

The UMC of Berea
Genesis 18.1-14; Romans 5.1-5
2nd Sunday after Pentecost

“Therefore,” we hear this morning, listening in on a letter to the church in Rome,
Therefore, since we’ve been made righteous through Christ’s faithfulness, we have peace with God through Jesus Christ. ... We even take pride in our problems, because know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn’t put us to shame—
does not let us down, does not leave us alone—

because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

That “outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” of course, is the great gift of Pentecost, the cause of our celebration two weeks ago, and a gift we continue to celebrate, receive, and live into throughout these weeks after Pentecost: this season of the church year we call “ordinary,” a season of intentional growth and deepening discipleship, marked by promise and possibility.

But marked, also, this year by great “troubles”: long-lasting troubles re-surfacing, yet again, testing our “endurance,” “character,” and even our “hope.” In the words of Bishop Greg Palmer last week,

That we are in a challenging season is [an understatement.] The church and...society are...fighting for health and shalom for all God’s children as we face two prominent viruses. The one is the novel coronavirus COVID-19, and the other is virulent racism. The one is new, the other old. [And] this doesn’t even name the anxiety about what’s ahead for The United Methodist Church,¹

which we must also name: our struggles fully to include and celebrate sisters and brothers who identify as LGBTQ+.

Each of these challenges is formidable. And each presents us with an opportunity: a sacred responsibility to respond faithfully as followers in the way of Christ. The faithful response to each—it seems to me—begins, at least, in the same place.

We have witnessed and put into practice already part of our response to COVID-19: limiting travel, maintaining safe distance, wearing face coverings in public. Recall the orientation—the underlying posture—for each of these practices. Each is oriented *away from ourselves, toward the well-being of others*. We do not wear cloth masks to help ourselves. We wear them selflessly, as an act of love toward those around us, to prevent spreading a virus we may not know we are carrying. And we do not limit in-person gatherings because it is our personal preference. Far from it: we stay apart as an expression of our love.

That general orientation—preferencing the needs and well-being of *others* ahead of *ourselves*—is precisely the antidote to that other virus, too: systemic, “virulent racism”—as well as all those other divisions that persist among us, too. The only way out of this pain is to go through it. And the only way to go through it into a more hopeful future is to go through it *together*, making space for one another, prioritizing the needs of others, and listening deeply to the stories of those whose life experiences are different from our own. As Margaret Wheatley

¹ <https://www.westohioumc.org/conference/news/bishop-launches-new-forum-spark-conversation>, accessed 11 June 2020.

has written, “we can change the world if we start listening to one another.”² Our only way forward is really—finally—to live gospel love.

“What is the source of conflict among you?” the author of the letter of James wondered:

*What is the source of your disputes? Don't they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives? You long for something you don't have, so you hurt and kill. You're jealous for something you can't get, so you struggle and fight. You don't have because you don't ask. You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings.*³

That is the “underlying condition”—underlying systemic racism or “white supremacy” and underlying all our discord, hurt, and division: all the harm we cause to one another and to the earth itself. It is the pandemic of *self*-centeredness: building our lives—focusing, centering our lives—on *ourselves*, living with a posture that places *me* at the center of my life, so the only space for *you* is somewhere out on my periphery, if noticed at all.

We tend to waste much of our lives there. Love is the only thing that can pull us out. Love de-centers *myself* in my worldview so there is space for others, too. Not thin, sentimental love, but real love—gospel love—unconditional, self-giving love. The sort of love described in that familiar 1 Corinthians 13: love that is patient and kind, that does not seek its own advantage and is not happy with injustice—love that trusts, hopes, and endures. Love that “never fails.”

Love that rebuilds our lives around “love of God” and “love of neighbor” instead of only—or primarily—love of self. “Don’t do anything for selfish purposes,” we are instructed in a letter to the church in Philippi,

*but with humility value others over yourselves, each of you thinking of the interests of others before your own.*⁴

That is God’s way of love. Today’s reading from Romans 5 continues:

The proof of God's love is that Jesus died for us while we were sinners— while we were still pretending, still living as though *everything* and *everyone* revolves around us.

We didn’t read it earlier, but the Gospel lesson assigned to today comes from the end of Matthew 9. Jesus is traveling “among all the cities and villages,” teaching and healing along the way. And we are told that “when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless.”⁵ That is a constant theme in Jesus’ life: his willingness to be interrupted, his readiness to make space in his life for the lives and experiences of others.

That is what love does. That is what *our* love *must* do. It is the only thing that can save and heal and help us all, as we struggle together—now and always—toward a life of *shalom* for all people. Love can be the only way.

It is what Abraham and Sarah model for us this morning, too. Notice especially where we find Abraham as today’s story begins: “at the entrance of his tent.” That is where we need to be: not holed up within the safe walls of our own lived experiences, our own “echo chambers,” our own tents. We need to be ready—at the threshold—to welcome and to listen.

² Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, 2009.

³ James 4.1-3

⁴ Philippians 4.3

⁵ Matthew 9.36

Like Abraham, when folks with different life experiences come by, we need to be ready to welcome them. Abraham remains with the three strangers but does not dictate the direction of their conversation. Humbly, he listens and is changed by what he hears.

Such readiness—to make space, to listen, to learn and be changed—does not happen by accident. It comes from a lifetime of listening to God, opening our lives, seeking opportunities to experience God’s presence through other people. Self-giving, space-making, justice-seeking love is not “trendy.” It’s a way of life, so when opportunities happen, our ears and hearts already are open, and we are ready to respond.

Some of us have had a tough time these past couple weeks, listening to the stories—especially the anger—of others. The way we’re hearing “racism” discussed may be new for us, knocking us back on our heels, putting us on the defensive. Phrases like “white privilege” and “institutional racism” may be outside our comfort zones and lived experiences.

Perhaps we have always thought and talked about “racism” primarily as individual words and actions. “Racists” are folks who wear white hoods or go around saying terrible things. “Racism” is confined to formalized laws, so that once schools are officially de-segregated and people of color officially have the right to vote and a person of color is elected President, then “racism” must effectively be over.

But for a number of years now—and with increasing urgency—we have been invited to think about racism more deeply, in more “systemic” ways: to acknowledge, identify, and turn away from the many ways it has been baked into our society from the beginning. In school systems and courts, healthcare and media, policing and politics—in explicit and implicit ways, from chattel slavery to “black codes” to Jim Crow to the “war on drugs” to “stop and frisk” to the “opportunity gap” of today—in things as “everyday” as the color of band-aids and the palate of cosmetics: in far more ways than we can name, we have a deep history of prioritizing “whiteness” in nearly every aspect of our life together.

And now—once again—we are being invited, *implored*, to listen humbly to the pain this causes our neighbors: to make space in our lives for the lived experiences of others—to learn and then, faithfully, to respond. Listening and learning are not passive things. They are loving things: making space for others so we can work together toward a more hopeful future.

That work is not easy, of course, but we can do it. For the Holy Spirit has been poured out into us, and that Spirit will keep us going, struggling, moving forward together. Love is the way—the only way—and the Spirit of God gives us the power: the endurance, character, and hope we need every step of the way.

For God is love, and the Spirit of love is poured out into us. And that means that love is possible. We are not doomed to continue the sins of our past and present into the future. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who taught and showed us that love makes a way out of “no way”—who taught and showed us that if we dare to take up the cross every day and follow his way of self-giving love, then we can find God’s way of life together.

Love is the way. And in these difficult months, we have seen signs of it: evidence that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can do it. If I make space for you, and you make space for me, and together, we make space especially for the voices of those too long silenced—and if we work together, then, to build a beloved community in which there is space for us all—for every person to be listened to and celebrated as a beloved child of God—for every person to be

welcomed as the presence of Christ—for every lament to be heard, for every cry for justice to be amplified—and if we don't give up, then love really can save us all. Thanks be to God. Amen.