

June 14, 2020
Romans 5:1-8
First Parish, UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Hope in the Midst of a Time of Reckoning

CHILDREN'S MOMENT

When our daughter Lauren was three we lived in student housing in Claremont, California. We were one of only two white families in the complex. Many of the families were from Korea. Our immediate neighbors were from Nigeria. They had a daughter Sandra who was about Lauren's age.

One day Lauren asked, "Why can't I have black skin like Sandra's? It's so beautiful." I agreed that indeed Sandra's skin is beautiful. Then I explained that people don't get to choose the color of their skin. You just get a combination of the color of your parent's skin. I could tell she felt Ron and I had let her down. I wasn't surprised when years later- when she got an American Girl Doll - she chose Addy, the African American doll.

Having exposure and interaction with people who are different from us helps us to appreciate a wide range of humanity.

Maybe some of you have seen pictures of the protests that are happening around our country and around the world. The people marching are reminding us that everyone – no matter the color of their skin – should be treated fairly and with dignity. And the people marching are of all different skin colors. It is the most diverse group of marchers ever.

I think it's because young people for many years now have been part of diversity groups and racial justice groups in their schools. Maybe some of you are part of such groups in your schools. You have been learning how to talk about matters of race and to listen carefully to other people's experience. You have been working for a world where there really is liberty and justice for all. As you watch people march, know that the work you have been doing right here in your schools and your homes makes a difference. Thank you for working for a better world for all of us. Keep up the good work.

SERMON

Today is Flag Day. On June 14, 1777, the Second Continental Congress approved a flag to represent the United States. They decided it would have 13 stripes to represent the original colonies and in the corner would be a blue background with a star to represent each state.

Flag day is a day to remember that we proclaim liberty and justice for all. It is a day to reflect on the authority given to leaders and civil servants to protect the common good so that there is indeed liberty and justice for all.

When I was called by this congregation and installed by the Cumberland Association of the United Church of Christ, I was authorized to be senior pastor for the well

being of the congregation. When police officers are hired by their departments they are authorized to be guardians of the well being of the community. In both situations, our authority is not to dominate others. We are not given power over others nor are we to commit violence against the very people we service in order to satisfy our own prejudices or perversions. Our authority makes us accountable to the people we serve.

For the last twenty years the church universal, and most visibly the Catholic Church has had a time of reckoning not only for the ways that clergy have misused their authority to violate other humans, but also for the ways that the institution protected those clergy by moving them (or allowing them to move) to other locales where people were unaware of their past misconduct.

This is a time of reckoning for police departments around the country - for the ways that police officers have misused their authority in violence toward other humans and then police authorities kept secret their misconduct allowing them to move to new locales where people had no idea who was moving on their streets, with guns in their hands.

How long, O Lord, how long?

Until the people rise up and demand justice. That is exactly what is happening with the protests in the street – crying for racial justice and an end to police brutality.

Those of us who are older generally grew up thinking racists are individuals who act in overtly racist ways. Many of us did not have the eyes to see the ways in which our

culture perpetuated racist undercurrents and the privilege we experience if we are white. We didn't have eyes to see systemic patterns of racism, whose tentacles entrap us all.

I think that is partly because the young people in the streets have grown up with diversity task forces in their schools that have helped them to recognize the systemic racism that has led to mass incarceration of young black men, unjust housing practices and different standards of treatment for black men by police forces. Not surprisingly, the protestors are the most diverse group of protestors ever. They believe in a different world and they have been working for it and living into it for years. Their time has come. It is time we listen.

I am torn by the juxtaposition of thousands marching in the streets for justice, while needing to wear masks due to a global pandemic. It is not really safe for them to be marching together. It is not really safe for them to leave things as they are. It is an intense time in history.

I used to wonder what it was like for people who lived through great turmoil in the past. I'm starting to get a sense. It's exhausting.

Five hundred years ago there were waves of global pandemics and the church was abusing its parishioners for financial gain. Political leaders were often despots over their own territories, ruling by dominance with their private armies.

Then there was a technological development that upended the death grip that leaders had over the people. We call it

the printing press. For the first time in history people could read scripture themselves or they could read the words of political dissent. The balance of power shifted and the people were no longer under the knee of the tyrants in the ways they had been. They could see the truth for themselves.

In the church we speak of this time as the Protestant Reformation. Historians also speak of this time in history as the Renaissance. Isn't it ironic that out of times of great suffering and turmoil sometimes comes freeing change and the blossoming of creativity.

Sociologists of church and society have been saying for some time that we are in the midst of another time of great reformation. And they were saying that before a global pandemic and unprecedented social protests.

The technological invention of our day that is facilitating this reformation - this renaissance - is digital communications – computers, cell phones and the web. We can now see pictures and videos of what corrupt leaders don't want us to know about. The dominators can no longer simply suppress us with their double speak. We can see the knee that took the breath away. The people are communicating with one another directly. We can see the truth for ourselves.

Let us grieve the death and destruction that we have witnessed. Each life is worthy of grief. Let us know the anger of righteous outrage in the face of injustice.

This is a time of awakening and reckoning. Let us not give up just because we're

exhausted. This is the moment for change. The echoes of the prophets of old reverberate through the millennia calling us to do justice. In Jesus of Nazareth, God shows us that in the face of human violence, as we see it on the cross, God answers with the resurrection of possibilities. This is the time to stand with one another for liberty and justice for all.

With the hope that has been given to us by the Spirit, let us hold on to the creative possibilities that are embedded in this time of reformation – this renaissance.

Peace and justice be with you.