

Sermon

The last two weeks or so have been a bit of a crash course for me in what it means to serve a community as a pastor.

On the one hand, my heart and my eyes have been glued to the rapidly developing protests, from Minneapolis to Louisville, from LA to Boston, and--closest of all to my heart--protests in Toronto, Ontario and Jacksonville, Florida. I know many people have been distressed as protesters have clashed with police, but I have to say, more than any other feeling, I have felt a great upsurge of hope, a tremendous inrush of faith: something is changing in this world. In a year already filled with the revelations of a global pandemic, we are witnessing the largest rebellion of citizens against the state in modern American history. It is obvious that the people have had quite enough of the status quo: quite enough of police brutality and systemic racism, quite enough of joblessness and poverty, quite enough of out-of-control inequality and

the profound imbalance of power baked into our political and economic system. This a great blessing. God has sent oxygen to the flame we carry within us. When George Floyd cried out that he couldn't breathe, God, it seems to me, had also had quite enough, and now sends new breath, new life. In the season of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit has come to baptize us all.

On the other hand, I was asked this past week to join a family that had lost a loved one, to walk with them in their time of terrible grief. A big, warm family, who welcomed me into their tenderest moments, sharing with me everything they knew and cherished about a man I had never gotten to meet, placing an enormous amount of trust in me to do right by a person they loved so completely. Even as I have been caught up in this clarifying moment, my pastoral responsibilities actually had me reading about this particular man who had passed, about his landing on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day in 1944; about teaching his

grandchildren to fish, about the way his gruff exterior seemed to soften as he devoted himself to five beautiful *great*-grandchildren.

So, there I was, on the one hand, staying up too late watching live footage of protests in Seattle and Portland, and then, on the other hand, waking up too early to dwell on the way one person had been shaped by the Great Depression, by the Second World War, by the transformation of Ashfield from a rural community filled with family farms, to something new, something still coming into form.

And then on Friday, we got the news of Bob Bates' passing. This hit me hard. Bob was the man who I shared the pulpit with on my candidating weekend. His hearty laugh, his generous, gleaming smile, the way he teased me about being overdressed and still having all my hair...

These are the two hands of ministry. And I share this today because I think the severity of the split between these two hands is familiar to the life we live in a place like Ashfield, in a place like Shelburne Falls, or Amherst or Northampton. These are two distinct needs of our faith--to respond to the demand for police accountability, and to respond to the need for a family's reassurance and comfort. Certainly we are well aware that there is an urgent need to get out there, to demonstrate, to visibly support the people of this country, especially black Americans--especially George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor--who are being persecuted by this society, as Jesus once was. To bridge the split in our lives right now between a movement for black lives that calls us to action on one hand, and a community here in these hilltowns that can feel remote from the struggles of black Americans across the country on the other hand, we need to look very closely and carefully at just what it is that permits racism to persist. If we do that, I think that we will find that the mechanism beneath police brutality in the

inner cities of this country is in turn connected to the mechanism beneath the need for such a large food pantry operation in our rural church. I think we will find that these mechanisms go hand-in-hand.

I *do* believe that we are all connected, that because we are all made in God's image, because we are in a relationship with God, this means we are in a relationship with our brothers and sisters and siblings across the country. But not connected as an ideal, not in the abstract are we related; rather, the relationship between us is material. The meagre public school budgets in Western Mass, now facing the latest round of cutbacks, are connected to the Boston Police's Department military-grade equipment. We must imagine a day--and that day must come very soon--when we are ready to link our demands on behalf of our public schools and underpaid teachers, our demands for the welfare of our farmers, our demands for food for the hungry and homes for the homeless, with the demand for the end of police brutality and systemic

racism. We must begin to imagine how the community we are building here is materially related to the communities being seeded right now in the people's Pentecost Spirit, being seeded right now by their organic protests.

Because if we say Black Lives Matter in order to stand in solidarity with the people risking everything right now, by definition that means we stand in agreement; we stand in unity with them. I don't know how many of you have found some time to watch the on-the-ground footage, but these protesters aren't playing around. Do we speak about our local police the way protesters in Minneapolis are speaking about theirs? I have to say, I don't think we do. I think we as a church generally have a positive relationship with the officers who work in our communities. (I know I can't help but think of the kind officer who pulled me over in Ashfield on my way to church in September). So while we still absolutely can and must say Black Lives Matter—and while we can and

must listen and learn from people of color who are here who may have had very different experiences (they need to feel and trust our support)—still, our own part in this fight will run its course very soon if we do not find further ways to stand in solidarity with the predominantly black working class on the south side of Minneapolis, further ways that *can* be more rooted in the kinds of oppression and marginalization that we *do* have in the communities that we belong to. Because a community that serves all, that guarantees dignity and food to all--that kind of community is beloved by God. And thankfully, because God is a God of relationships and community, when we have built that here, we will have helped build it everywhere.

Alleluia and Amen.