

Sermon for Easter 5
June 14, 2020
St Paul and the Redeemer, Chicago
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As some of you may know, Anne and I returned a few days ago after spending a semester in New Haven, Connecticut. I served as a visiting associate dean of Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal seminary at Yale. As you might guess, it was not the semester Anne and I imagined it to be.

One of my assignments was to teach a course to seniors on the pastoral offices. That's a quaint name for the Prayer Book rituals of baptism, marriage, confession, healing, and burial. It was a kind of how-to-do-it course for the soon-to-be-ordained. I designed the course as a practicum. That made for a lot of entertaining role-playing in the seminary chapel.

All went well right up to spring break. Our last class before we scattered was a demonstration of the Prayer Book rite of healing. Working in pairs, we laid hands on each other's heads, having first asked our partner's permission, and anointed each other with oil. We reflected long and hard on this experience of sacred touch. We knew that the act of healing touch was Jesus's most characteristic gesture. But we also knew that the experience of touch, even and maybe especially in church, is problematic for so many, in these days of sexual misconduct and trigger signals. Our practicum experience made relevant the old evangelical question: in times like this, what would Jesus do?

We had no idea how appropriate—and how ironic—that question would seem in retrospect. Just before Holy Week, my students returned to Yale and to New Haven as to a different world. We were separated from each other in lock-down, the campus buildings closed and bolted. No touch allowed, except the touch of our laptop keyboards. No sight allowed, except the worried faces on our Zoom screens, where we were arrayed like third-rate celebrities on Hollywood Squares. The irony of our separation was made even deeper by our first Zoom topic. While the global death toll mounted, we reviewed the rites of burial.

Like the rest of my colleagues, I radically reshaped the syllabus to respond to the pandemic. I cancelled the final two papers, and instead challenged everyone to design a ritual of healing and reconciliation to be performed when they imagined the pandemic might be over.

When the term was over, I am glad to say that, in spite of the pandemic, all my students managed to find jobs in parishes and chaplaincies. I now wonder how, in their new circumstances, my students would reshape the services of reconciliation they imagined for the end of the pandemic in the light of what has happened since our virtual commencement service on May 18—with the murder of George Floyd, the massive demonstrations, the egregious misconduct of the president, the harsh

spotlight on police violence, the exposure of systemic racism that has stained this country since before its founding, in what is finally being recognized, along with the genocide of Native Americans, as this country's original sin.

The pandemic continues to rage, summer weather and our own restlessness notwithstanding. Burial, as far as pastoral offices go, we all can get our heads around. Burials will sadly continue. But what about healing? What about reconciliation? Where are healing and reconciliation to be found in these violent and pestilent days?

In my own anger and frustration, I confess I have no answer, likely any more than you do. But as a Christian believer—a believer however shaky these days—I know I need to take today's Gospel seriously, however angry and frustrated and useless I feel.

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Jesus is the Way of healing: I need to stand back, take a breath, and recognize the healing ministry that Jesus modeled has been made flesh in the self-sacrifice of nurses, doctors, and medical technicians in this pandemic.

Jesus is the way of Truth. I need to think of Jesus before Pilate in the Pretorium. Pilate was the tyrant who like our own wannabe despot in the White House had no regard for truth. "What is Truth?" Pilate spits out to a fawning crowd of sycophants. Sound familiar? I try to think of Jesus's courage before Pilate as I contemplate the witness of countless demonstrators throughout the world demanding justice and truth-telling truth from those in power—a power derived from generations of white privilege. If you decide to join these demonstrations, whether in body or in spirit, I hope you will remember the courage of Jesus before Pilate.

And finally, Jesus is the Way of Life, even in these wretched times— when the grief of a deadly pandemic is compounded by the horror of watching a latter-day lynching recorded on camera in real time.

I'm glad to be home, but I liked being with seminarians again this past spring. They gave me hope for the future of the church, as uncertain as the church's future seems to be. I hope my students are OK, wherever they are. But I also hope they get it. If we were still in class, given the events of the past few weeks, I think I would tell them that for any pastoral offices to matter in these times, we need radically to reshape them into sacraments of justice and truth-telling.

What might that mean in practice? I can think of three things, at least:

One: That in whatever way is open to us, ritually or otherwise, we must make clear to those who stumble and are afraid in these days of truth-telling —especially our

white neighbors, including people like me—that the way of peace is by necessity the way of justice.

Two: That in whatever way we can, ritually or otherwise, we must insist on truth, when lies, like teargas, poison the air.

Finally, in whatever way is open to us, ritually or otherwise, we must stand against violence in these murderous times. Stand up against the fanatic stoning of Stephen all those centuries ago. Stand up against the eight-minute, forty-six second asphyxiation of George Floyd in a nondescript Minneapolis parking lot under the knee of a callous white cop. In standing against violence, in Jesus's name we stand up for life, and life abundant, whatever our need for security, or loss of our sense of privilege.

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. God help us in these perilous days to act accordingly.