord. Now what? To whom shall we go, what shall we say? You have the words of eternal life. Halleluiah and Amen.