

“Justice For All”

The past two weeks in our country we have been asking “How can we have peace?” Turmoil has erupted over the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Floyd, an African-American, died after a policeman pressed his knee against Floyd’s neck for over eight minutes, resulting in death by asphyxia. Floyd was heard saying, “I can’t breathe.” Three other Minneapolis policemen stood by and watched and did nothing. This was clearly state action, taken by police who are supposed to protect life.

You may ask, “Why are we talking about this in a Sunday sermon?” It is because as Christians we are to be all about justice. The Holy Spirit who guides us wants to see justice done. This is actually Peace with Justice Sunday. So the scripture passage from 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 fits in quite nicely into what is going on in our country right now.

First of all, we must understand there is a spiritual problem in this crisis. Paul addressed this problem in the church at Corinth. He told the people to live in harmony with each other. He was ending his second long letter to them about how to do this. The church in Corinth had fallen into disharmony. Groups had formed behind different leaders, each claiming to be better than the other. Sexual impurities were going on. The rich were not treating the poor right. During

communion they would come early in the day and eat up all the food, not leaving anything for the working poor. The people were not being treated equally. They needed the peace of God. Paul affirms that all Corinthians should be treated the same and stand on equal ground. This was what the Spirit of God desired.

Next, we must understand the problem. We understand why people are troubled and upset. The video of George Floyd's killing is horrific. What happened to him has been condemned by many, including other police departments. But many in white America ask, "Why do these people have to turn to protest? Why can't they just let our system of justice take care of things?"

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." Black people, and some of other races and creeds, are fed up with a justice system which many times does not bring justice to blacks in this country. In many ways there seems to be two different justice systems. Although blacks make up only 12 percent of the United States population, they constitute forty percent of the prison population. By the time they are eighteen years old, one-third of the black men in this country are in prison.

And there are those in prison who do not deserve to be there. There is the recent story of a contestant on America's Got Talent who served thirty seven years in prison for a crime he did not commit. With the Innocence Project working for

him, he was freed with new scientific evidence. At the same time, white TV stars such as Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman, who cheated and lied to get their children in prestigious colleges, will spend only weeks or months in jail for crimes they clearly committed.

How does this happen? Why the killings of unarmed blacks, often by police. In the most recent issue of *Christian Century*, Rev. Dorothy Sanders Wells, who is the rector of Saint George's Episcopal Church in Germantown, Tennessee, writes about the recent killing of Ahmaud Arbery. In February of this year Arbery was killed while jogging in Georgia because someone who saw him as he passed by on his run decided that he was a criminal. We have learned that Georgia legal officials initially saw nothing wrong with this. It was not until the release of a video that two white men were finally charged with murder in May. Arbery's case points to the problem in this country where many times the unjust killings of black people have not resulted in criminal convictions or the bringing of criminal charges in the first place.

Rev. Wells points to a shared history of people of European descent (that's us white people) and people of color on this soil as a troubled one. It includes slavery and the subsequent laws that devalued human lives. It has bled into the reality of the separate and inherently unequal lives that we share today.

My own studies of American history, political science, and African-

American history have revealed an oppressive system which has been in place for 400 years ever since the Mayflower came over from England. Slavery, Jim Crow laws, and prejudice against those of color. In the 1857 Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott* the court found that black people were not citizens but personal property. Although the 13th amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery and the 15th amendment granted voting rights to blacks, incomplete language in those amendments allowed for states to pass laws which practically kept blacks from voting and allowed discrimination against them. An 1896 decision by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* said trains, facilities, schools, or hotel accommodations could be separate as long as they were equal. Sadly, things still are not equal today when you examine how the races are treated in this country. As Rev. Wells laments, it is still dangerous and sometimes deadly, to be black in America.

The next thing to consider is what should be the response of the church? What should be your response as a white Christian? Unfortunately, the historical response of the church to systemic racism against blacks has not been good. For 400 years some faithful people in this country have tried to justify separation and segregation. Christians have used the Bible to defend slavery and ideas of racial purity. Pastors were used by plantation owners to preach to slaves to convince

them to submit to their masters. In the early Methodist church, a black named Richard Allen who sought to worship with whites was relegated to a certain area of the sanctuary and was denied communion because of his color. He decided he was not going to put up with this and went out and formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME).

What should be your personal response? You can say I didn't have anything to do with slavery or Jim Crow. I didn't do those things to blacks. Blacks have been given opportunity. What about all that welfare and food stamps we give them? I pay my taxes. I don't think I need to do anymore.

This is not an adequate response. We cannot remain silent. As our District Superintendent Rev. Steve Patterson wrote this week, silence makes it appear that we side with the powerful. We need to speak. Our prophetic voice makes it clear that we side with the Almighty.

I believe that the people of Latimer are open to helping African-Americans. I believe you are comfortable with having people of other races in your church and worshiping with them. I have seen you embrace black children during vacation bible school. I know you care deeply about all people.

But more has to be done. A system exists in our country, our society which keeps blacks down and treats them differently than white people. We have to

engage in a confession of our sins and ask for forgiveness. As Rev. Wells writes, our scriptures acknowledge the sinfulness of our human hearts; our tendency to deny the image of God to other people, our unwillingness to follow the commitment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Instead of neighbors, sometimes we see people of color as intruders and threats.

When we seek peace, let's not just fall back on law and order and seek vengeance against those who are protesting. These are human responses. We cannot condone the destruction of property or looting. Dr. King was clear that we not use violent methods. As Bishop Holston wrote this week, violence is not the answer. But using violence against protestors is just as wrong. We need leadership which promotes unity and harmony, not domination of those we don't understand and don't respect. Harmony is more effective. Sheriffs and police who have walked with protesters, most prominently the Sheriff of Flint, Michigan, have experienced peaceful protests.

Law and order must also be put in perspective. When the law treats people of color differently, which it does in America, what does that say about enforcing the law? We don't want chaos but we also do not want injustice. Law and order in this country right now is inherently unjust. The law we as Christians are to follow is the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. The Bible contains

instructions on holding one another accountable and reproofing one another in love.

We must remember that Jesus saw no one-not even the ones who would ultimately take his life---as being beyond God's mercy and love.

In our scripture today, Paul writes of God's grace towards us. We need to exercise grace towards the African-Americans in our country. What if God had not exercised grace towards us? We would be lost. All are entitled to God's gift of salvation. All are entitled to sacred worth.

We must remember that it is God who brings peace. Peace is not brought by guns or retribution. We must be totally dependent on God for the answers.

What will it take to begin to live more fully in the legacy of Jesus? As Bishop Curry (who married Prince Harry and Meghan) said this week, we need to think of ourselves as all being brothers and sisters in Christ. We are one big family.

With America's history of racism, the work cannot be done overnight; it will take continual deliberate work. There are positive signs. The four police officers in Minneapolis were fired immediately. The one who put his knee on George Floyd has been charged with murder and the other three officers charged with aiding the crime. Many whites are marching in the protests. Our Bishop has indicated there will be actions taken to address the inequities and injustice being suffered by blacks in this country.

It is important that you be willing to act. Do not be scared off by elements in this country that want to keep the status quo. Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, recently wrote: "And some white Christians avert their eyes---even in cases of clear injustice---for fear of being labeled Marxists" or "social justice warriors' by the same sort of forces of intimidation that wielded the same arguments against those who questioned the state-sponsored authoritarianism and terror of Jim Crow."

What can you do? Join groups and engage in conversations about what needs to be done. Bishop Holston and the church will give you opportunities in the coming months. Write your government representatives and tell them what changes you believe are needed. Vote for candidates who will bring needed change.

Finally, pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit on us all. It is the Holy Spirit who produces the spiritual gifts to enrich the good of the community. It is the Holy Spirit who will guide us to be in right relationship with all our brothers and sisters of all colors and creeds, just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit exist in harmony.