

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“Live in Peace” (2 Corinthians 13:11-13)
June 7, 2020
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Like many of you I am heartbroken by the events of the past couple weeks as we have been reminded once again on a national and even international level the hideous reality of the endemic and pervasive racism in our country. While historically this has been particularly pronounced in the Deep South, the tragic death of George Floyd occurred well north of the Mason-Dixon Line, and the angry response is everywhere. As his girlfriend Roxie Washington, the mother of their daughter Gianna Floyd, tearfully put it this week, “He will never see her grow up, graduate. He will never walk her down the aisle. If there’s a problem she’s having and she needs her dad, she doesn’t have her dad anymore.”

The outbreaks of violence are all expressions of anger directly connected to the systemic, entrenched racism of the past four centuries in our country—going back even past the so-called Great Compromise of 1787 that considered a slave three fifths of an inhabitant—i.e., three fifths of a person—when calculating congressional representation—I am not sure what is so “great” about that. Don’t mishear me, I love our country, always have and always will. And yet the ugly reality of racism has always been part of our story, and even now is alive and well.

Growing up in the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia—the largest diocese in the Episcopal Church, and one of the original nine dioceses in the Episcopal Church—I am fully aware of the dark underbelly of our denomination regarding its explicit, implicit, and complicit racism, and as such I am as guilty as anyone else. Many years ago I served at a different church in the Deep South that had a balcony in the back of the sanctuary that had been originally designated for slaves. I remember my wife and me riding with a real estate agent from that church looking for a place to rent, and as we passed a townhouse development I asked her if we could look there. “You do not want to live there,” she retorted, “Those people live there”—and of course by “those people” she meant African Americans. And of course, we ended up moving into that very neighborhood and we had some great neighbors.

One of the slogans chanted so often at the protests of late, both nationally and internationally, is a slogan that has been chanted at many protests for many years: “No justice, no peace...no justice, no peace.” That connects directly with today’s New Testament passage on this Trinity Sunday, a passage that concludes the most vulnerable and heartfelt of the Apostle Paul’s thirteen New Testament letters, his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you (2 Corinthians 13:11-13).

“Live in peace,” Paul emphasized, “live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” We often give lip service to this idea of living in peace but as has become crystal clear in the last couple weeks, lip service is just not enough. And yet, giving lip service to the idea of living in peace is nothing new. Six centuries before Christ the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah put it this way:

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace (Jeremiah 6:13-14)

If we are honest, this passage applies to every one of us, including me. When it comes to the deep seeded wound of racism in one way or another we have all dealt falsely, we have all treated the wound of God’s people carelessly. And for that we need to repent—at least I do. As many of you know, one of my heroes is Martin Luther King, Jr., whose tireless civil rights efforts could also be summarized, “Live in peace” as he wrote near the end of his 1964 book *Why We Can’t Wait*, “Sooner or later all the peoples of the world, without regard to the political systems under which they live, will have to discover a way to live together in peace” (190-191).

Martin Luther King, Jr. gave much more than lip service to the idea of peace, he gave his life, as he was shot on April 4, 1968 on the balcony outside his room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.

The Lorraine Motel is the site of the National Civil Rights Museum, which I highly recommend. After you wind your way through all the exhibits, you look into the actual room, and off to the side to the balcony where he spoke his last words this side of heaven. On a display in front of this room are words from his father, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., words from his autobiography that describe what happened as he anxiously sat in his study at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and heard the dreaded news bulletin on the radio that his beloved son was dead:

We had waited, agonizing through the nights and days without sleep, startled by nearly any sound, unable to eat, simply staring at our meals. Suddenly, in a few minutes of radio time it was over. My first son, whose birth had brought me so much joy that I jumped up in a hall outside the room where he was born and touched the ceiling—the child, the scholar, the preacher, the boy singing and smiling, the son—all of it was gone (*Daddy King: An Autobiography* 172).

A month before his assassination, in a prescient sermon entitled “Unfulfilled Dreams” Martin Luther King, Jr. compared the struggle for peace with a long road trip on Highway 80, which runs through the South all the way to Los Angeles:

And you know, being a good man, being a good woman, does not mean you’ve arrived in Los Angeles. It simply means that you’re on Highway 80. Maybe you haven’t gotten as far as Selma, or maybe you haven’t gotten as far as Meridian, Mississippi, or Monroe, Louisiana—that isn’t the question. The question is whether you are on the right road. Salvation is being on the right road, not having reached a destination...But if you’re on the right road, God has the power, and he has something called Grace. And he puts you where you ought to be (196-197).

“Live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you”...Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ became incarnate in part to bring peace to the world, or as the angels proclaimed from the heavens the night he was born, “peace on earth” (Luke 2:14). “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus preached at the Sermon on the Mount, “for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). “Be at peace with one another” he later taught (Mark 9:50). At the Last Supper Jesus assured his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27).

And when it came to the idea of living in peace, Jesus never just gave it lip service. Jesus literally embodied peace as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Regardless of one's race or background or backstory, Jesus never dealt falsely with anyone. Jesus never treated anyone's wounds carelessly, ever. When it came to humanity's relationship with God there was indeed "no justice, no peace" and so on the cross Jesus, the Prince of Peace, died in our place, to bring justice to a world in need of justice, to bring peace to a world in need of peace.

Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace died on the cross to justify you by faith and give you peace with God—as Paul wrote to the Romans, "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1), and as he wrote to the Ephesians, "For he is our peace...he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:14-17), and he also wrote to the Colossians, "Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the his cross" (Colossians 1:20). This peace cost you nothing but cost Jesus everything, and on that awful Good Friday afternoon Jesus' mother Mary experienced what Martin Luther King Sr. experienced as her firstborn son, the Prince of Peace who had brought her so much joy—"the child, the scholar, the preacher"—breathed his final breath to bring peace to the world and to your life.

After his resurrection Jesus still continued to emphasize the need to "live in peace." The Risen Jesus appeared to his disciples who thought he was still dead and had gathered in fear in a locked room, the same disciples who had without exception fled when he was betrayed and arrested, and proclaimed multiple times, "Peace be with you...peace be with you...peace be with you" (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 21, and 26). And even now, right now, the Risen Jesus offers you "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:6).

Moreover the Risen Jesus remains the Prince of Peace who offers the world, and offers you, "something called Grace" that will put you on the right road and keep you on the right road, the road to salvation, the road to peace.

I believe that someday all the unfulfilled dreams of Martin Luther King, Jr. will finally be fulfilled, that all the Gianna Floyd's of the world will be reunited with their dads again, and that evil of racism will finally be abolished.

In the meantime, God calls us all to stop treating the wounds of God’s people carelessly—especially wounds related to racism, to stop giving lip service and repent. God calls us to do exactly what we read today, “live in peace.”

What does that look like? This beautiful prayer attributed to St. Francis shows us:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen (The Book of Common Prayer 833).*

Imagine a world of people by the power of the Holy Spirit living out that prayer.

Imagine a world of people by the power of the Holy Spirit seeking to live in peace.

On this Trinity Sunday we will close with the beautiful Trinitarian benediction that concludes today’s passage from Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Corinthians 13:13).

Amen.