

Sermon on Matthew 9:35-10:23
Second Sunday of Pentecost, June 14, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace....

The theme for the day in our gospel reading is how Jesus had compassion for people he encountered as he taught in synagogues and traveled through the cities and villages, cured their diseases and sicknesses, and sent out his disciples, saying “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” As it is today. There is plenty of sickness during this COVID-19 global pandemic, there is a sickness in our land which we call racism, there is division among us because of politics and differing worldviews, and there is violence directed at those who disagree or demonstrate against authorities in power who do not protect their people. But as we try to “find our voice” as the Church, and discern our true mission in the midst of this pandemic and the social unrest because of racism in our institutions against brown and black people – particularly today seen in police departments across the country, we wonder if Jesus is talking about “us” when he says “the laborers are few”. Whatever the case, Jesus sends us out – we, the baptized, who follow him – to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom, to bring God’s healing and hope.

So in the past several months, the sickness we are in has been revealed. Our health care protection has been found lacking, as we go through this pandemic – as thousands tragically die who shouldn’t have, if precautions would have been followed. We lost our custodian named Daryl this past spring, while we were shut down from COVID-19, though we are not yet sure whether it was the coronavirus that killed him. But there are plenty of people of every age, older seniors who were vulnerable to the virus in care centers, but also younger people who had not health issues, such as Marny Xiong, the 31-year-old chair of the St. Paul School Board who died last Sunday from COVID-19, while her father survived the same illness. The point is not to place blame over whose fault this pandemic is, but to say that all over the world and across the street, people we know are suffering from sickness and illness of every kind. Including the suffering caused by the sickness of racism and violence, and the suffering which has resulted from the demonstrations and violence hitting St. Paul and Minneapolis the last two weeks.

But today we also look back to five years ago, on June 17, 2015, the sin of racism and hatred resulted in the killing of nine clergy and Christian faithful in Bible study at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, shot and killed by a young white man who was welcomed by them. What was particularly shocking was not only the violence of this crime, but that the victim martyrs were

all Black, the young man was white, and he had a background from a Lutheran church. His religious studies and church confirmation program had not instilled in him strong enough values and compassion to keep him from going to a bible study at an African American Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston with the expressed purpose of killing African American human beings in prayer, with the goal of starting a race war. But although he killed nine people, he was later arrested without harm. He was convicted for his crimes, but still is alive, in prison.

The shock of this act woke the Lutheran church up to the fact that there are people who have been instructed in the Christian faith, even confirmed Lutherans, who fall into violence, sin, and racism, and are capable of committing acts of racial violence and vicious hate against others. Not only this young man, but others, too. Perhaps not so blatantly racist, but many of us have been silent when our criminal justice system continues to put black and brown young men in prison at a far higher rate than white young men, because we don't have as direct a connection to communities of color who are suffering. We don't make as much "noise" about asylum seekers, teenagers and children who are detained in private prisons while awaiting court hearings that never seem to come, because they came from Central American fleeing for their lives from violence and crime, or want to feed their families – like many of our ancestors once did a century ago from Europe, but THEY weren't detained in jails – they were welcomed, for the most part. So we see now that in our justice, education, housing and healthcare systems, people have not been treated equally or fairly, due to their race or faith, their wealth or poverty.

The day after the Emanuel Nine were killed, I remember gathering with sister and brother clergy of different faiths, Christian and Jew, black and white, for prayers at St. James AME Church across the freeway. We were all stunned that such violence could be committed inside a church, but our Black brothers and sisters recalled the many times their ancestors and colleagues have suffered from violence and discrimination, and the churches that have been burned or bombed in generations past. Last summer our ELCA in churchwide assembly declared June 17 an annual day of commemoration of this sad day, to remember the nine Christian martyrs who died in prayer, to fast and to pray ourselves in order to strengthen ourselves for the work to dismantle racism in our nation, to end the hatred and division, so such a day never happens again.

So this coming Wednesday evening our Saint Paul Area Synod pastors, bishop and congregations members will gather on Zoom to commemorate the anniversary of the death of the Emanuel Nine, to confess and repent of our own racism, pray for healing and for a new spirit of compassion and love for one another in this nation, with an end to all the hate and violence we experience. This is part of that spiritual "journey inward", breathing in, so that we can take the "journey outward" with action to do justice in our world, as we exhale.

Because too many cannot breathe. Two weeks ago, after the shock of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, following the nights of demonstrations against police misconduct and racial injustice throughout the world, we all woke up to see the devastation that the violence and burning had done to our community. It was a miracle that no one else was killed, that the violence was primarily done to property. Since then there has been a lot of work done. There has been the work of witness in protests against violence, and healing words spoken of what can be possible if we create a beloved community of justice. There has also been a lot of work doing clean-up in the St. Paul Midway and along Lake Street in Minneapolis. We have seen hundreds of volunteers at Bethlehem on the Midway gathering food and household supplies for families that lost their grocery stores and pharmacies.

A month ago, who knew all this would occur? There will be a lot more work to do to heal our communities, address racial disparities, the poverty and suffering during the pandemic and after the social unrest that has built up for years, and came to a head after George Floyd's murder. Our witness as disciples of Jesus is critical these days, but it goes beyond the distribution of food, clean-up, and rebuilding of small businesses – critical as this is. The REAL work is going to be much harder – for it is the work of getting real with ourselves, examining our part in allowing the sin of racism and inequity in economic opportunities, education, housing and healthcare to create such disparities between us based on race.

What makes this tricky is that we cannot fix this on our own. We have tried this before and failed so many times. White people have tried to take care of everything, but only go so far as we are comfortable, because things “work” for most of us. People of color have experienced much of the suffering and the brunt of racial injustice, and know what DOESN'T work. So we will have to listen to them – white people will have to listen to black and brown skinned people and ask that they be patient with us as we “catch up” in our understanding, and then work together, sharing political and economic power to get this right, and become a city, state, nation and world that “works for everybody!” This really is the goal, where every child of God has worth! When we don't have to shout “Black Lives Matter” because black and brown lives WILL really matter as much as White lives do. Which hasn't been the case so far, which we must admit if we are honest. We cannot say truthfully that All Lives Matter in this world – yet – because they all don't seem to matter as much to everybody, except for those who “look like us”. That is what has to change. But when you speak this truth, and work for REAL justice and equality, many people will not appreciate it – they will shut you out. People in power may not listen because they see the truth as a threat. So there is always push back when you do something worthwhile, tell the truth or seek a more just society. Power does not let go of power without a fight. Like Jesus warned his disciples when he sent them out to the cities and villages: not everyone welcomes

the truth as good news. But to build this Beloved Community, we have to do the work which we have never done before.

But even though the work will be hard, we have hope in the words of the apostle Paul in Romans, who said *“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us....For God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”*