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 Texts: Isaiah 2: 1-4; Romans 3: 9-24  
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### Laying Down Our Swords and Shields

Just prior to the sermon, you heard Dan Stevens play “Down by the Riverside.” It’s a song with a long history, known to have been sung by the enslaved long before the Civil War. Its most well-known verse, about laying down one’s sword and shield, is drawn from the book of Isaiah chapter 2, when the prophet foresees a time in which humanity will beat their swords into plowshares, a time in which people will no longer study, or practice, warfare. While we don’t know the precise origin of the song, we do know that it was first recorded by the Fisk University Jubilee Quartet back in 1920. Since then it’s become a song known to most every American, recorded by Louis Armstrong and Mahalia Jackson, Etta James and Sister Rosetta Tharpe. It’s a song that’s been on my mind these last few weeks.

Here’s why: in the early days of the protests, it became clear that many uniformed police officers were themselves outraged by the murder of George Floyd, and they found ways to signal their solidarity with the protesters. The story that moved me most deeply emerged from Flint, Michigan, where, instead of treating protesters as adversaries, the local sheriff began a dialogue. “What do you want us to do?” he asked those who had gathered. “Join us!” they responded. And so he did. The sheriff took off his riot gear, he had his fellow officers lay down their billy clubs, and he wound up marching with those demanding police accountability. It was an image straight out of the old spiritual, and the words of that great song ran through my mind:

(Dan Stevens: “I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside...and I ain’t gonna study war no more.)

Similar things began happening all over the country. Here in Connecticut, up in Hartford, I listened as some young people recounted what it was like to stop the flow of traffic on I-84 with their bodies, and of how they demanded that police submit to that action without reprisal. Instead of behaving as adversaries, some of those police in Hartford, they chose to kneel – a gesture of respect and grudging support for that action. “There is nothing new under the sun,” the writer of Ecclesiastes gripes, but this seemed like something genuinely new under the sun, when even police became fed up with the violence and warfare they’re all too often asked to unleash on black and brown bodies. It was as though a wave had crested, and the occupiers were confessing to the occupied that the burden of forcible command and control over human lives was, at last, too much to bear.

Not everyone has behaved that way, of course. Unfortunately, and rather perversely, many police units have used demonstrations against excessive police force to demonstrate...excessive force. Some have even used kneeling as another ruse of power, taking a knee just before they unleash tear gas and billy clubs and rubber bullets on demonstrators. Those have been vile displays of inhumanity. Meanwhile, many in the

media and in predominantly white communities have fixated upon the burned buildings, spending much more time worrying about property damage than about the human rights issues confronting us. Even so, there are some police in the midst of it all that have said enough. There are some police who are using this as a moment to reflect upon whether a warrior culture and warrior training dehumanizes everyone who takes it up. There are some police who are questioning whether a militarized and overly weaponized police force will actually make our communities safer. There are some police who are taking up the refrain for themselves, who are letting the words of that sacred spiritual interrogate their own practices.

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If there's a way forward through this mess, if there's a way to address the centuries of racial injustice and white supremacy built into the very fabric of our country, I believe that the words of that spiritual, together with the example of a few members of the police, might suggest how to proceed. In situations where there is such a grotesque asymmetry of power, between the colonizer and the colonized, say, or between the police and communities of color, or between a predominantly white culture and that of everyone else, lasting change requires those with the power, with the weapons, with the swords and shields, to lay them down. That can happen voluntarily, but most often it happens as a result of upheaval, protest, and demonstrations. That's how it was in South Africa when the apartheid regime crumbled. That's how it was during the civil rights era. And so it is now. Moral change requires those who wield swords and shields to put them down, and to quit studying war. That's a question that we'll all have to take up in the coming weeks and months, as we consider whether there are alternative methods of public safety, ones that don't involve sanctioned state killings, or a militarized police force.

But really, I think the truth of that spiritual runs much deeper than policing. Because it turns out we in the majority white suburbs have our own swords and shields, and we use them like weapons.

During the Covid crisis, we know that African American communities have been affected at rates three times higher than those in majority white communities. There are a lot of reasons for that, but the overarching reason has to do with space. We along the Shoreline, in places like Lyme and Old Lyme, have ample space in which to spread out and maintain our distance. In fact, I've often said over the past three months that social distancing began in Old Lyme not in March of 2020, but in 1665. Meanwhile, black and brown communities are forced to live in far greater density, which is one of the reasons covid has rendered those communities so vulnerable. And that arrangement – spacious white suburbs and dense urban housing – didn't simply happen as if by magic. It occurred through red lining, and housing laws, in towns like ours. Those have been swords and shields that communities like Old Lyme have used to keep minority populations out. Throughout the affordable housing hearings a couple of years ago, we heard over and over again that residents were for affordable housing, but! But, but, but. As we grapple with the effects of systemic racism, I believe it's time to put down the swords and shields that we've wielded in our community to keep people of color out. I believe it's time to take up the question of affordable housing once again, allowing the

words of the spiritual to take effect, such that redlining will no longer be a sword and shield that we brandish.

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There are other swords and shields that we brandish in predominantly white spaces – the way our school districts are organized, how many of our resources remain in town, versus being given to a wider regional entity, and the way we vote on things like affordable health care and a living wage. Those are all the equivalent of swords and shields that are weaponized against black and brown lives, ways of declaring in practice, if not in so many words, that black lives really don't matter – at least, not as much as white lives.

But I'm also concerned about another sword and shield, one that most every white person I know employs, including me. That has to do with our own sense of moral righteousness when we speak of things like race. Especially in progressive circles, there's nothing more unsettling than to be told that our behavior or assumptions are racist. We spend an immense amount of time and energy differentiating ourselves from those that we do deem to be racist – poor, rural whites, say, or murderous police, or the sea of white faces at a Trump rally – all the while telling ourselves that if we're not that, then we must be among the good guys. We hold onto the assumption that if we don't consciously discriminate, or use offensive language, or that we befriend people of color and work for positive change, that we're free of the racialized codes and narratives that have structured American life since 1619. What we're often not able to admit is that it's possible to be good people, and to live upright and decent and thoughtful lives, while still participating in and benefiting from living in a racist society. It can be painfully hard for white progressives to acknowledge that. It can be painfully hard for me to acknowledge that. Swords and shields fly up immediately. “But I've been working for reconciliation my whole life; But I marched in the 60's; But I've taken diversity training workshops; But I have people of color in my family; But my best friend is black,” and on and on it goes. The point is always the same: I know that systemic racism exists, but somehow I'm exempt. That may be the single greatest sword and shield that exists in American culture, the single greatest instance of white supremacy of them all: to say that I know it's out there, and that it's terrible, but thanks be to God, I'm not a part of it. The sword and shield, in other words, represent the tremendous psychic investment we have in preserving our own sense of righteousness and moral character. But perhaps it's time for us all to lay down that sword and shield, because it prevents us from seeing our own whiteness, and from acknowledging the ways we participate in white supremacy.

If that feels hard, I have some good news for you. Laying down our claims to moral righteousness is a task especially suited to people of faith. In fact, much of the book of Romans turns on the same theme that we encounter when confronting systemic racism, where Paul argues that no one is righteous, not even one. Paul's argument in Romans isn't that people everywhere are bad or depraved. He's not arguing that, every appearance to the contrary, people are wicked to the core. Some are, I suppose, but I'm reasonably certain that the vast majority of people then, as now, do their best to live lives of decency and care. That's why it's sometimes a little strange to be in a church where a

confession of sin is a regular part of the worship service. I've been in services where the congregation reads a confession that lists things I know for a fact to be untrue of most everyone in the room. So Paul isn't trying to get us to feel guilty about things we haven't done. Instead, when Paul argues that no one is righteous, it has to do with a dynamic very much akin to structural racism: we can simultaneously be good people but also participate in and benefit from social dynamics that truly are monstrous. Let's not forget that Paul's letter was addressed to citizens of the Roman Empire, in this case those living within the very capitol of that empire. That meant that simply by their placement in that society, they would have benefited, in ways large and small, from the maintenance of that empire. And so rather than drawing a line in the sand, and placing some people on one side of the line and other people on the opposite side, with designations of good on one side and bad on the other, he draws a circle, where everyone, each in their own way, is implicated in structural injustices, and where everyone, each in their own way, is in need of help, of growth, of grace. We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory, Paul writes.

I don't know about you, but I sense such good news in that. When we draw lines in the sand, we create enemies, defining our own goodness against their supposed badness. But when we draw a circle, we confess that we too fall short, and recognize our own inadequacy. It also means that we don't have to expend nearly as much energy defending our righteousness and goodness. If we all fall short, then maybe there's not so much to defend in the first place. What it means is that we can lay down our swords and shields, and quit worrying about protecting our moral reputations, which is really a form of progressive narcissism and self-absorption. It means that we can move through the world with a greater degree of humility, and with an openness toward learning and growth. It means that we might be open to receiving critiques of our behaviors or assumptions, without withering or hiding. I don't know about you, but something about that feels profoundly freeing to me. It might actually feel good to be able to lay down that sword and shield, because holding onto it has worked to perpetuate an inner war within a lot of us.

If that still feels hard, I have one more piece of good news to offer: even if our own righteousness projects run aground, there is an agency beyond us and around us that's helping us along the way, giving us the courage to grow, offering grace when we fail, providing the strength we need to change. Paul names that agency Jesus, and I would as well, but you might name it differently. It's a force within the world that, despite the indifference we too often display, an inhumanity that we too often countenance with our decisions, continues to insist that there are ways to conduct our lives that don't involve domination or white supremacy, and that do involve the mutual affirmation of the rights of others to enjoy the same privileges and freedoms that we enjoy. When our own morality projects come apart, we stand a greater chance of encountering the fullness of another's humanity, such that we can at last affirm that black lives do matter. When our own morality projects come undone, we also stand a chance of sensing the power of Jesus at work in the world and in our hearts, insisting that he's not through with us yet.

It's not easy, I know. For many of us, owning up to our complicity in a racist system is as painful as it gets. But try to remember: you're not alone. We're all trying to recover, and to live into a different, and better narrative. Jesus won't abandon you in this

struggle. And there is hope. It lies in the words of that old spiritual, words that a few people are now having the courage to enact. A new thing enters the world when we discover the courage to lay down our swords and shields, and refuse to learn the habits of this war any longer.

(Dan Stevens: I'm going to lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside, and I ain't gonna study war no more.)