

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Pentecost 6-A (14 June 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2020-06-13 Sat 07:36>

Collect

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7), Psalm 116:1, 10-17, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

1 Jesus Knows Pain

(Read Collect)

Before I ever came to visit St. Thomas', here is what stood out to me. I saw a parish with a diversity of ethnicities all worshipping together. I saw a parish whose previous Rector was a woman, and not just any woman, but a woman of color. To this day, women and people of color have a more difficult time finding positions even within the Episcopal Church! When I looked at St. Thomas' I also saw a parish engaged in Kitchen of Hope and Family Promise: big ministries that seemed all out of proportion with a small congregation and a tiny worship space. Before St. Thomas' spoke its first word to me in interviews and in conversations, I heard St. Thomas' living into today's collect, proclaiming God's truth with boldness and ministering God's justice with compassion. You won my heart before you ever said the first word. I saw in you a people bringing into being the Kingdom of God in imitation of our Lord.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus – who was God in the flesh – “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.”¹

¹Mt 9.35 NRSV

God, the Creator of the Universe, the one who could heal every disease and sickness with a word, isn't satisfied with a technical fix from afar. God is not satisfied to convey God's teaching via a Netflix special, or even via Zoom. God could have used TikTok or Instagram. God could send an email. God could send a tweet. God could call every telephone in the world at once and speak to everyone in their own language. Like at Pentecost. God could speak in a voice that reverberated throughout the whole planet. God could proclaim God's message in the sky, spelled out with stars, or God could implant that message, sure and unadulterated, in every human brain. God could do any of these things without breaking a sweat.

But here's what God did instead. God experienced pain. God endured childbirth, circumcision, and all the pains and challenges of a tiny new body struggling to survive its first weeks of life. God endured schooling, adolescence, and blue-collar labor as a trades person who worked in wood and stone. God worked hard. God banged God's thumb with a hammer more than once. God was cheated by unscrupulous customers. God struggled through recessions when work was scarce, and enjoyed plentiful work when the Romans decided to build a new city just a couple miles from Nazareth. God knows pain.

God in the flesh walked the dusty, sweaty roads from one city and village to another, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness. That's how Jesus operates to this day. He enters the context of our pain and carries that pain along with us. Jesus knows pain. Jesus heals us with his solidarity.

2 We Know Pain

Since early March in the United States, and earlier for anyone who was paying attention, we have been enduring the pain of sickness, death and economic shock from Covid-19. That has taken its toll on us and was quite enough pain and distress on its own, thank you.

In recent weeks, since Memorial Day, we have been brutally awakened once more to the painful disparities in how different people groups are treated in the United States. Horrific videos and news reports of modern day lynchings, not with rope but with guns and knees, have resulted in protests across our nation and around the world. Our own responses to what is going on have varied widely as we have grappled with all the different emotions this news kindles in us.

The tendency I've noticed among some of us who identify as white is to focus on the moment. We see violence and fire. We see emotionally charged protests. We see police officers putting their lives on the line. It all looks threatening and sometimes we're surprised by the level of response to the death of a single individual. This is the story as it looks from afar, without context. This is judgment from a distance. It's a self-protective engagement that will only go so far.

But up close to people who more readily see themselves in what's happening, I hear a different story. From my black colleagues and friends, from conversations here at St. Thomas' and elsewhere, I hear great pain and anguish. I hear a visceral connection. Our Senator, Cory Booker, talked last week about how he thinks twice before donning his shorts and sneakers to jog home from work. Our Surgeon General, Jerome Adams, spoke this week about how easily it could have been him who was killed after a minor speeding infraction or a broken taillight or just driving through the wrong neighborhood. He tells of being "repeatedly detained by police and

security guards in grocery stores and shopping centers, where he was accused of things he did not do.”² He points to racism as a growing, not receding, barrier in education; to the fact that fewer black men attend medical school today than did 30 years ago.

Members of our own St. Thomas’ community recounted their own stories when we met last Wednesday. They told of encountering racism in housing, of being stopped on the NJ Turnpike, and of their concern for their own children. Presiding Bishop Curry observed in a recent sermon that policing and the unequal treatment of the black community is nothing new at all: it is an issue that his own father dealt with as a priest in Buffalo, NY when Curry was a child.

Black and white are both saying together, “shouldn’t we be over this by now?!?” Sadly, the evidence all around us says, “We should be, but we’re not!” Things have improved in some ways, but huge disparities remain. The United States continues to exact a heavy psychological, spiritual, and economic *tax* upon people who don’t identify as white.

To persons of color here at St. Thomas’ I say this: your parish stands with you. You are valued, your lives matter, you are important members of this community. You have a voice and your story is an important part of the fabric of our parish.

To those who identify as white here at St. Thomas’, I say this: now is the time for us to follow the example of Jesus by showing up. This is the time to care for our sisters and brothers who through their whole lives have been given the false message that their lives are worth less than others’. Now is the time for us to listen. Our stories, white stories, get told all the time. But there are some new stories coming around, *shocking* stories of what it means to live in America while black. These stories are distressing to hear; sometimes they make us feel guilty. These stories invite us to feel another’s pain. They invite us to imitate Jesus, to bring healing with our solidarity.

3 We heal by hearing one another’s pain

This can be a fearsome challenge. But when I fail to feel my sister or brother’s pain, that’s a spiritual blockage. It is a mass that is blocking off part of my spirit from the life-giving breath of God. And so I come to church to confess, to pray, to serve, to be in relationship, in order to make myself available to God to reduce that mass and save me from its pernicious effects. Sometimes this spiritual chemotherapy is terribly hard and painful and feels like it’s going to kill me. But I come to church in order to enter more fully into God’s Kingdom, to feel the pain of those around me, to practice solidarity, and to learn how to love without getting shut down by an enormous load of guilt and defensiveness.

I also come to church in order to learn how to speak out, especially among family and friends, against prejudice and oppression. I come to church in order to soothe my own anxiety about slogans like “Black Lives Matter.” Instead of being afraid of what others might think, I learn to take up that slogan myself in response to the marginalization of black lives around me, my sisters and brothers in Christ. Because I stand in solidarity with them. Jesus *died* for us, standing in solidarity with us while we were yet sinners in order that we might answer the call of the prophet Micah who said: He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? ³

²<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/11/surgeon-general-george-floyd-313168>

³Micah 6.8 NRSV

Everyone who bears the name Christian is called to this same work. To Jesus' work among all the cities and villages of Galilee: to teach and proclaim and heal. We may not teach with words or proclaim with impressive arguments or heal with supernatural signs. But we are all called to teach with our attitudes, to proclaim with our presence, and to heal as we tenderly acknowledge each other's pain.

Amen.