

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7A
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran, Portland OR
June 21, 2020

I was thinking this week about instruction manuals. Here at home we have file folders full of manuals, for the dishwasher, stove, refrigerator, leaf blower, dehumidifier, what have you. The main reason we keep them is just in case something goes wrong. When the fridge starts leaking water onto the kitchen floor, the manual can help us troubleshoot. If something breaks down before its time, we might be able to get a replacement or repair.

When your child starts a new school, there's always a parent handbook to read. And one thing that's always included is emergency procedures, what to do in case trouble comes.

When we prepare to have surgery we receive all kinds of instructions, including warnings about the possible dangers of the procedure. We must sign our name to say we've been fully informed of the risks.

Matthew Chapter 10 is a kind of instruction manual for missionaries who are sent out in Jesus' name. When Jesus gave the disciples power to cast out demons and heal sickness, he also gave them realistic warnings. Because whenever you try to do something new, even in God's name, you can expect to face opposition – often from those who are closest to you. Jesus was clear on the risks, but also clear on God's promises: *Don't be afraid*. You will never be alone. *Have no fear*, for God sees you, God cares tenderly for you, God ultimately guards your life and gives you what you need to see things through.

Early Christians endured punishment and even death when they refused to worship Caesar. In the year 2020, we might think we're past all that. Today, Christian values are supposedly aligned with the American way. But are they really? What cost will there be for today's disciples when we challenge the way things have always been? When we press for change that is more faithful to seeing each other the way Jesus sees us, every one as a beloved child of God?

These days the quest for justice is progressing so rapidly it has our heads spinning. This week the Supreme Court handed down a surprise judgment protecting the employment rights of gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Thanks be to God! These children of God can no longer be fired for living out the identity God gave them.

Another surprise Supreme Court verdict has protected the security of undocumented young people known as Dreamers. Brought to this country as children, they have been

facing the threat of deportation from the nation where they've built lives and contributed to the common good. A collective sigh of relief is rising from these families, at least for now.

And the press for racial justice continues. "Black Lives Matter" protests have filled the streets for over three weeks. Around the world statues are being torn down to assert that some heroes named by history are not so heroic after all. Here in Portland, the statue of slaveowner Thomas Jefferson was toppled at the high school where 60 percent of students are African American—recognizing that our nation's founding documents actually excluded the basic human rights of slaves. People of color are grieving aloud for the violence that's been done to them over centuries, and white people of privilege (like many of us) are scrambling to catch up. Books like "How to Be an Anti-Racist" by Ibram Kendi are sold out. People are learning about Juneteenth, the holiday celebrating the end of slavery. This past Wednesday our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America observed a long-planned day of lament and repentance for racism, honoring the nine Black Christians killed at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina five years ago.

Do we dare to hope this awakening will bring real change? Could this be like the #metoo movement, which radically shifted society's attitude toward sexual abuse, and made our whole society say, "No more!" ?

Rutha Mae Harris was a Freedom Singer who encouraged Black voters in the 1960's, and she sees something important and different happening today. Mrs. Harris says, *"When you see the [police] kneeling, I just love that. And there are a lot of young white people. I've never seen that. We had some white people [with us back then], but not as many. It is a surprise, and it gives me hope."*

Others warn that demonstrations aren't enough on their own. Bob Moses, who worked in 1960's voter registration drives, says *"It is revelatory that the pressure now is coming from within. It's been sparked by [the killing of George Floyd] -- but the event really has opened up a crevasse, so to speak, through which all this history is pouring through, like the Mississippi River onto the Delta. It's pouring into all the streams of TV, cable news, social media. So that is quite different. And the question is, can the country handle it?"* (NYTimes 6/17/20, *7 Lessons (and Warnings) from Those Who Marched with Dr. King*)

That is the challenge—and we all have something to do with the outcome. Scripture warns: when you do a new thing, you can expect to face opposition. The new life God is bringing for this world won't arrive without the labor pains that are part of any new birth.

We white people want to fix things. That's our naïve instinct. But there can be no quick fix for systems of injustice that have taken centuries to put in place. Police brutality will not end overnight. Cities and states that press for reform are already encountering opposition. If we want to be true allies for racial justice, we must commit to joining this struggle for the long haul. And must be willing to pay a personal cost, just as Jesus warns all those who go out representing him.

It's happening already, in churches. Pastors moved by the awakening have begun preaching about racism, some for the first time ever, and the backlash is real. In some areas, members have quit. Some Councils are asking whether their congregation should leave "the liberal ELCA."

It's happening in families. I was told this week about a family that got together to help move a relative from one house to another. When evening came and the alcohol began to flow, somebody started making what he considered jokes about the protests, how an AK-47 could solve that little problem. One young man wasn't entertained – in fact he was so outraged, he decided to leave. It hurt when the cousins jeered at him for spoiling a night of fun, but he made the decision to set his boundaries and not back down on his values. He's made a plan for how to respond the next time, too. Even if he's mocked and called names like the "good times police," he'll refuse to tolerate racist talk. He'll spend the night in a motel if he has to.

Opposition is to be expected whenever people work to right old wrongs and create something new. But Jesus says, *Don't be afraid. Take courage. Let me be the source of your inspiration and resilience. This is all part of bringing the reign of God. I see what you're doing, and I will give you power to keep it up.*

The struggle has an inward dimension too, and it's very dangerous. A friend of ours confessed recently that, as excited as he has been about Black Lives Matter, as much as he believes in it, he's also getting really tired, and he almost doesn't want to deal with it anymore. My friend had the insight to admit that "getting tired of dealing with racism" reflects his privilege as a white man. The very idea that for him it could be optional whether to keep on fully investing his energy and keep on striving so that all God's children can have what they need.

We have to be wary, people of God. Because this is how racism works. Racism is our society's default mode. When white people get weary of doing what is right, we default to the old ways that make sure we get ourselves taken care of, while we ignore and discount what others suffer. Even when people of color are dying in the streets, literally, and dying in hospitals in great numbers, because of this virus and unequal health care.

It's been said the heartbeat of racism is denial. Denying the pain of others. Ignoring even deaths, these unjust and unnecessary deaths. But scripture says, *Do not be weary in well-doing, people of God. Always keep pressing on toward the high calling that is ours in Christ Jesus.*

Today, we are called to keep on uncovering the truth about how racism deceives all of us and injures the children of God. We're called to keep our eyes open, keep our hearts open, keep our hands open, keep that door open no matter what. We're called to learn as much as we can, become as self-aware as possible, and stay in the struggle. Live fully in this moment of pain and possibility for the whole human family -- and be ready for how to use the power we have, for justice.

Our reading from Romans is a beautiful way to close today. St. Paul declares that in baptism we are dead to sin and made alive in Jesus Christ. In baptism the old way of life is put to an end, and Christ sets us free to live a new life, a resurrection life.

This is finally what God is up to with the human family, and what God is up to at this moment in history-- helping us die to what is destructive and hateful and death-dealing. Raising humanity up out of grief and hurt and pain and denial, raising us to a new way of life that is greater than anything we can yet see. So, people of God, we do not grow weary. We stay open to resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.