

My brothers and sisters in Christ – today is Trinity Sunday - and it is the day every clergy person dreads having to preach on. I guess you could say I have gotten out of that task though, because what is going on in our nation is so important and compelling that it demands a response in the sermon today from a Gospel-informed perspective. But I'm aware that the pressing issues at hand are even more difficult to address than even the nature of the Trinity, because it has to do with human nature.

Our theology and the Bible give us two important starting places when we talk about human nature. First, Genesis tells us that we humans are created in the image of God. And second, we sinned the first chance we had. When confronted with a choice to disobey God and eat from that tree, we ate the fruit... and sin has been with us ever since. Fortunately, that wasn't the end of the story. We, as the Church affirm that God sent his Son Jesus into the world – not to condemn the world but to save the world. And part of that salvation plan was birthed in the creation of the Church (of us!) on Pentecost – which we celebrated last week – and we read about the miracle of the Holy Spirit being poured out on Jesus' followers who were then given the gift of tongues to speak to everyone in their own language in that multiracial context of first century Jerusalem. One of God's first acts through the Church was a universal reaching out in love – to make known God's love for all people of all languages, nations, and races. And today's Gospel reading is the Great Commission – the call of Jesus to his followers to preach the Good News to all nations- and to teach them all he commanded us. So, what did Jesus command us? Jesus told us the greatest commandment is to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. So here we are today as the Church. And our role and mission have not changed. Our mission is to make known God's love for all people – to live and speak the Good News of God in Christ...and to do that in the context in which we live.

And we're living in a context that is heart breaking and divisive and deeply challenging. The sin of racism is simply part of our story as humans, like all sin, and it goes against God's command to love others. It's part of American history. But that doesn't mean systemic racism has to continue- that doesn't mean we don't challenge and try to change the system for the sake of love as followers of Jesus. And I don't think I need to tell you or convince you that racism is wrong- I believe we all, as people of faith, agree that racism is a deep and horrible kind of evil because it denies what is fundamental to our faith: that all people have been created in God's image and that God's love extends to all people. I, like you -we- have all felt deep heart break and we have cried together over the unjust killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and the many, many other black Americans who have been killed unjustly. Our hearts break over their deaths because they are children of God and we know any time someone is killed, God's heart breaks too. We know this and no matter how complex the issues are- we feel that pain together and we grieve collectively. But these past 2 weeks have revealed to us not only how rampant the sin of systemic racism still is, but how much pain it has caused our black brothers and sisters in this country. I am seeing their pain in a way I hadn't before. And so these events must be a herald – a call to us as the Church to unify and to live out our mission in what we do and say to confront injustice and sin and to proclaim again the Good News of salvation – the way out of our sinful mess – and the way out is nothing less than the love of God in Jesus Christ. And let's not think for one minute that love isn't the most powerful force in the world – because it is the only thing that can defeat evil and death – just as it did on the cross.

I have a steep learning curve right now though...these events have taught me that. And this past September my daughter Charlotte started public high school as a freshman here locally near our home and she has brought back some really powerful stories. In the second week of school Charlotte was put into a small group in which, for the first time, she was the only white person in a

group. And the teens began to talk about their experiences and shared what part of the county they came from, because many of them had “choiced” into our local high school from other areas in the district. These youth and their families wanted a better education for them because their communities, which are mostly comprised of people of color, were terribly underfunded. One girl shared that it took her 2 hours by bus to get to their school every morning and 2 hours back. Charlotte must have looked shocked and had never even imagined a reality like that - and the girl looked at her and said quite matter-of-factly, not with hostility or judgement, “You don’t know where my community is- do you?” Charlotte said, “No, I don’t.” Then the girl said, “And you have probably lived in a white neighborhood your whole life with good schools, right?” And Charlotte said, “Yes I have.” And they all shook their heads knowingly and continued to share their stories and they talked respectfully about how different their experiences were in an honest and open way. When Charlotte told me about the incident, I asked her how that made her feel -to be asked those questions in that group setting – and in my own bias, I fully expected her to say she was embarrassed or uneasy. But she looked at me and said, “Mom, I was glad she asked me those questions– it’s important to say it and be honest about our differences.” My 14-year-old said that. My eyes got big –I was surprised, and I know that wouldn’t have happened when I was in high school in a positive way. A few months later Charlotte told me that the girl who was coming to school by bus had stopped coming – the travel had become too much for her and her family to manage. We were both sad. It was an important, but hard learning for both of us. But I was so grateful for that simple, open, multi-racial conversation between teenagers, because it brought to light several important things for us.

First, they were all aware, including my daughter, of the difference it made to be white in a white neighborhood with excellent schools ...that this was an advantage but that it also limited her knowledge and experience of the world as others

experienced it. Secondly, it was understood by these teenagers that this was not Charlotte’s fault - but it was still valuable to acknowledge that fact in order to open up understanding for more honest sharing – to build a bridge between them despite their different life situations. That bridge was built and Charlotte’s closest friends at the high school have become teenagers of many different races– and they truly see each other as fellow children of God with different life experiences that are mutually respected. It gives me so much hope. Her experience feels like an invitation to me to listen better and to simply acknowledge my own limitedness, my own bias, my advantages in life, and my lack of understanding.

Teenagers can teach us a lot. Today we acknowledge and celebrate our graduates, and they are graduating at an incredibly difficult time-during a pandemic and this national crisis. And I know you join with me in praying and hoping for a society for them to enter into that upholds justice, mercy, and love. The dream we all share can be made a reality when we listen and work together, no matter our race, political affiliation or background - and our teenagers are teaching us something about what that looks like and how to get there. But it also means that WE must choose humility to listen and check our own conceptions at the door, it means we have to learn and be challenged by what we hear and show respect for the voices begging to be heard about unjust systems. We need each other right now more than ever. But I have hope because of the Gospel. The Church has a mission. It’s hasn’t changed. You and I are people of faith who worship an awesome God -who sends us out in the power of the Holy Spirit to witness to the Gospel and to live following Jesus’ commands to love God and our neighbors as ourselves... right now, in this moment in time – right in the middle of the chaos and heartbreak we find ourselves in. It’s that simple. And we do it with God’s help so that our children will inherit a better and more just society because of it...where God’s Kingdom comes and God’s will is done, on earth as it is in heaven. Thanks be to God!