

“SIGNS OF THE TIMES”
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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Trinity Sunday/Peace with Justice Sunday

During the late winter and early spring, the daily news was totally dominated by the global pandemic and the impact it was having on our health, our economy, and our lifestyles. All other news became just a footnote, including the presidential election campaign. And then on May 25, like a bolt out of the blue, another major story burst into the headlines – the death of George Floyd, a black man in Minneapolis who suffocated when a white police officer pressed a knee into his neck for several minutes. That incident triggered a worldwide protest that also has been dominating the news. The Coronavirus pandemic is now sharing the spotlight with what our resident Bishop Thomas Bickerton has referred to as the “other pandemic” – the pandemic of hatred and racism that has threatened our country since its inception and has shadowed all of humanity since the dawn of history.

It’s worth noting that both pandemics have produced a combination of bad news and good news. The COVID-19 crisis has given us grim stories about death tolls, lost jobs, canceled events, and social isolation. But it has also given us heart-warming stories about frontliners and regular citizens who have responded to the crisis with courage and creativity. Likewise, the heartless killing of a black man under police custody was bad news at its worst; but the good news is that it has raised our awareness of racial injustice and prompted a wide range of people to voice their disapproval and call for fundamental change.

When people express strong feelings and convictions, they often do it in visual ways. Have you noticed the proliferation of signs during both of these pandemics? Yard signs and banners on the sides of buildings have appeared everywhere, and signs are also being carried by people in the streets. They are quite literally “signs of the times.” Some bear messages of gratitude and hope; others bear messages of anger and defiance.

In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, our church’s youth have made and placed signs on our side lawn out on Main Street. One sign says, “A gentle kindness warms the heart.” Another says, “Thank You Frontline Workers with Love.” Another says, “Thank You Essential Workers and First Responders.” Another sign simply says, “Thank You,” but in multiple languages. How creative and thoughtful is that?!

But next to these feel-good signs on our church lawn is a sign that directly addresses the other pandemic. It says, “Hate Has No Home Here.” This sign was created and circulated by two local clergy in response to a white supremacist group that has been posting stickers with hateful messages on public buildings right here in Woodbury. I thought it was appropriate and necessary to place this sign on our side lawn. If our church motto is, “Love Is Spoken Here,” then we also want to say in no uncertain terms, “Hate Has No Home Here.”

And so, during these turbulent times there are “signs of the times” right on our own church lawn, bearing two messages that are equally urgent. This is because the pandemic of hatred and racism is just as deadly as the pandemic caused by the Coronavirus.

As any person of color will tell you, racism is expressed and felt at an individual, personal level. One of the most powerful books I've ever read was a novel by Ralph Ellison entitled *Invisible Man*. The book was semi-autobiographical; Ellison reflected on his lived experience as a black man in America. When he walked down the streets of any town or city in our nation, he felt "invisible" – which is to say, he felt devalued and overlooked, treated like a nobody, for no other reason than the color of his skin.

Ellison wrote this book in 1952, a decade before the civil rights movement. But nearly seventy years later, many blacks still feel discounted as human beings, either because they are invisible to the rest of the population or – just the opposite – because they are all-too-visible as targets for discrimination and hate. This sheds light on some of the signs we've been seeing in demonstrations over the past two weeks, signs which people carry to protest being treated as invisible or insignificant: "Black Lives Matter." "Respect Existence or Expect Resistance." These, too, are "signs of the times" – signs that racism is deeply personal and that it diminishes the worth of individuals.

But lest we forget, the experience of racism is also corporate and systemic, and much of the outcry we are hearing today is a protest against this wider problem. Systemic racism means that a society is organized in such a way as to place minority groups at a disadvantage. In theory, everyone in our society has equal rights and equal opportunities; but in reality, the playing field is not level.

I could cite many examples of how this has been true for African-Americans, but the most telling examples are the most recent ones. Infection rates for COVID-19 have been higher among ethnic minorities than among whites; and unemployment resulting from the pandemic has also been higher among minority groups than for whites. This is not because people of color are physically weaker or less ambitious by nature, but because many of them do not have access to the same spacious living conditions, the same level of health care, or the same kinds of secure jobs that many white people do. On top of this handicap, African-Americans also have been targets of racial profiling, suspected of being criminals simply because they are black, treated with a double standard by some law enforcement officers and others in positions of authority. Again, we've been seeing literal signs of protest against this kind of treatment, the most haunting of which quotes the last desperate words of a dying George Floyd: "I Can't Breathe." Signs of the times.

However, the protest sign that has prompted the most reflection on my part bears this message: "No Justice, No Peace." This slogan grabbed my attention because it is ambiguous. It could be taken as a threat of violence: "If you don't give me the justice I deserve, I will break the peace in order to get it." This is obviously the response of some on the radical fringe. But what really caught my eye about this slogan is that it reflects the theme of this "Special Sunday" in the United Methodist Church. Today is "Peace with Justice Sunday," which calls attention to an important biblical truth: peace and justice are inseparable; there is no real peace without full justice. This is not a threat; it's just a fact.

It is the prophet Jeremiah who best captures this truth in one of his most famous oracles. The people of Israel have doomed themselves by their sins of idolatry, immorality, and injustice; but false prophets lie to the people about the true state of affairs. Jeremiah says, "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14,

8:11). Do you hear it? The true prophet, Jeremiah, affirms the message of the protest sign: “No Justice, No Peace.”

This point can never be emphasized enough: in the Bible, “peace” doesn’t refer merely to the absence of conflict – you know: our country is not at war, the city streets are calm, the rich and the poor are staying in their places, and people are being nice to each other. No, in the Scriptures the word “peace” is equated with *shalom*, which is a state of harmony and wholeness marked by safety and prosperity for all people. This is the kind of peace that most protesters today are seeking to achieve – not “peace at any price,” certainly not “keeping the peace” with oppressors and unjust practices, but the kind of peace that ensures the welfare of all people, especially those who are marginalized.

The New Testament calls Christians to be proactive in making this kind of peace. The apostle Paul says to the Corinthians: “Put things in order . . . agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Corinthians 13:11). Here Paul is calling specifically for peace within the Church; but elsewhere he has some pointed things to say about the Church’s role as a peacemaker in society. During Paul’s time, terrible violence is being done to him and his fellow Christians, and they must be sorely tempted to strike back at their oppressors; but the apostle urges his readers to break the cycle of violence: not to retaliate, not to repay evil with evil, but to repay evil with good (1 Thessalonians 5:15). We are never to avenge ourselves because vengeance belongs to God alone (Romans 12:19).

In recent days we’ve seen what happens when a single act of violence – the senseless killing of a black man – prompts many other acts of violence – the destruction of property and even more killing. The cycle of violence is perpetuated; the efforts of those who are protesting peacefully are tarnished; and the underlying issue becomes obscured. As Christians, we should not be distracted by the excesses of looters and thugs and lose sight of what the underlying issue is – racial inequality and injustice. I, for one, want to extend my full sympathy and support to those who are protesting these conditions in peaceful ways.

One day last week I saw an event I had never seen before on Main Street in Woodbury. Of course, I had seen parades and festivals on our chief thoroughfare, but I had never seen an organized act of protest until that day. Perhaps twenty people were standing on both sides of Main Street between the North Green and our church building, holding signs denouncing the killing of George Floyd and calling for racial justice. I’m talking about right here in Woodbury – a town that is 93% white, a town that prides itself in being homogeneous and harmonious, a town that takes comfort in the fact that we are largely sheltered from the crime and unrest that are more prevalent in urban areas. But it’s apparent that some of our citizens look at the world through a wider lens and are disturbed by much of what they see. I made a point that day to introduce myself to two of the protesters and affirm their cause.

Seeing racial protests in Woodbury, Connecticut, helps to counter three assumptions that you and I may be tempted to make. The first assumption is that racism is not our concern because we live in a predominantly white area. When racial injustice is out of sight, it can also be out of mind and off our moral radar. But this is not only tunnel vision; it is contrary to the Christian vision that sees the human family as interconnected and seeks “peace with justice” for all people. To put it bluntly, if the state of race relations in the nearby city of Waterbury doesn’t matter to us,

it should. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote from the Birmingham jail, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

The second assumption that the local protesters laid to rest is the notion that there is nothing you and I can do to combat and overcome racism. We may think of ourselves as tiny individuals caught in a vast system where one voice and one vote seem to make no difference. But the protestors in our own quiet community should give us inspiration. At the very least, you and I can break out of our comfortable silence and speak out against injustice.

I read in the newspaper about a demonstration last Tuesday in Washington Depot that was similar to the one here in Woodbury. Hundreds of people were there, almost as many as live in the entire town. A 28-year old protester was quoted as saying, “I’m just tired of being silent. I think silence is compliant. I don’t care whose feelings I hurt, but I’m going to be vocal and I haven’t been vocal in the past. It’s time for a change.” Perhaps he had seen and taken to heart two of the signs that have been carried by fellow protesters in recent days. One sign reads, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you are on the side of the oppressor.” The other sign makes the point more sharply: “Silence Is Violence.” These signs should remind Christians that we have a message about “peace with justice” and a mandate to proclaim that message. You and I should never underestimate the power of our words and our voices to make a difference.

And then the third assumption that was challenged by those protesters out on Main Street is the naïve idea that racism has a quick, easy fix. Today’s demonstrators stand in a long line of social activists who have struggled for centuries to bring equality and justice to all Americans. Not only have they spoken out; they have backed up their strong words with strong actions; and without a doubt they have helped to achieve some measure of progress. But the events of recent days remind us that racism still festers in American society. The wound is constantly reopened because it has never fully healed; and it has never fully healed because it has never been comprehensively and consistently treated. Laws regulating racism have been enacted over the years, but racism itself is persistent in the human mind and heart, and you and I must be persistent in confronting it and rooting it out.

At a rally in Hartford this past week, a black state legislator had this to say to his audience: “There’s a difference between a moment and a movement. We need a movement. I need to see you next month. I need to see you six months from now with the same enthusiasm.”

Friends, this is what Jesus comes to inaugurate in human society – not a moment but a movement. God help us to persevere in that movement until God’s kingdom of “peace with justice” is fully realized on earth as it is in heaven.