

June 7, 2020

Psalm 137:1-4  
Mark 8:20-25  
Ephesians 1:18

“I carry your heart with me  
I carry it in my heart” (eecummings)

This week has been a trial for the sturdiest of souls. The grief and agony we have witnessed.... the heavy fist of power from which we all have flinched.... The broken hearts, grieving families and trampled dreams... It has all added up to be mountain of sorrow.

Many of us – **most** of **us** – live in relative calm and safety in bucolic beauty – free from the daily machinations of violence and brutality. But on our television screens and in our daily papers there come to us scenes of monumentally brutal hardship and suffering. It’s heart-breaking and disorienting and painful.

In 1978 James Baldwin wrote these words: “To look at the United States today is enough to make prophets and angels weep.” Those words are as true today as they were 40 years ago. So true they *sting*.

Those of us who serve on this church staff have wrestled mightily over this past week with this question: what does it mean to be a church *right now* – in the midst of this national outcry of pain and suffering and oppression and aggression? Like the Israelites held captive in our psalm for the morning, we have asked ourselves “How do we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” For this land - our land, our country - has felt foreign and strange in this past week.

What does it mean to be a people of faith in this troubled time? What does it mean?

Surely it means to weep with those who weep... to mourn with those who mourn... to don the heavy mantle of grief... and to prepare to seek justice and mercy for the **real** healing of the nation. On the outside of our Meetinghouse there will soon hang a banner, a quote from Reinhold Niebuhr that will read: “Love is the motive, but justice is the instrument.” Justice is the instrument. Surely, as people of faith, we need to be builders of justice.

I’d like to begin today’s sermon by telling you a story. Bear with me. It might seem like a diversion at first, but bear with me.

It’s a story about a young woman raised in a relatively peaceful and idyllic place. She’d had a lot of advantages, growing up – more than perhaps she ever realized. Her parents instilled in her the virtues one would expect. As a child she was given no choice but to attend Sunday School every week. She had a good education, and she’d read a good many of the right books. You’d probably have found her to be a pleasant friend or neighbor.

But when she was in her thirties – a mother already with three young children – she had an experience that turned the world as she’d experienced it - upside down.

One day – a day as clear in her mind today as if it were the yesterday of thirty years ago – she found herself on the streets of Soweto, South Africa. The year was 1988. The South African government had declared a state of emergency. Which meant that, in addition to the police, military personnel patrolled the streets of the country with absolute authority and full impunity.

On the day of our story, she arrived in that township as dusk settled in upon the streets. It was winter. And a biting, acrid smoke from anthracite-burning heaters cast a heavy smog which made it hard to see. Almost hard to breathe. She was white – so very white in the pitch-blackness of that night. All around her, the two-million residents of Soweto were black – so black that their faces almost disappeared in the thick, smoky air.

It was against the law for a white person to be a visitor in that black township in 1988.

The police, and the South African defense force soldiers, carried rifles and batons, and they wore military protective gear. They drove vehicles that resembled tanks through the streets. They spoke out of big, amplifying megaphones, as they rose up out of the cockpit of the vehicle, saying, “Clear the streets. Curfew. Clear the streets. Curfew.” Does any of this sound familiar???? Angels and prophets were weeping then, too, I am sure.

“I am so white,” a voice whispered in the terrified strata of her mind. Surely the police will see me.

Her fear was palpable. But, palpable fear was all around her. Mothers rushed to bring their children indoors, terror on their somber faces. You see it was common for young black youth to be taken off the streets by the army forces for seemingly no probable cause, and detained. Sometimes they did not return. Sometimes they were identified later – in a morgue.

Our young woman friend was to spend the night in the home of a church family that agreed to take her in, knowing well the risks to themselves and to her. They opened their home with a generosity of spirit, and a loving warmth that was every bit as palpable as the smog and terror of the streets outside. They sheltered her that night. They opened their hearts, and they opened hers. There was such a strong measure of love and grace in that home that night that it felt like safety.

But the refrain that echoed through her mind in that night – and in the nights that followed was this: “I had no idea.” That’s what she kept saying to herself: “I had no idea. I had no idea that suffering could run so deep. I had no idea that such good people would have to live in such constant pain and fear. I had no idea that young mothers would have to race to protect their sons from the heavy hands of soldiers bearing arms – soldiers whose sense of justice was capricious at best – vindictive and sadistic at worst. I had no idea what it would feel like to know that the color of your skin was a crime. Her “white-ness,” you’ll remember, was a crime. “I had no idea,” kept echoing in the chambers of her mind.

Suffering does not lend itself to a rationed or metered assessment. You can’t gauge it by taking its temperature, or measuring its width or depth. You can’t experience it by reading a textbook. You can’t stand it alongside the suffering of another and say, “You have suffered less than your

neighbor.” But suffering takes its toll in the eyes, and in the belly of those who suffer. With every move, it hangs around their shoulders like a lead blanket.

And suffering has a memory. It can accumulate in the stories of generations of those who recant their lives while their children huddle at their knee. That kind of suffering is deeper than deep, wider than wide, heavier than earth itself can bear. That suffering defies words.

I’m going to pause now and borrow from the archives of our South African friends, a song entitled, “Sensenena.” Loosely translated – the words mean... “Why have we suffered so? Is it something we have done or failed to do? Why do we suffer so?”

In our gospel story from Mark, we read of the blind man who was brought to Jesus for healing. Jesus spit into his own hands, and touched the man’s eyes. And at first, the man *saw* – but his sight was inaccurate and skewed. “I see men. But they look like trees walking,” he said to Jesus.

The scenes that unfolded before our eyes across the cities and byways of our nation this past week brought that scripture reading to mind. Seeing that unbelievably horrendous video of the death of George Floyd brought that scripture to mind. Did I really just *see* what I think my eyes saw?

All week long, divergent perspectives and commentaries floated around us in the media. There was the agony of the family gathered to mourn and honor their brother and son – the family of George Floyd. There was weeping inflamed by tear gas. There were throngs of people in synchronicity of mourning, covering roadways and bridges. There was the shocking advance of armed men on horseback. There was fire, and there was looting. “I see men, but they look like trees walking,” we might have said to one another. Because it was so hard to put the pieces of all these stories into some kind of coherent form.

We well might have said, deep in the intimate, unspoken caverns of our souls, “I had no idea.”

As a church community, we’ve worked, we’ve read and studied, we’ve prayed and struggled together – but we, collectively, had “*no idea*” – or at least not a sufficient level of understanding – of the deep, deep chasm of memoried pain that has accumulated in the hearts and souls and minds of our black brothers and sisters. It was hubris to think that we did. Though, the good Lord, knows, we have tried. But the waters of truth have been ministered to our eyes yet again. And now, we can see clearly.

We can see that the depth of pain is a fathomless ocean of suffering. And we stand in humility before it.

There have been some signs of hope in this week that has passed. There were policemen who laid down their batons and held the hands of the protesters. There were as many white faces in the crowds of protesters as there were faces of color – or so it seemed to me. That tells me that the energy for confronting and solving the issue of police brutality is bigger and stronger than it might ever have been. This issue – this push for justice – has broken through lines of color.

There was the big, handsome black man who was handcuffed by police, and turning toward a video camera, he announced that he was an FBI agent. Smiling, he said, “But this is what racial profiling looks like.” And he said it for all the world to see and hear.

There was the airline stewardess who struggled with what she had seen on the news; but put her best foot forward and went to work. On her flight she noticed a man sitting in the back of the plane reading the book “White Fragility (its subtitle is “why it’s so hard for white people to talk about racism). It was a book she had been meaning to read herself. The man happened to be white – she happened to be black. But she sat down and began a conversation with him. “How are you?” she asked, and “What do you think of that book?” The man thanked her for approaching him – and for the conversations –that ensued. “We’ve got to have these dialogues, painful though they may be,” he said. It turned out that his name was Doug Parker, and he is the CEO of American Airlines.

I was recently sent a copy of two letters written to parents by the Superintendents of schools of two of Connecticut’s school districts – districts that just happen to be mostly white. And hence, mostly privileged. Both of the letters touched me deeply. It took guts to write them. And people in authority too often shrink when they need to confront truth. Tom Moore, Superintendent of the West Hartford School System wrote:

“When we see the brutal killing of George Floyd, we add it to a mental catalogue of injustice that through video we have actually witnessed over not just the past days, but weeks, and years. And when we see our nation burning, it is incumbent on all our institutions to speak not just to our community, but to our children, and make one simple promise: We can do better, and we will do better, and we will not wait any longer to take action....”

He goes on to say, “I confess that I have, prior to this week, been pleased with our incremental gains while I have been superintendent. But now I am, frankly, embarrassed by my own satisfaction. My patience has not been a virtue.....from this time forward we will be actively anti-racism in our thoughts, our actions and our professional development.

I am a white male, and while I can listen to those who have lived as a person of color in America, it is the height of hubris for me to pretend that I can ever truly understand that experience...

But I know that if our community and our schools pull together, we can help to satisfy those who hunger and thirst for justice, and we can make the words our children say every morning ring true – “with liberty and justice for all.”

Our choices, going forward, must reflect our hopes, not our fears.”

(excerpted from a letter of June 1, 2020, written by Tom Moore, superintendent of the West Hartford Public Schools)

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul prays that the “eyes of your hearts might be enlightened.” It’s the eyes of our hearts with which we, as people of faith, must see the evening

news. We might not be able to catalogue or quantify or even adequately identify with the suffering and pain. But we can feel it. We can feel it in our hearts.

I've borrowed the title for today's sermon from a poem by ee cummings

"I carry your heart with me  
I carry it in my heart.....  
Here is the deepest secret nobody knows.  
(Here is the root of the root and bud of the bud  
And the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows  
Higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
And this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart  
I carry your heart. I carry it in my heart."

That's the work of a community of faith in these troubled, tragic, heart-breaking times: to carry the hearts of those who suffer in our own hearts. Our faith asks us to be not afraid – to turn not away - but to reach out and hold the hands of those who have been broken on the wheels of savage injustice. And surely we must do **more** than just that.

Designing the curriculum for racial healing is the task that lies ahead. It will take a coalition of schools and local governments, churches and families, neighborhoods and individuals, wise men and women, prophets and poets, libraries and museums. It will need to be sweeping and comprehensive in its breadth. It will need to be bold.

It will need to push back against those who say – “we can't...” Because – **we can. We certainly can.** There's money enough to build more equitable educational systems and adequate health care. **We need the will.** There's information enough to formulate humane codes of behavior and accountability for all law enforcement. **We need the will.** There are adequate resources to protect our elderly and our disadvantaged. **We need the will.** We need to elect public officials who are not afraid to look the beast of cruelty in the eyes – and stare it down.

***We have seen the will.*** That's what we have seen on the streets of our nation – and on the streets of nations around the world who have risen up to stand in solidarity. That galvanized, sturdy, resolute, ***will*** took the form of every color in the rainbow. And that ***will of steel***, so evident on the streets day after day and night after night should make every sitting politician in America quake.

Remember that old Bob Dylan song; “The times they are a changing...? Let's hope he sings it again and we live up to its words at last. For we are now in the business of carrying one another's hearts.....

Amen

Carleen R. Gerber  
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, Ct.