

## 6-7-20 Sermon "Imagination"

As an openly out and self-proclaimed introvert, I generally process thoughts, ideas, and reactions in my mind for a while - sometimes a long while - before I talk about or otherwise express them. As an introvert who is also a writer and preacher, words are important to me. Choosing the best words, in the right combinations, is important to me. I don't always get that right, but it isn't for lack of trying. A typical Sunday sermon will go through at least three drafts, if not more, before you hear it. And often times what's on the printed page in that "final" draft is different from what comes out of my mouth because in the moment of delivery, the Spirit moves me to tweak those words yet one more time.

And I say all of that because this week it has been particularly difficult for me to find just the right words to express how I feel about what is going on in our nation right now - words, that is, that are appropriate for me to share with you and your families in this space. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not suggesting I have nothing to say on these issues; that would be a sure sign that

you don't know me. No, the issue is the filter that I'm told I must engage or that I am **expected** to engage when the title "Reverend" precedes your name. Much of what I feel compelled to say about these issues in the privacy of my home, sitting in front of the television, I cannot say in the sanctuary standing in the pulpit. At least, according to that filter, and those expectations.

The book club that Lynn and I are part of talked last Sunday evening in our back yard about the issue of race and racism, of protests and politics, of riots and responses. We shared our absolute horror over the brutal death of yet another unarmed black man at the hands of an overzealous police officer. We lamented the lame or vitriolic responses that were coming from different levels of government. And we talked about how we, as mostly privileged white people, could respond in positive and productive ways to show our support to our black and brown brothers and sisters, for whom these events are not just another news story on television that can be turned off, but is a fact of every day life - for them, for their parents, for their children - and

always has been. How can we, we asked ourselves, when we will **not** advocate for or participate in violence, show our support for our friends, our co-workers, our family members, for whom violence is being inflicted from all directions, and most particularly from those who are charged, nay called, to be their protectors and not their persecutors?

So that was part of the muddy undercurrent of what has been swimming in my mind as I began to prepare a message for today, based on our scripture passage from Ephesians chapter 3. I read the passage multiple times, I read it from different translations, I read what came before and what followed. I read commentaries, both print and online. And I ruminated. I let all of it just mix in my mind - as introverts do - and percolate if you will, ferment if you prefer. Today is communion Sunday, and while in the United Methodist church we use grape juice in our communion, in other traditions real wine is used, so fermentation is a concept not completely divorced from the sacrament of communion in the Christian tradition.

The Letter to the Ephesians, while its authorship is attributed to the Apostle Paul, was likely not written by him but by one of his later followers writing in his name, a practice that was common and acceptable in the time period. And at that point in the letter from which we read today, a “hinge-point” several commentators called it because of the change the letter makes from being theological in nature in the first three chapters to being more ethical in nature in the final three, we see the author begin what is basically a written prayer.

“My response is to get down on my knees,” the author writes in the opening verse of today’s reading. His response is to pray. “I ask [God] to strengthen you by [God’s] Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious **inner** strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in.” This is a moment of tenderness, in which the author speaks directly to his readers about how much he cares for them. In using the word “you” in his prayer, he’s not talking about an individual you - in Greek the word is a plural “you;” he’s talking about a community. The word “Father” to whom he addresses his prayer on behalf of the

community, is the Greek *patria*, which indicates the creator or parent of an entire community, of a clan or a tribe. This is a prayer to the God of all people on behalf of all people. And the prayer is that "Christ will live in *you*" - all of you, the universal *you* - "as you open the door and invite him in."

Besides being an introvert who tries to choose his words carefully, I'm also a visual person, a visual learner, so words often create for me or remind me of images, of pictures. This line from Ephesians reminded me of another line of Scripture from the Book of Revelation, chapter 3, "Look at me. I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I'll come right in and sit down to have supper with you." (Rev. 3:20 MSG). And you're likely familiar with one or more of the famous paintings that were based on that passage of scripture.

There are several different ones - here's one - and we wordy-preacher types like to point out that when you look at this picture you should note, there's no door knob on Jesus' side of the door. The door must be opened from the inside. Jesus has no battering

ram - he's not serving a "no-knock warrant" here - he's extending an invitation **to us**, to invite **him** into our lives.

And the prayer offered to the Ephesians then, and to us now, goes on to say,

*"I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to imagine with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love."*

As followers of Jesus, with our feet planted firmly, not on the laws of men, not on arbitrarily enforced rules, not on red lines diabolically drawn on real estate maps, not on unrealistic expectations or on systems of injustice, but firmly planted *on love*, we are invited to imagine the *extravagant dimensions of Christ's love*.

Imagine, if you can, a love that has no limits.

Imagine, if you can, a love that knows no bounds.

Imagine, if you can, the height, the depth, the breadth, the length, of a love that, in Paul's letter to Rome, we are told **you** cannot be separated from - the universal *you*, the communal *you*;

the *you* who is the child of the *patria*, the parent of all peoples, all nations, all communities, all tribes, all families. "Live full lives," the author proclaims, "full in the fullness of God!"

Imagine, if you can, that you are trying to "live your full life, full in the fullness of God," and your name is George Floyd, and you're a black man in Minneapolis, and you're lying handcuffed, facedown on the pavement, while the knee of a police officer pressing down on your neck is slowly draining that life out of you.

Imagine, if you can, that you are trying to "live your full life, full in the fullness of God," and your name is Breonna Taylor, and you're a black woman in Louisville, Kentucky, and in the middle of the night, as you sleep, armed police officers bust down your door and in a hail of bullets takes that life from you.

Imagine, if you can, that you are Ahmaud Arbery, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, or any number of black and brown young men or women or boys who have needlessly died because of racially motivated vigilante violence or police brutality. This is not to say that all police officers act this

way - they certainly do not. The vast majority of police officers live into their commitment "to protect and serve" in wonderful and courageous ways, the vast majority of police officers are good people. But, as the philosopher said, "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." - (Edmund Burke.) While one officer pinned an incapacitated, handcuffed, and dying George Floyd to the ground with a knee on his neck, several other officers stood by and did nothing.

This series, this scripture, calls us to "imagine the people of God." When we do that, are our imaginations limited to people who look just like us, live just like us, worship just like us, vote just like us, or love just like us? Well, I'm here to tell you that just as this privileged, white, middle-class, middle-aged, introverted clergy person is among the "people of God," so are our brothers and sisters of color, our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, our Latino and Latina brothers and sisters, our poor and homeless brothers and sisters, and all people everywhere, created by the God of all people and all places, whose love knows no depths, no heights, no breadth, and no length; whose love knows no skin



color, no nationality, no denominational or faith label, no gender or sexual identity, and certainly no socio-economic class.

The prophet Joel, almost as though he were there on the Pentecost Sunday we celebrated just last week, wrote,

*"I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old ones shall dream dreams, and your young ones shall see visions. - Joel 2:28-32*

God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh. And some let that Spirit soak in and become a part of them - enabling the love of Jesus to live in them. Others wash that Spirit away in a brackish bath of hate, and division, and vitriol. Some of God's children dream dreams of a time when a person "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," as Martin Luther King, Jr. phrased it, while others of God's children look for ways to destroy people **because** of the color of their skin, or the accent with which they speak, or because of who or how they love. Some of God's children respond to one another with the love that comes from letting God's love in Jesus Christ live in them and guide how they live their lives, while others of God's

children respond from a violent fear that perhaps reflects that they don't know the love, don't feel the love of God that is part and parcel of how God created them to be, because they left Jesus standing at the door...knocking.

Even for this introverted, educated, word-loving, filter-growing, middle-aged, middle-class privileged white male pastor, it's sometimes difficult to imagine that the rock throwing, name calling hate mongerers who have infiltrated and are attempting to co-opt peaceful protests are just as loved by God as the peaceful protestors; that the die-hard, gun-toting, neo-Nazi and right-wing rabble rousers are just as much children of God as the tree-hugging, latte'-sipping, antifa and snowflake lefties. So what are we to do? In the midst of all of this, how are we to imagine the people of God?

I think the place to begin, and it's only a beginning, is in the same way the author of Ephesians did it - by praying for them, all of them, ourselves included. Prayer is the first step. Action is the next step. Whether that action is marching in a peaceful protest,

as I did this week, whether that is calling or writing our legislators to let them know that enough is enough, we must act.

As members of the household of God, as members of the United Methodist Church, our baptism and membership vows call us to

*"...renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,  
Reject the evil powers of this world,  
And repent of our sin!"*

And those vows continue...

*"We accept the freedom and **power** God gives us*

***To resist evil, injustice, and oppression***

***In whatever forms they present themselves!"***

We cannot, as followers of Jesus Christ, allow the evil, injustice, and oppression of racial injustice to continue without resistance.

We **must** resist! We **must** reject the evil powers of this world, regardless of where they reside. We **must!**

BREAK

This week in our staff meeting we began, as we usually do, with a time of devotion and prayer. April Smith, our facilities manager, brought as our devotion, this poem in the form of a prayer, that she was inspired to write. With her permission, in closing, I share it with you today. Would you pray...

Let us pray for every hand

That held a brick

That lit a torch

That sprayed graffiti

That threw a punch

That held a sign

That raised a fist

That flipped a "bird"

That looted a store

That recorded a video

That Tweeted hate

Let us pray for every hand

That carried a weapon

That discharged an irritant

That locked a handcuff

That set a barricade

That extinguished a fire

That swept up broken glass

That boarded up a door

Let us pray for every hand

That touched the blood

That applied first aid

That lifted a stretcher

That drove an ambulance

That stitched a wound

That dried a tear

That held another hand

That clasped in prayer

Amen.