

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, June 7, 2020

Let us pray. May we be guided O God by the presence of your loving and grace-filled spirit. May we know the steadfastness of your love. May we know the steadfastness of your grace. Open our ears, open our eyes that we might see, that we might hear. We pray all of these in the name of the Christ. Amen.

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. It was an age of wisdom. It was an age of foolishness. It was the season of light. It was the season of darkness. Undoubtedly you recognized that. It's the beginning of Charles Dickens novel, A Tale of Two Cities. It's the best of times. It was the worst of times. I wonder sometimes if that might not be said about every era of human history. Certainly, you can make the case that we live in such a period of time, at least I think you can.

We get stunning images from the Hubble Telescope from space. There is new edge scientific discovery and research. There are even some who say the level of poverty in the earth is less than it used to be. You could argue I suppose it is the best of times. On the other hand, you're probably a little more aware of this, it is the worst of times. We do have rising conflicts in all kinds of areas, religious conflicts and social conflicts, and political conflicts. Warfare still rages in many parts of the earth. Hunger. The fact of brutality. Political gridlock. Environmental destruction. Need I go on?

And in the midst of all of these I'm asking the question, I suppose many of you have sometimes asked the question where is God? Where is divine love? And these little colonels of doubt. Is the Jesus way even possible in our time? Has it ever been? So it is good to remind ourselves that the world into which Jesus was born was very similar. They also faced daunting challenges, oppressive conditions--certainly for the Jews, who were under the thumb of the Romans. Life at times seemed more than dismal. Seemed absolutely hopeless and there was plenty of struggle. Different groups within the 1st-century Jewish community were arising and vying for attention putting forth various pathways for the people. For the people to embrace. How should we see the Romans? What should we do in the face of their oppression? The zealots were advocating armed resistance. The Sadducees, they kind of cooperated. The Pharisees had greater adherence to the Mosaic law and if we would only do that it would in turn precipitate God's dramatic intervention into history on our behalf--withdrawing into what they considered to be a relative pure and holy life.

These groups were very often in noisy conflict with each other. How should we approach the Romans? And it complicated any kind of unity, any kind of unified opposition. Indeed, you could say the people sat in darkness. That seemed to be the case. And it's not unlike what we sometimes feel today. And so we enter into a time of social unrest and challenge. Step Jesus. "The kingdom of God is near," he said. Come again. The kingdom of God is near. The justice and peace and grace of God has come very near. In spite of what you think you might be experiencing

and what you are seeing, love is right there. You only need repent. That is you need to completely change your perspective. You need to completely change your direction. Your way of seeing. Instead of seeing yourself or someone else as some kind of label, a sinner, a drug addict, bipolar, schizophrenic, Republican, Democrat, socialist, gay, straight--instead of seeing someone else or yourself as basically a label--Jesus is inviting us to repent and to change, radically change our perceptions and our direction, to transform our consciousness and to embrace the love that is right there, that is near. To see ourselves and each person as a gifted love-child of God.

Whatever else your handicap or their handicap might be, or fault or identity, we all have those. We are being called to look beyond that. Not to excuse bad behavior and not to ignore problematic human conditions. And not to recognize the importance of conviction or the importance sometimes of some kind of identity, it gets us through certain periods of life. But instead to finally know this: that fundamentally we are each one of us, and we say it so often, a beloved precious gifted child of God. So repent. That is, open your eyes and wake up. Wake up to the presence of the spirit of God that is indeed all around you and within you. The kingdom of God is over you and under you and beyond you and within you. The love and grace and compassion of God is near, it is right here in front of you. And to repent means to change so radically that we are willing to be filled with that love. That we are willing to embrace the compassion and grace that flows from the heartbeat of God. Sounds easy but for some reason it's not. To embrace that which was there in the beginning, the goodness of God. The goodness of creation. The goodness of you and of me. To let the eye of your heart be awakened. The faith and trust that we are made in the image of God, that we are made in the likeness of God, that all of that stirs within us. And that we can begin to connect with the power and energy and grace of God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in whom all things come together, in whom all things are in creation. All things are one. So that our humanly devised categories and labels which are helpful sometimes, but all of those things that cause us the vision and barrier building and wall building, all of this in the face of the Kingdom of God begins to crumble and disappear. And it is love that transforms us so that miracles can and do begin to happen. Indeed, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light awaken. The rule of God has come near.

Some of you may have heard this story before, but Kathryn Watterson, in her book *Not by the Sword*, tells a story of a man named Michael Weisser, a Jewish cantor, and his wife, Julie. When they moved into their new home in Lincoln, Nebraska in June of 1991, their unpacking process was interrupted by a threatening phone call. Shortly after that, they received a package of racist flyers with a card that announced, "The KKK is watching you, scum." Amazingly, Julie Weisser, the cantor's wife, while frightened and naturally angry by the hate mail, also felt a spark of compassion for Trapp, who lived alone in a one room apartment. And when she learned that, she began to send a letter to him every day with passages from proverbs. And when Michael saw that Trapp had launched a hate spewing TV series on the local channel, he began to call the KKK hotline each day and leave a message. "Larry, why do you hate me? You don't even know me." At one point, Trapp actually answered the phone, and Michael, after telling him who he was, asked him did he need help with his grocery shopping? Trapp refused but something was beginning to happen inside of him. Something was beginning to stir within him. And for a while, it was almost as if Larry Trapp were two different people: the one spewing infective hate on TV and the other having these private conversations with Michael Weiser on the phone saying to him, "I can't help it. I've been talking like this all my life." One night, Michael asked his congregation to pray; to pray for someone he said who is "sick from the illness of bigotry and hate". That very night, Trapp did something he had never done before. He removed the swastika rings that he had worn on both hands for many, many years because he said they began to itch. And he called the Weisers

the next day and said, "I want to get out but I don't know how." Michael suggested that he and Julie drive to Trapp's apartment so they could "break bread together". Trapp hesitated, but then he agreed. And when they got there, Trapp broke down into tears and handed the Weisers his swastika rings. And in November of 1991, just six months after the Weisers moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, he resigned from the Klan and later began writing letters of apology to a lot of the groups that he had harmed and wronged. On New Year's Eve of that year, he found out that he only had less than year to live. And on that same night, the Weisers invited him to move in with them, and they turned their living room into Trapp's bedroom. He said, "You are doing for me what I think my parents probably should have done." Bedridden, he began to read Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and to learn about Judaism. And amazingly, on June 5th, 1992, he converted to Judaism at the very synagogue he had planned to blow up.

Julie quit her job to care for Larry in his last days and both she and her husband Michael were holding his hands when he died on September 6th of that year. The Kingdom of God has come near. The power of love, the power of God's love. There's an old hymn whose refrain speaks here. "Love lifted me. Love lifted me. When nothing else would do, love lifted me." Indeed. So, my friends, as we continue with the coronavirus pandemic moving into this summer, as we continue to struggle as a society with systemic racism, with a criminal justice system that needs reform, let the image of God awaken within you. Turn toward the light and compassion and power of God's Spirit. It is near. Let it work in your life as you seek to serve the least of these. Awaken, for indeed, the power and compassion of God are near. Very, very near. Amen.