

Sermon: A House Called Tomorrow
Acts 2:1-24
Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
6/14/20

On that Friday, we were all gathered in one place.

There were more than two thousand people on the New Haven Green last Friday. It was an afternoon of defiance, community and nonviolent action. My heart pounded in rhythm with a multitude of other determined voices.

Everyone was well-masked. Young people and old, a diverse crowd shoulder to shoulder carrying homemade signs like ours that said,

No Peace, No Justice

Black Lives Matter

Silence is not an Option

I Can't Breathe

As we walked, those in the crowd with bigger voices began to chant. I joined in quieter at first then growing louder,

“George Floyd, George Floyd, George Floyd”

“Breonna Taylor, Breonna Taylor, Breonna Taylor”

I found it to be a profound, holy thing to say these sacred names in unison with so many masked strangers. We were as one moving voice walking step by step behind the student organizers.

Some voices were ragged, others raging, and still others, raw with the power of grief.

Each name a mantra of breath and confusion, horror and remembering.

*There is something about repeating someone's name,
committing it, them, their story to memory,
breathing life again into one's own.*

I felt anonymous and yet part of something so much larger and grander than myself. Showing up with my friends probably didn't matter. But for me, trying to listen, trying to be a worthy ally, trying to show up changed me. It mattered to me to be one more voice demanding,

“Never again.”

With my mask on, my breathing felt labored, loud and a noisy rush of air. Then, bending down on one knee in silence, I prayed that this protest would remain peaceful. I prayed for all the brokenhearted that I saw around me ...

I prayed to be a strong advocate for my five nephews and nieces, all of them children of color ages 2 to 17. I prayed for Christopher, Dominic, Gabriel, Fitz, and baby Gigi.

I prayed that they would never become a George or Breonna or Eric although because of the color of their skin, the world is already a dangerous place.

I prayed to be a worthy ally to my adopted sister, Mimi, originally from the Congo, and her husband, Wale in Houston. Knowing the jog Wale takes every morning through his neighborhood makes Mimi cry when it seems to take longer than it should.

I prayed for the two police officers standing on the roof watching and listening as we marched by. And all those in law enforcement needing courage in this pivotal moment.

Bending on one knee is an intimate and deeply humbling act. As a white woman of privilege, it is for me something else, too. A submission to being part of the problem of racism in this country and a promise to examine the hard stuff inside myself and the visible and invisible ways I've benefited from our society's unjust, racist systems.

More than that, I promised in my prayer to be part of the solution.

Taking a knee as the prophetic football player, Colin Kaepernick, knew years ago, is a posture of a different kind of power. It protests all injustice that has POWER OVER another human being.

Instead, it embodies the power of the human spirit to make a difference, to make meaning out of horror and create an opening for lasting change.

For me, all the signs and demonstrations of protest that have unfolded in the past weeks since the killing of Mr. Floyd, point to one of my favorite scripture stories.

Found in the Book of Acts, it is most known as the birth story of the early church. It was the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Many different people from all over are speaking in various languages coming with their own cultures, ethnicities, worries and woes. The whole place is packed with a cacophony of voices that resembles “gale force winds” before the Spirit shows up and drives the disciples out into the streets to meet people where they were.

And there was the sound – of chanting or fires burning, and a hurricane shifting.

*And with that, there was the sound of everything changing.
And the sound of people listening to each other’s stories
And the sound of people being listened to who’d never been listened to before.
And the sound of people saying each other’s names,
And the sound of silence in between breaths,
And it was the sound of people listening who’d never listened before.
And the sound of new understandings being created out of the babbling chaos.*

*And with that, the sound of power grabbing and racist structures toppling and young students rising with their new visions of freedom and justice for all dreams.
And the sound of the not-so- young rising up with their voices and bodies, too.*

And we hear Joel, that ancient Old Testament prophet, echoing God’s promise, “I will pour my spirit out on every kind of People” (Acts 2:18b)

And it poured and poured and poured

*Into you and me
And into heads of corporations stepping aside to share their power
And into Generals apologizing for the violent power wielded.
And into sheriffs setting aside weapons to join in the struggle.*

Imagine!

This “ruah,” the breath of the Spirit that winds its way through scripture and our own private and collective lives. It’s what the civil rights activist and founder of Moral Mondays, the Reverend William Barber the II, just preached,

“It’s almost as though, whether it be George Floyd or others who have died from coronavirus that should not have died, almost in a spiritual way, when they breathed their last breath, their breath came in us, and now we have work to do.”

That's the Breath of what we in church call the Holy Spirit.

Call it what you like.

It's a Love that doesn't fence in or wall up or tear gas or kill.

It's a Love that changes hearts and pushes us into the squares of the city or onto our front church lawn or into New London to care for folks needing some food and housing justice.

It's a Love that can make us uncomfortable as we consider our own power privileges or ways of investing or access to equitable health care.

It's a Love that unleashes a new kind of energy and messes with the way things used to be.

It's a Love that as St Paul says in a letter to the Corinthians that has no end... (1Corinthians 13.10)

(Pause)

As I got up off my knee at the protest, I thought of where we need to go next. *I thought, too, of our current graduates at every level.*

We are so proud to know and love you.

James Baldwin, in his seminal work, *The First Next Time (1962)* composed a letter to his nephew, James, in honor of the 100th Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. It's another work of scripture to me. Baldwin said then, how much farther we had to go to do justice to any emancipation.

And to James, to the next generations, he wrote,

"Take no one's advice, including mine-but trust your own experience. Know whence you came. If you know whence you came there is really know limit to where you can go."

Graduates (some of whose pictures will be scrolling during the postlude), wherever the next step leads you, know that we'll always hope to be a place of home for you.

The poet, Alberto Rios, in his poem, A House Called Tomorrow, writes

From those centuries we human beings bring with us

The simple solutions and songs,

The river bridges and star charts and song harmonies

All in service to a simple idea:

That we can make a house called tomorrow.

**What we bring, finally, into the new day, every day,
Is ourselves. And that's all we need
To start. That's everything we require to keep going.
Look back only for as long as you must,
Then go forward into the history you will make.**

**Be good, then better. Write books. Cure disease.
Make us proud. Make yourself proud.
And those who came before you?
When you hear thunder,
Hear it as their applause.**

*When you go out into the world now
When you hear thunder
Hear it as our applause!*

Amen