

Messiah Lutheran Midweek Message for 4.21.21

This week the jury turned in guilty verdicts in the Derek Chauvin trial after the murder of George Floyd. The build-up to this trial, the scrutiny the proceedings have been under, and the anticipation for the verdict have been front and center in the news and in people's hearts and minds for almost a year. There has also been a slew of other recent shootings with racial dynamics, one happening literally at the same time that the verdict was being read. There have been protests, and not just recently. There have years and decades of other shootings, other protests, other cries for justice, other times in this cycle of trauma.

And, of course, there is the reality of systemic racism. There has been the recent resurfacing of white supremacy, more bold than it has been in a generation. There are still unresolved echoes of slavery, debates over how to teach history, and documented inequalities baked into our nation's origin story. Does that mean our country is inherently evil? I don't think so. Does it mean that our country has unaddressed sins and injustice? Without question. Does it mean that our country needs to make some changes and do the hard work of reconciliation? Yes.

One of this coming Sunday's Bible readings is 1 John 3:16-24, and it starts out like this: "We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"

We might not have all the world's goods in terms of wealth or possessions, but we have the world's goods in terms of friends and family, a loving congregation, and many, many blessings. I think it's safe to say that the majority, if not all, the members of Messiah Lutheran Church, have never feared for the lives at a traffic stop. A number of our members, or their relatives, are part of the law enforcement community, and work to serve the public trust. So, how can we, who have all of this good, see our brothers and sisters in the black community who are in need – in need of changes, in need of peace of mind, in need of respite – and refuse to help? How can we *not* lay down our lives for others, even if laying down our lives simply means not much more than acknowledging some hard truths and making some changes?

The next verse goes like this: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Well, I do have some words to share today, words that can hopefully start conversations and take steps towards truth and actions in our own contexts and lives. Because it will take all of us working together to bring about any kind of lasting or meaningful changes.

The words I'll share today aren't my words. I grew up *outside* of a town of 900 in rural Wisconsin. There were few, if any, people of color at any stage of my time in school, from kindergarten to graduation. I attended Ripon College, just down the road, a little liberal arts school that had a smattering of people of color, some of whom I counted as friends or acquaintances, but to be honest it was still pretty homogeneous. In seminary we had the chance to learn alongside some pastors from other parts of the world, but, again, most of the folks there looked more or less like me. In my time serving congregations I think I could count on one hand, two hands tops, how many black or Latino or Asian (in other words, not white) parishioners I served.

So, not my words. What do I know about this?

I'll be sharing some passages from the 2019 *Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections*. From the introduction: "Luther's methodology in the Small Catechism was clear and concise. Following a presentation of each article of faith, he asked and answered a critical question: "What is this?" or "What does this mean?" Luther's answers were contextual, taking into account his historical, cultural, and social settings, and they continue for many to be meaningful and relevant for Christian faith and life today." In this edition of the Small

Catechism, there are reflections written by black theologians and scholars to take into account “the historical, cultural, and linguistic experience of Lutherans of African descent, both on the African continent and in the diaspora.”

So, let’s listen.

From the fifth Commandment, “You shall not murder.” Luther said: “We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.” And the African Descent reflection: “We should be so respectful and in awe of God that we protect the integrity of each person’s life as of special concern to God.

“People of African descent in the United States are four times more likely to be murdered than the national average. What’s more, four out of five homicide victims of African descent are killed with guns. These are real lives being destroyed, families devastated, entire communities torn apart. The gun violence epidemic, seen and heard through the media in shopping malls, schools, campuses, movie theaters, parks, and homes across America, places a disproportionate burden on people of African descent. What should be done to protect and safeguard life?

“Human life is not ours to dispose of in any way. This is true because all life belongs to God and not to us. The fifth commandment says we have no right to take the life of any other human being, no matter how finely we sift the judicial laws or how cleverly we explain the legal language. When we decide to murder our brothers and sisters, even judicially, determining that they deserve death for their actions, we in fact usurp the power of God and deny God the right to deal with that person as only God can. According to this commandment, we humans have no right to take the life of any other human being – period! This is, of course, not to say that we do not do it – and fearfully often – but rather than gloat about it or shout that we are doing God’s work when we do it, we ought to weep, since it is a sign that once again we have fallen short of the world that God has in mind for us.”

From the reflection on the Third Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven”: “In this petition we pray that God’s will be done, even while knowing the tragic love of Jesus in his attempt to bring about the promised kingdom that was not/is not fulfilled. So, ‘thy will be done’ is not a passive petition; it is an active petition asking and even proclaiming to God that God’s will be done not just in the by-and-by, but now, here on earth. This petition commits us to seek and to act on God’s will in every way we can.

“Remember that the original context of this prayer was a time of political unrest. That time is no different than what African and African diasporic people encounter today. We are like Hagar, daring to ask God to intercede on behalf of her child and herself. Not only does Hagar ask of God, but she acts to liberate herself from oppressive power structures.

“African theological principles hold to the belief that God’s will governs the universe and the life of humanity. According to John S. Mbiti, God’s will is immutable. People invoke it or accept it, especially in situations beyond human power and control. God’s will is exercised in a just way, however, as African people consider God to be just.”

And, from the seventh petition, “And deliver us from evil”: “Evil is the abuse of power. Evil causes individuals harm and injury. Evil creates socioeconomic, ideological, and institutional chaos and denigrates sacred bodies and spirits in community.

“Evil is an external object that cannot act on its own but must be employed by human or spiritual agents. In other words, individuals are neither good nor bad (evil), but they can act in evil ways. Remember, what God created was and is good, so evil is what a person does rather

than what a person is. Evil exists when people forget what the African proverb asserts: ‘I am because we are and we are because I am.’

“So, when we pray ‘deliver us from evil,’ we are calling on God to keep us from acting in evil ways. Asking God to deliver us from evil is a call for resistance. Asking God to deliver us from evil is a call to avoid violence – in the home, in the community, and even against oneself...”

A couple of weeks ago I saw some calls among the online Lutheran community that Lutherans should have more prominent voices around what’s been happening in Minnesota, since Minnesota is so predominantly Lutheran. But, to be honest, Lutheranism comes from northern European roots, and our denomination is statistically the “whitest” in the country. However – Lutheranism has since spread around the world. And eventually we descendants of missionaries started to listen to the descendants of the evangelized, such as when the global Lutheran church listened to Lutherans in South Africa and Namibia and used divestment to help pressure Apartheid to end. We are listening to the churches in Tanzania and Ethiopia, who have grown exponentially, to see what we can learn from them to help our own ineffective work to spread the good news. If we can listen to other Lutherans abroad, I think we can also listen to Lutherans of African descent at home, too. And what I just shared was just a handful of quotes from one mildly academic book. We need to listen to the stories, the witness, the prayers, and the pleas of the black and brown folks who live with all of this every day.

I don’t have specifics to share today in terms of what our response as Messiah Lutheran Church in Mechanicsville, Virginia, should be. Perhaps I can find some advice from others who actually live with these issues every day, when I do not. But I am asking you all to listen. And I pray that our listening might lead us to love in truth and action.