

Listen and Follow: Matthew 29:16-20

Norwalk Christian Church, June 7, 2020, Livestream, Trinity Sunday, Year A

It's been quite a week in America, in our community. From Metropolitan cities to small towns across our country--and even internationally--people have hit the streets protesting, saying in one voice, black lives matter.

Black lives matter. That's a phrase that we may hear in a lot of different ways, a phrase that can often be misunderstood. It is a phrase spoken from people hurting, begging to be noticed, a community lifting up injustice that they experience, injustice that I, as a white man, can never know personally, but only learn about through their testimony.

Like you, I've witnessed protests that have become violent on both sides. Property damaged, but more importantly, lives lost, protesters and police. It's tragic, heart-breaking. And so many police officers--friends, family, church members--try so very hard to be the absolute best, most fair and just officer they can be. I so admire that. Violence is never the answer and should never be excused. But nor should we let the violence distract from the message--the pain--being shared and the justice called for.

I saw an image a couple days ago shared by one of the local Black Lives Matter leaders. It was a picture of him talking one on one with the Des Moines Police Chief. He wrote how well the Chief listened as he told of the particular policies they were speaking out against. He named two officers who had a history of harmful actions to the black community. And he said he found a kind and compassionate ear in the police chief. Walls are being torn down, and as a result, things will change. We need more of this.

I read last week an illustration that helped me better understand what is being said when someone says, "Black Lives Matter." Say a house on your block catches fire. The fire department is called, and when they arrive, what do they do? They don't spray every single house with water even though every house on the block is valuable, important, and loved. It's an emergency, and in that moment, the house that matters most is the one that is burning down. And so, that's where the focus is put, because none of the houses on the block will be safe, until that house is safe.

Across our country, people are declaring that there is an emergency in the black community. Their house is burning down, and it's been on fire for a long time. Lives are at risk. But the fire has for too long been ignored and allowed to spread. That's why they shout, "Black lives matter." Not because all lives don't matter—they do, always, *of course they do*. But this is a call for equity. *Because* all lives matter, black lives should also matter equally. Not just in theory, but in reality. And when one of us suffers, we all suffer. As the Rev. Dr. King said, a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

But it's hard to hear. As a white person it's hard to hear. Because I abhor racism. I hate it. And I know you do, too.

I try hard to ensure that I never act in these blatant racist ways. And yet, in our communities, racism still happens. Almost like it's built into the mechanics of our society, behind the curtain, it just moves like clockwork, unwillingly at times. And doing nothing only keeps the unjust system running as it always has.

That's what is meant by systemic racism, something that is a part of our culture, set up within the system from centuries of injustices that have shaped the way things are today.

It's like a canyon that has, over years and years, been washed out, slowly eroded by a flowing river. You may not see that it is happening or notice the effects of the river rushing against the rocks, yet every moment it flows, the canyon gets wider and deeper. Until the flow is changed, the damage will continue to be done.

But beautiful people, we can see that another river is flowing. All around us! "Let justice roll down," the prophet declares, "like a mighty river." God's justice, creating a new way, eroding the systemic racism on which our country is built, creating a new flow of justice. And with every action that goes against the flow of society, every voice raised, every eye opened, every story heard, that new canyon of justice grows wider and deeper.

In our Gospel text this morning, Jesus stands with his Disciples, the chosen twelve who have spent the last three or so learning directly from Jesus. Jesus is about to ascend to heaven, leaving them behind, but before he does, he gives them this final word.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he says. And then he gives them a charge. He gives *them* the authority that was given to him. "Now go and make disciples." Make disciples. But of whom? Your friends? Your neighbors?

No, "Go and make disciples of all nations."

This is a call for diversity, for these nobody disciples from a small, palestinian region called Galilee--to go into the world, crossing the lines that divide, and make disciples of all nations. Sharing with all the baptism that Christ has given them, the teaching that Christ has given them.

Be disciples. Make disciples--of all nations. This is Jesus' final charge, and it is still our charge today.

To be a disciple, by studying ourselves, learning from Jesus the way to go. Disciples follow--and where does our Master, Jesus, lead? Where does Jesus go?

Jesus spent his life crossing lines and seas of division. He tore down barriers. He dined with tax collectors and sinners, priests and prostitutes, Jews *and* Gentiles. All nations. All peoples.

If we're following Jesus, Disciples, get ready. He's going to take us to uncomfortable places, crossing lines we may not want to cross.

But, we do not fear. For he not only calls us, but he gives us a promise. Remember, he tells us. When it's scary or uncomfortable. When you are confused or don't know the way. When you're overcome with the pain of the world, but do not know what you can do. Remember, I am with you always.

You are never alone. Nor you are not called to work alone.

For we are disciples called to make disciples. As we learn, we teach others. As we follow, we call others to follow with us, gathering a march of Disciples following Jesus as we work to change the world. We learn together. We march together. We work together.

Together, we show the world another way. That violence is never the answer. That no one is outside of God's love. That every life should matter and be valued equally, but when it's not, there's work to do together.

During these days, church, don't give into fear or indifference, apathy or even rage. Instead, see the good that is happening. Be inspired that people are standing up, working to make our world a better world.

I have a lot to learn, and right now, I'm trying hard to listen. And I ask you to join with me in learning, too. One thing I want to do, is to start a reading group of a book that addresses issues of racism and white privilege. There were a few I was interested in and, well, they're currently all sold out on Amazon. A good thing, I guess. So I'm looking for something, but if your interested, we will send out a survey where you can sign-up for more info.

There are other ways to listen, learn, and follow right now. I want to share a message from the Rev. Dr. Teresa Hord Owens, our church's General Minister and President, who gives Disciples several ways we can get involved right now.

Whatever you find to do, there is something we can all do. A book. A documentary or movie. Maybe it's by joining in a protest yourself. If you need resources or ideas, Marti or I will help however we can.

But whatever we do, what Disciples cannot do is let this moment pass. What we cannot do is wish it would go away. It won't, and ignoring it will only let it perpetuate. Disciples, this is a holy moment.

There's a lot that can be done, but perhaps the greatest thing those of us who are white can do right now is listen and learn to our sisters and brothers of color. And, after all, that's what disciples do best. Listen. Learn. And follow.

For we are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. And we follow Jesus, who leads us into hard conversations and hard places, but who never leaves us alone.

May we go into our world with minds wide open, ears ready to listen, mouths slow to speak, hearts vulnerable to other's pain, and feet ready to turn and follow.

Amen.