

Pastoral Letter from Pr. Scott Trevithick. Week of June 2, 2020

About worship this coming Sunday, June 7: More than once I have metaphorically balled up and tossed in the trash can a perfectly good half-written sermon at some point in the week when events changed enough during that week to warrant taking a new focus with the sermon and directly addressing that event. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton of the ELCA, the denomination of which Good Shepherd is a part, will be the preacher this week as she provides a video-recorded message to congregations across the country. A couple weeks ago, we were alerted to this plan, which was an intentional sign of support for pastors, worship leaders, and tech folks who have been working hard in adapting to ever-changing conditions and providing worship, pastoral care, and general leadership during a stressful time. It sounds like Bishop Eaton has balled up and tossed her prepared sermon this week as well: In an email from our regional synod on June 1, we were told that “Due to recent events, Bishop Eaton is re-recording the sermon.” I look forward to hearing from Bp. Eaton.

Reflection on the Church and its Role: My sermon for Pentecost last week, “The Building is Closed, but the Church is Open” was prompted in part by the declaration by President Donald Trump on Friday, May 22 that churches are “essential” and should be open over Memorial Day weekend. In my personal view, this declaration was made in an attempt to portray himself as the champion of religious liberty, which appeals to a segment of the Church which supports him. My Pentecost sermon was therefore a response that while we love our physical building, the Church (capital C) and Good Shepherd as a particular congregation are not defined by or limited to a physical place, but are called to demonstrate love of God and love of neighbor out in the world. We are not prevented from praying, worshiping, and caring for one another and for our neighbor while in physical separation, but are doing our creative best to adapt to these challenges. Moreover, we will be guided by science and recognized public health sources as we wisely determine how and when we shall regather physically.

The Voice of The Preacher, the Voice of the Church, and the Call for Justice: I mentioned that with the worship video from Bp. Easton and additional content from our synod leaders, this week was intended to be a Sabbath break for us and I’m trying to abide by that. At the same time, I identify with the preacher’s responsibility to respond to current events. With ongoing crises in public health, the economy, racial injustice, increasing violence against human beings, and destruction of physical property, even here in Reno, where does one begin and how can one meaningfully respond? Wasn’t it an encouraging sign of community that after Saturday night’s destruction in downtown Reno to see so many joining in cleaning up and removing graffiti on Sunday?

The death of George Floyd under the knee of police in Minneapolis, MN was followed by an initial autopsy report that suggested that underlying health conditions were a primary factor in his death, which minimizes the obvious factor of the police officer’s knee on his neck for over 8 ½ minutes. A second independent autopsy cited “asphyxiation from sustained pressure” as the primary cause.

Mr. Floyd's death was preceded by the death of Ahmaud Arbery, who was out jogging no more than 2 miles from his home in South Georgia, when confronted by shotgun by a father and son. Mr. Arbery was killed on February 23, but his death was not widely known until May. I have read of a group expressing support for the father and son with the claim that "these two God-fearing men were only trying to protect their neighborhood." It strains credulity to suggest that one person out jogging is the aggressor when confronted by two men in a truck with a clearly visible weapon.

On Monday of this week the President spoke in the Rose Garden at the White House and then walked across Pennsylvania Avenue, through Lafayette Park, to St. John's Episcopal Church. In the Rose Garden, he advised governors to deploy the National Guard to "dominate the streets." Tear gas was used by police to clear peaceful protestors from the park. I read a firsthand account from the Rev. Gina Gerbasi, rector of the nearby Episcopal parish in Georgetown, also called St. John's. She was in the church's courtyard with other clergy, seminarians, and volunteers from the Episcopal Diocese providing water, medical supplies, and other hospitality in support of protestors. Later she found out why the area had been cleared out: the president stood in front of the church marquee and steps, holding a Bible aloft. Peaceful protestors, whose right to gather is conferred by the First Amendment, were driven out with tear gas so that the President could use a Bible and historic church as props for a photo opportunity to attempt to convey the Church's support for his actions.

The ELCA's social statement "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture" (1993) defines the pervasive and corrosive nature of racism in this way: "Racism--a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice—is sin, a violation of God's intention for humanity." Another line that sticks out to me is "Racism infects and affects everyone . . . When we speak of racism as though it were a matter of personal attitudes only, we underestimate it. We have only begun to realize the complexity of the sin, which spreads like an infection through the entire social system." (Incidentally, the continued relevance of this ELCA social statement, now nearly 27 years after its initial approval, shows how deeply racism is imbedded in our history and culture.)

In September of last year, about 35 Good Shepherd folks gathered weekly in Shepherd Hall to discuss the book *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* It's written by ELCA Pastor Lenny Duncan, who both loves the ELCA denomination as a part of the Church and calls it to account and recognize its participation in systemic racism. I'd like to invite you to a similar effort of self-recognition by viewing the recently-released movie *Just Mercy*.

In response to current events, Warner Bros. is offering free streaming rentals of its film *Just Mercy*, from the director Destin Daniel Cretton and starring Michael B. Jordan and Jamie Foxx. *Just Mercy*, released in theaters on January 10, tells the true story of Bryan

Stevenson (Jordan), a civil-rights attorney who works to defend Walter McMillian (Foxx), who was wrongfully convicted of murder.

You can rent "Just Mercy" for free in June through a variety of digital movie services in the US, including [Apple TV](#), [FandangoNow](#), [Google Play](#), [Amazon Prime Video](#), [Redbox](#), the PlayStation Store, [Vudu](#), [Microsoft](#), and [YouTube](#).

The studio said it hopes the film will be an educational resource for people who want to learn more about the dangers of systemic racism in our society. If you'd like to learn more about attorney Brian Stevenson and his work at the Equal Justice Initiative, visit the website [EJI.org](#) We'll figure out a forum for sharing comments and insights about the movie with Good Shepherd folks. We may convene a Zoom meeting for people to share their insights.

During this tumultuous time, may we respond to God's call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Pr. Scott Trevithick