

A SERMON PREACHED BY  
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ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH DENVER, THE DIOCESE OF Colorado  
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, 2020

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

+ IN THE NAME OF GOD THE FATHER, GOD THE MOTHER,  
AND GOD THE EVER PRESENT LOVER. AMEN +

I thank God, and Elizabeth, your priest and Rector, and my Sister in Law and Sister priest, for the gift and blessing of again sharing the word of God with the Lord's Family that is known as St. Andrew's Church, Denver.

I think....I think I was seven years old when I decided that it would be impossible for me to be a Christian, and so I really needed to find something else to try and be good at.

That morning's Sunday School class had focused on the portion of St. Matthew's Gospel that we consider today, and to say it then defeated me is somewhat akin to suggesting that the Rocky Mountains are a somewhat interesting collection of smooth little hills.

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect". What? Really?

I mean it took me days to learn how to tie my shoes and the list of things I was not very good could on and on and .....perfect? God being kind, it wasn't very long thereafter that I learned the real meaning of this passage, though I also learned it would mean a lot of work.

The perfection to which Jesus refers is not the fantasy of never being wrong, but the reality of having a heart which has a loving song for all people, whether they love me or not. I decided that this requires a fierceness of heart because the commitment cannot be an occasional one or one observed when it is convenient. It was easy to see that I would have to do this over and over, which unknowingly reflected the great wisdom of Gabriel Garcia Marquez when he wrote:

"HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOT BORN ONCE AND FOR ALL ON THE DAY THEIR MOTHERS GIVE BIRTH TO THEM, BUT.....LIFE OBLIGES THEM OVER AND OVER AGAIN TO GIVE BIRTH TO THEMSELVES."

We who are bold enough to be a part of what our Presiding Bishop calls the Jesus Movement are called to again and again commit ourselves to love, yes, when it is the joy of a delightful meal shared with family or friends, and yes when it is the devastating moment when we are screamed at or screened out or at our wits end.

In the words of the writer of Deuteronomy, we are to “hold fast” to loving. The demonstrations which have taken place in America and around the world in response to the murder of Minnesota’s George Floyd, and giving rise to new examinations of the deaths of Colorado’s Elijah McClain and countless others, have stirred consciences near and far, and if some have obscured the deeper meanings of the protests to steal whatever stores contain, the many standing up for justice and truth is the falling of life giving rain upon the parched indifference which contributes to paralyzing misery and deaths preceded by so much pain.

Listening to Jesus, and mindful of the Angels and Saints whose prayers always defend us, how can we believe anything other than that God loves George Floyd AND that God loves former police officer Derek Chauvin?

Just as God loved Martin Luther King, Jr. and Birmingham Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, just as God loved Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee.

And if our hands stop shaking in rage and we find a moment to dry our tears, we realize that within the reality of

Walking while Black,

Shopping while Black,

Driving while Black,

or while Black going to the local school or a swimming pool, is the painful truth that some have learned to see the while Black as less:

Less deserving of respect,

Less deserving of equal treatment,

Less worthy of life;

just as many people have learned to see while Gay or while Latinx or while Asian, or while immigrant, or while Native American, or while Jewish, or while Muslim, or while female, while physically or mentally challenged, as less.

Lost in the madness is the truth that in seeing others as less, one loses the ability to see what is more. If slavery resulted in a group of people who were on intimate terms with abuse and victimization, it also resulted in a larger group which lost the ability to see the living God in those they lauded over.

And not recognizing the humanity of some diminishes the ability to fully embrace humankind in its many and varied forms.

Moved by Monet, shall we only value impressionist art? Celebrating James Taylor, shall we only listen to songs which reflect our yearnings? Should Jim Brown be the only one considered a great running back?

Moreover, race is an artificial construct whose chief original and ongoing value is to separate and subjugate.

God did not make the people we call “White” on Monday and then the people we call “Black” on Tuesday, and then those we acknowledge in this country as the First People or as being of the First Nations, on Wednesday, with Asians on Thursday, and the Latinx community a day later, or perhaps before.

God made PEOPLE, and our differences in eye, hair, skin color, clothing, food, and ritual, reflect the environments to which our ancestors migrated hundreds of thousands of years ago, and the adaptations they made to seek and secure meaning.

Former Officer Chavin did not see Mr. Floyd as his brother in the Family of God, nor even as an extension of himself, and so he was able to hold his knee on the neck of yet another someone for whom Christ died, and someone, in ways known only to God, in whom Christ lived.

He had one hand in his pocket and he appeared to be looking at the person who was filming his death dealing knee.

He did not try to hide or curtail his actions, as if he did not think he was doing anything wrong.

One is reminded of the crowds which gathered various places in this country to watch when men and or women of color were hanged by the until they were dead.

In that ghastly era, it was a fashion of some to send postcards with a picture of the gathered throng on the front, while a lifeless body before was suspended, with none of the visible faces showing remorse or any understanding of the heinous crime their presence supported.

And if one of the Aurora police officers who stopped Elijah McClain on that fateful night last August had not said,

“I HAVE THE RIGHT TO STOP YOU BECAUSE  
YOU’RE BEING SUSPICIOUS”,

but instead,

“I HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO CARE FOR  
YOU FOR THOSE ARE THE MASTER’S WISHES”,

Mr. McClain would likely still be here and we would all be better for it.

The several years I spent as the Chief of Chaplains in a Virginia jail occupied by 1500

Residents and 500 Staff made it clear that not everyone who is issued a star and a  
sidearm should be entrusted with that responsibility.

Three Wilmington, North Carolina police officers were fired in recent days when it came  
to light that they harbored hateful and deadly ideas. Would any suggest that these are the  
only bigots wearing badges in the Tar Heel State or in any other place?

Doesn’t love demand that we exercise different and greater care in the selection of those  
in whom we invest the power of life and death ?

And if the closing of mental hospitals and the reduction in community mental health  
centers and the woefully inadequate opportunities for addiction treatment that trouble the  
land like so many storms, can’t we agree that America would be wise to emulate Denver  
and create programs that have Social Workers and Emergency Medical Technicians respond  
to some situations that have previously been responded to by police?

If, as one study has shown, if a person with an untreated mental health issue is 16 times  
more likely to be shot by police than someone who does not have such a challenge, why  
aren’t we changing our response?

In seeking equal justice for all, in committing to love our neighbors, in building what  
Dr. King called “the beloved community”, we are like Abraham; we are setting out for a  
place without knowing exactly where we are going. But our faith tells us that it is a

place where “lions lay down with lambs”, a place where “swords become plowshares” and where “justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

And while this will not be easy, we must believe they we can move toward this place, that we can make the contribution that is asked of our generation.

Roald Dahl wrote:

“ABOVE ALL, WATCH WITH GLITTERING EYES  
THE WHOLE WORLD AROUND YOU BECAUSE  
THE GREATEST SECRETS ARE ALWAYS HIDDEN  
IN THE MOST UNLIKELY PLACES. THOSE WHO  
DON'T BELIEVE IN MAGIC WILL NEVER FIND  
IT.”

More and more, more and more, more and more, we are called to love. And if, in all honesty, we realize that we can do better at loving the people we already care for; and you do know, don't you, that love is a decision and that you can decide to love more patiently, to love more tenderly, to love more unselfishly, the people you have chosen love.

And if it is true that you can love some better, how can you not see that there are some you have not yet chosen to love?

In May, 1963....in May, 1963, the great playwright Lorraine Hansberry, perhaps best known for her searing drama, *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*, attended a meeting of artists and activists with then Attorney General Robert Kennedy, that had been arranged by James Baldwin. The aim of the gathering was for Mr. Kennedy to convey to his brother, the President, the hope that a meaningful action would be taken in support of a Black student attending a segregated school.

Before Miss Hansberry walked out of the meeting, she said, quote:

“I AM VERY WORRIED ABOUT THE STATE OF  
THE CIVILIZATION WHICH PRODUCED THAT

PHOTOGRAPH OF THE WHITE COP STANDING ON  
THAT NEGRO WOMAN'S NECK IN BIRMINGHAM.”

If the virus known as COVID-19 has imposed on many Americans a severely limited mobility, economic insecurity, and a wrenching tension that seems to never

go away, the virus of racism has caused many Americans to live with these same realities for soon 401 years, and for each of the 244 remembered this weekend.

“O beautiful, for hopeful skies, for love in the face of pain,  
we treasure the blessings of freedom that are to life and land sweet rain,  
from many different, distant shores, a people we've become,  
still finding it hard to learn the truth that the many are greatest, as one.  
The sacred blood which grew this land, the choices that give birth to glory,  
can bear a fruit, rooted deep within, that make ours a noble story.”

“NOW MAY OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF, AND  
GOD OUR FATHER, WHO LOVED US AND GAVE US  
ETERNAL COMFORT AND GOOD HOPE THROUGH  
GRACE, COMFORT YOUR HEARTS AND ESTABLISH  
THEM IN EVERY GOOD WORK AND WORD.”

AMEN +