

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 17—Year A
Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26:1-8
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

Oh, it's been good to **step away** these last few weeks. *We all need to step away*—whether for a day, or a week, or a little *every* day if we can—we need to **breathe in deep, renew our spirits, get away to that lonely place to pray** like Jesus did. No matter how crazy it was, **no matter how great the magnitude of need, Jesus still stepped away**, sometimes to the consternation of his disciples. And, *when he came back, all that need was right there, waiting to greet him.*

And so it is with us, especially in these crazy times.

We **step** onto the **trail** or into our **gardens** or **sit** on our **decks** or **patios** or **wherever it is that renews us**; we **take in beauty** and **drink in peace**, and *when we step back into the world*, it's *all waiting to greet us again*, and **break our hearts**.

In the **last two weeks, wildfires are raging in California**, where fire season is now all year long, and **two tropical storms entered the Gulf of Mexico** with **Hurricane Laura** cutting a devastating path of destruction across parts of **Louisiana** and **Texas** and **Arkansas**—all of these events **made worse by climate change**.

Moving north to **Kenosha, Wisconsin**, and with details still not at all clear, **another black man is dealing with lifechanging injuries at the hands of police**, people have **hit the streets in protest, giving voice to their pain**, *most of whom* are committed to peaceful protest, and yes, as the **nights have grown late**, some have taken the way of violence and destruction in efforts to **sow chaos and burn the house down**, *to the great dismay of the peaceful protesters* who understand that *these actions* take attention away from the systemic racism *they* are protesting. And all of this is **further complicated** by armed civilians self-appointing themselves as **helpers of police** and **protectors of businesses** in roaming “guards,” which this week, **ended catastrophically**, though *predictably*, when a **17-year old young man killed two protesters and injured another**.

Again, with details not at all clear, **this morning** brought news of **another killed in clashes in Portland**, and **police wounded** responding to calls in **St. Louis** and **Chicago**.

The **last two weeks** saw schools **starting in earnest** and doing their best to **educate during the pandemic** balancing **extraordinarily complex, and often competing, needs**, which means **administrators, teachers, students, and parents** are **stressed** and **struggling to make it all work**.

And, in the big picture, **those who have lost their lives to COVID in our country** passed the **180,000 mark on Friday**.

In our **individual lives, amidst moments of joy and peace**, there are also the **losses** and **anxieties** and **uncertainties** and **heartbreaks** that are the **stuff of daily life**, and on any given day, that scale may be weighted more heavily on one side of that joy-heartbreak scale than the other.

And **these last two weeks** have also held **8 nights of political conventions**. I did my best to **watch both trying to understand where each party is coming from**. I don't have cable, so I **started off with the**

public television station where I quickly noticed that the commentators were deciding which speakers I would see or not see. That irritated me beyond belief, so I went and found a livestream with no commentary where I could just watch.

Having watched both, I can understand why huge swaths of America just don't understand other huge swaths of America. Within each convention experience, there was a coherent narrative with BOTH sides deeply fearful of what may come should the other side win. It's not just that we don't agree on a vision for the future; we don't even agree on the shape of the present.

Whenever we step out of our places of refreshment, all of this waits to greet us.

Just as in Jeremiah's time, and the psalmist's time, and Paul's time, and Jesus' time, there is monumental need all around us, complex forces at play, individuals and collectives jockeying for power. There are narratives swirling all around us asking us to take them as the one and only truth. We are all trying to make sense of these times, and all trying to discern a way forward. As people of God and followers of Jesus, we simply have to go deeper. We have to immerse ourselves in a deeper story.

This morning, Paul gives us some really specific instructions to shape our actions. Hear them again, but this time with all that has gone on these last two weeks as a backdrop: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers."

Paul certainly isn't arguing for a hands-off passivity, but a fully engaged love committed to what is good, full of hope with a capacity to suffer, committed to perseverance and the care of the community and stranger alike.

And from there, Paul goes deep, and this is where it gets really hard: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Oh wow. Paul is calling us on our pride and our desire to cut ourselves off from others, especially from those we consider "not-like-us." Paul is calling us to go all-in with the joy and pain of the world. No room for casting the enemy out here, even people who are persecuting us, but we are to feed them, give them something to drink. We can't control others actions, but only our side of the street, and our side of the street needs to be grounded in a desire to live peaceably with all.

All of this is easier said than done, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to go to a deeper place and "take thought for what is noble in the sight of all," as Paul says.

Jeremiah channels God's plea to us: "If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth."

The psalmist shows us the *posture* we are to take, **praying to God: "Test me, O LORD, and try me; examine my heart and my mind."**

As we proceed through these months ahead, I beg us to keep these thoughts foremost in our minds as we engage in political action and as we construct, participate in, add to, and pass on the narratives sweeping across social media. Let God "examine your heart and mind and test you" before you post. Try to "utter what is precious" and not sink into all that is "worthless." Don't make the other who holds a different perspective into your enemy. We don't get to opt out, remember, Jeremiah, the psalmist, Paul, and Jesus all call us to engage passionately and fervently with the world, but how we engage matters.

And taking this path won't be easy; Jesus is super, super clear about that. To follow him is the way of suffering. Following him means denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him straight into Jerusalem, that *very place* where all these complex forces and powers are competing. It means following him into places of tremendous suffering and setting our minds on divine things not on human things. It means being willing to lose our life, release our small minds and all our less-than-honorable strivings, trusting that as we let all that go, we will find the only life that matters, the life that is hidden with Christ in God [Colossians 3:3], life that is abundant and spacious and generous and merciful and courageous beyond measure, the life that comes to us when we die to our old self and step into the bigger self that Christ offers us.

For the last few weeks, the wise Franciscan teacher, Richard Rohr, has been working through the pattern that frames all of spiritual life, a pattern he names *Order-Disorder-Reorder*. In Christian terms, he says that this is the pattern of *Life-Crucifixion-Resurrection*.

In one meditation, he says this: *"Every religion in its own way is talking about getting us to the reorder stage...It is the life on the other side of death, the victory on the other side of failure, the joy on the other side of birthing pains. It is an insistence on going through—not under, over, or around. There is no nonstop flight to reorder. To arrive there, we must endure, learn from, and include the Disorder stage, transcending the first naïve Order—but also still including it! It amounts to the best of the conservative and the best of the liberal positions. People who have reached this stage, like the Jewish prophets, might be called "radical traditionalists." They love their truth and their group enough to critique it; and they critique it enough to maintain their own integrity and intelligence. These wise ones have stopped overreacting but also over defending. They are usually a minority of humans."*

Rohr continues: *"Based on years of spiritual direction, I have observed that conservatives must let go of their illusion that they can order and control the world through religion, money, war, or politics. True release of control to God will show itself as compassion and generosity, and less boundary keeping. Liberals, however, must surrender their skepticism of leadership, eldering, or authority, and find what is good, healthy, and deeply true about a foundational order. This will normally be experienced as a move toward humility and real community."*

We need to hold this wisdom close in these times, *especially in the months ahead*. No matter where we stand, we ALL have work to do. To follow Jesus is to die, *though WHAT we each need to die to will DIFFER*. Only God knows what we will look like *on the other side of the cross* that is ours to bear, but THIS is the LIFE to which we are called, and THIS is the LIFE that God wants us to discover.

This is the **peace we discover** when we **step away to places of refreshment** and **step into our lonely places to make meaning of the crosses we bear**. And, this is the **peace that sustains us** when we **return and re-engage a world that feels so broken**. This is the **peace that passes all understanding**, the **peace that goes deeper**, the **peace that is strong enough to stand in all these tragic gaps and do the hard work of repairing the breach and tending the wounds and healing what longs to be made whole**.

There is no question that **we are walking the way of the cross**.

Keep walking, keep following, keep releasing, keep hoping, keep trusting, keep on going deeper—all this **Disorder** will **NOT** be our new normal. **Something new is being born**. Resurrection life will **NOT** be denied—that **tomb of death** couldn't deny it **2,000 years ago**, and it won't be denied now. **Dying and rising** is never easy, but it **sure beats the fear, despair, and cynicism** being offered to us as alternatives. **Choose the way of the cross** and know that, *on the other side*, though *not yet in our sight*, resurrection will be waiting to greet us, full of life and possibility as we, and the world, are made new. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC via zoom
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