



Grace Makes Us Brave
Third Sunday after Pentecost A 6/21/20, Fathers' Day
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord, take our minds and think through them, take our mouths and speak through them, take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I feel like I'm back in school right now, with everything that is going on around us.

The President's rally in Tulsa has woken me up to the history of the Tulsa massacre of the spring of 1921, which I thought I knew something about.

It turned my stomach and defied my moral imagination to read about what was likely an aerial bombing of the black citizens of Tulsa. Until this week I had not known the full extent of how depraved and craven that tragedy was, and is.

I also knew a little bit about Juneteenth, the name given by Black Americans to the day of liberation of Texas by the Union Army on June 19th, 1865, which began the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery.

But I didn't know just how important this date has become for many African Americans throughout our nation, especially in the South, in essence, an African American, July 4th celebration.

And so, I, like many of you, can get behind this holiday and see it as African Americans down the years have seen it: a joyous lodestar to navigate the continuing struggle for freedom and racial justice in this country.

As a word of encouragement to all of us I say:

God's grace makes it hard to intimidate a Christian.

This is especially true of our Black brothers and sisters in Christ who have endured so much; and because they have endured so much, the Black churches today are at the center of the work of justice and reconciliation in our nation, and continue to invite the White churches into that work, so that there can be one Church, with one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

God's grace has the power to make all of us brave. God's grace helps us stand up in the face of danger. God's grace helps us to get our priorities straight. And by God's grace we can be transformed.

Today's hard Gospel passage and Paul's thoughts on dying to sin lead me to this encouraging conclusion.

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The so-called Missionary Discourse in the Gospel of Matthew gives us a glimpse of Jesus preparing his disciples for the challenging work of taking his message into the world.

He realistically warns them that this work is costly, and yet when done in his name, it leads to life, new life, real life.

Perhaps the hardest part of this Gospel reading for many of us is that Jesus appears to be encouraging the destruction of biologically based kinship networks, or, put plainly, families of origin.

My own take on this hard Gospel passage is that it is descriptive, not prescriptive.

Many early Christian communities certainly would have included those who had left their families to follow Jesus; and so these words described what many of them had in fact already experienced: rejection by family members, because of their own desire to embrace a new way of living in community that cut across all social and racial stratifications.

And for sure, Jesus knew what it meant to be rejected by his own family—elsewhere in the Gospels, you may remember, he openly asks the question, “Who is my brother and my sister?” And of course, his answer: “Whoever does the will of my Father is my sister, my brother.” (Matthew 12.50)

And let me make no bones about it: Jesus uses powerful, figurative language to indicate that following him requires a decision: “I come not to bring peace, but a sword.”

The English word “decision” comes from a Latin root which means “to cut.” When we make a decision, we cut ourselves from *that* course of action, by choosing *this* course of action.

And for Jesus, there is no false peace based on choosing to avoid conflict and practicing niceness; for Jesus, and those of us who seek to follow him, real peace only comes from a willingness to face hard truths and inconvenient facts, letting the chips fall where they may, and justice rise to the top.

Christians are not called to be nice; we are called to be respectful of all persons. It's the grace of Christ that fortifies us to do this work, to be respectful as we make hard choices. Paul, the writer of the epistle this morning, knew about these hard choices. Never one to back down from conflict, Paul knew about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's what caused him to leave everything he ever knew, the privileged life of a well-educated, honorable member of the religious establishment, and to become an itinerant messenger of the loving and liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ, facing hardships of all kinds, and finally, death by execution for refusing to worship Caesar and his values.

Paul also knew about sin, literally “missing the mark” in the Greek, an archery term. Later in this same letter to the Church in Rome, he laments the power of sin in his life:

He writes, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” (7.15-19)

I think we can all relate to this sentiment. All of us have attitudes or habits—sins—that separate us from one another and from God, that we can't seem to break. And Paul testifies to the grace of Jesus Christ as the power to break through sin, once and for all.

Paul reminds us, however, that the bottomless grace of God does not give us permission to keep sinning. “Should we continue to sin, that grace may abound? By no means!” he writes.

God's grace must lead to transformation, that we may no longer be enslaved by sin. We are called to walk in newness of life; however slowly, we must walk.

God's grace makes us brave. God's grace makes us stand up in the face of danger. God's grace helps us get our priorities straight. God's grace transforms us.

Perhaps some of you have heard the story about Peter Norman, the Australian sprinter who came in second in the 200-meter finals at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. He shared the winners' stand with John Carlos and Tommie Smith, African American sprinters who were famously suspended from the team and sent home by the US Olympic Committee for raising their fists to protest racial inequality in the United States. You may know that iconic photograph.

The Australia of Peter Norman had strict apartheid laws, almost as strict as those of South Africa. Norman publicly supported the American athletes by wearing a button on the stand that evening promoting the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Raised a devout Christian in the Salvation Army tradition, Norman believed strongly in God. John Carlos remembers just how well Norman understood that this action was about something much bigger than an athletic event. “I'll stand with you,” Norman said. And John Carlos remembers expecting to see fear in Norman's eyes, but instead seeing love.

After the games, for refusing to condemn the Americans actions, he and his family were shunned. For the rest of his life, he had trouble getting hired; he descended into depression and chronic illness. The American team invited him to be their guest and paid his way to the 2000 Olympics in Sydney; since he refused to apologize for his actions in 1968, the Australian team would not pay his way. When he died suddenly of a heart attack in 2006, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, now his long-time friends, were pall bearers and eulogists. Only in 2012 did the Parliament of his own country finally recognize his courage. <https://www.filmsforaction.org/articles/the-white-man-in-that>



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Let me end with this story from our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry.

While on a pastoral visit, and following a festive banquet, people lined up to get selfies and have a brief word with Bishop Curry. In the line, out of the corner of his eye, Curry could see a very large white man, football-lineman kind of large, wearing overalls, sporting a beard. Bishop Curry confesses to feeling a bit of fear. When this man arrived, he looked down, and straight into Curry's eyes.

And then, and I'm quoting Bp. Curry directly: "I could see tears welling up in his eyes and he said, 'I want to thank you for being here. And I want to thank you for this church.' He was referring to the Episcopal Church... You see, I was born, and I was raised in a family who were active in and high up in the Ku Klux Klan. And I was born, and I was raised in hatred and bigotry for black people, Jews, Catholics. That's how I was raised. And I went off to school and I allied myself with people who agreed with me and shared my views. When I left school, I moved to a small community. On one Sunday morning I went into a little bitty church that had about ten people in it - this little Episcopal Church.' And he said, 'Those folk just took me in.' And he said, 'They actually loved me. Even when I told them who I was, they took me and loved me. They helped me understand who Jesus is. They gave me my life again.' "

https://day1.org/video/5d9b820ef71918cdf2004296/day1_presents_presiding_bishop_michael_curry_we_need_some_witnesses_to_the_way_of_jesus

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How mightily the grace of God makes us brave.

How mightily the grace of God empowers us to die to sin and walk in newness of life.

How mightily the grace of God works in the lives of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Amen.