

I am with you always, to the end of the age

2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, UCC, in Camden; June 7, 2020

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

"Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace." These are the final words of challenge by the Apostle Paul to a congregation that was racked with in-fighting. There were rivalries, arguments about dubious teachings and teachers as well unequal treatment of its various members depending on their status (and more). While we are at peace as a faith community, our nation is another matter. We are struggling in the wake of the hardship and heartache and all the consequences of dealing with the murder of George Floyd and so many before him. We are living through a time in our country that is characterized by great strife, disorder and disagreement. It is also a time of people drawing together in new ways, though at time still in polarized fashion.

As we all know, racism and the hurt it produces is not new even if it is now dominating our news. We are having to look into our collective mirror and face the reality of structural and systemic oppression of people of African American descent in particular and People of Color in general. Large numbers of people, especially of the younger generations, have gone to the streets to decry racism and police brutality. They have expressed their rage, calling out: "No Justice, no Peace," and "If you can't respect my existence, expect resistance." Most

demonstrations have been peaceful though sometimes undermined by various players with different motives. There has been so much tension and overwhelm for all involved, demonstrators and law enforcement included. In numerous instances, teargas, batons, rubber bullets have been unleashed on people. Many demonstrators were met with undue force and brutality in the name of keeping law and order. They were exercising their constitutional rights to assemble peacefully and voice their concern.

All this raises the question of what it means “to put things in order,” and to “live in peace” in our context? We have seen a response from the White House calling for “domination” and harsh crack downs, even if it would mean deploying active military to control the unrest. Compare this to the actions of some police chiefs, including our own, who have opted to listen to demonstrators and walked with them, thereby diffusing tensions from the get go. The President recently even usurped the authority of the Bible to call for law and order and present himself as the enforcer of the will of God. Church officials have rightly criticized him for this action. I, too, believe that the authority, peace, and will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ offers us a dramatically different vision and pathway than that implied in the recent presidential photo op.

Our Gospel text assigned for today challenges us to become clear about what and who has authority in and over our lives. When Jesus commissions his followers as his last official act, he says to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” What does it mean to say that Jesus embodies authority in our lives? The word “authority” has been defined in a variety of ways. Some definitions focus on having the right to enforce obedience. Others speak of having gravity, dignity, the power to convince, and the capacity to inspire trust.

Is Jesus an enforcer/dominator of sorts or one who inspires? He does say to his disciples in our passage from Matthew that he wants them to “obey” his commandments. As I have mentioned before, “obedience” comes from the Latin *ob-audire* and means to listen deeply. Obedience is then not about blindly following orders but about listening deeply to that which has dignity and

inspires trust as we seek for guidance on how to live our day to day lives. Jesus Christ inspires our lives as one who chose to love all people. He lived in solidarity especially with those who had been judged, marginalized and abused even to the point of dying on the cross. Those who saw themselves as responsible for enforcing political and religious law and order tried to put an end to his ministry. Many stood by as Jesus was killed, others even cheered on the execution. Even the disciples were timid and frightened and Jesus loved them still.

In our text for today, he is inspiring his followers to not just stand by but live the Gospel with their whole lives.¹ Right now, Jesus challenges us to flow with love in a most complex situation: first and foremost to act in love and solidarity toward those who suffer. It also means not cutting ourselves off from those who cause the suffering like Derek Chauvin and his colleagues who are responsible for the killing of George Floyd. This has nothing to do with excusing or tolerating their actions or not asking for justice but with striving to see beyond the blindness and the mask. We all have to ask ourselves how we are blind to how our own assumptions, beliefs and actions are hurting others. White privilege is real and costly to us all. We all have hard work to do if we want to create change in this country toward real equality.²

I do believe that it is important to stand up as people of faith and let our words and actions have integrity. This has not always been so even in the legacy and history of this church. I am thankful to Terri McKenzie for sharing an article by Camden Town historian Barbara F. Dyer from December 25th, 2010. Part of the article highlights how our church served the community during the Spanish flu by becoming a hospital for a time. Dyer also went into great detail about the ministry of Horace I. Holt from 1918 – 1928, particularly his response to the presence,

¹ He asks us to follow as baptized people. That is, we are people who have taken on an identity that comes truly alive when we are not driven by concern only for ourselves. The beauty of the Trinitarian formula of baptism, whether we speak of Father-Mother/Son/ Holy Spirit or Creator/Christ/Holy Spirit, is that it models a relational identity shaped in a mutual outpouring of love within the persons of the Trinity. And while we are not God we are not separate from God. We are ourselves expressions of this dynamic outflow of divine love guided by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we are flowing freely within this love and sometimes we get snagged, stuck, and stagnate.

² Of course, our work is also broader than this. The current pandemic has unearthed the wider spectrum of disparities and suffering in our country a lot of which has structural and systemic dimensions. That is also why we will be discussing how we as a church can respond generously to people in need at this time and why we will have to find ways to ask the deeper questions of what plagues our common life beyond COVID 19.

ideals and activities of the KKK right here in Camden. As Vicki Doudera so aptly spelled out for us at the Vigil last Wednesday, Maine as a whole and Camden as a town were not immune to the bigotry of the Klan. In the 1920's the main target of discrimination and ridicule in Maine were Catholics and immigrants but the Klan always embraced its white supremacist agenda. White American born Protestant Christians were clearly seen as superior to all others and the true heirs and defenders of this nation and true religion. They regarded themselves as the true upholders of law and order, purity and decency. Klan members even burned a cross on January 8th, 1925, on the summit of Mt. Battie before a large church gathering. (Thank goodness that we now light holiday stars instead!)

On March 15th of 1925, Rev. Horace I. Holt preached on the activities of the Klan right here in this sanctuary. In his sermon, Holt applauded the Klan for desiring to uphold law and order and praised its respect for the church and its symbols, especially the cross. He argued that wearing hoods was common practice in many secret societies and that everyone had a right to worship God as they wished. The fact that Klan members insisted on "racial" purity and segregation did not perturb him either. He likened their stance to the "Hebrew Race," as he called the Jewish people of the Bible, believing that they had sought to remain separate and distinct. Never mind that the Klan is and was actually highly Anti-Semitic/Jewish. Holt believed that as long as Klan members actually lived up to their creed, he could see nothing in the organization to object to even though he did not choose to join. Holt was by no means the only minister in Maine who was not critical of the Klan. Some pastors, including a congregational minister in Rockland, even had lead roles in the organization and marched at the head of hooded parades.

This, too, is part of our congregational history. We are the ones "authoring" the history of our congregation in our day and time. How do we want to be remembered? What do we want future generations to say about who and what had authority in how we responded to the narratives and events of our time? I am thankful that we are still here today to love and work together because God has not given up on us. God is also not done with us.

We will eventually find a vaccine for COVID 19, however devastating it has been. Many now refer to racism and the legacy of slavery as COVID 1619, dating back to the year 1619 when the first African slaves were brought to Jamestown, VA. Our African American siblings have been asking for far too long when that “some day” will come when we shall overcome all this pain, violence and discrimination. This work will take time and commitment but we must undertake it. Those of us who are considered “white” especially have hard work to do to listen deeply, humbly and to join in working for systemic change. In light of this work, let us give thanks that Jesus Christ offers us this promise: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” God’s Holy Spirit is with us. May we listen deeply to the Spirit’s guidance as we seek to grow where we must grow and play our part in shaping meaningful and just peace in our day.

As long as I’m alive, I will continue to try to understand more because the work of the heart is never done.

MUHAMMAD ALI