

“The Fears That Summon Us”

Rev. David Gregory

June 7, 2020

Pentecost 1



First reading

2 Corinthians 13:11-12.

from the *J.B. Phillips New Testament*

Last of all then, my sisters and brothers, set your hearts on this maturity I have spoken of, consider my advice, live in harmony, be at peace with one another. So shall the God of love and peace be ever with you.

Second reading

Dr. Walter Brueggemann, in a blog post *Racism in America* published by churchanew.org.

The community in the love business might well pause over fear, name it, pay attention to it, notice it, and dissect it. We might do well to have prayers and litanies that name, in dramatic ways, the fears that summon us and notice their power for us. It is our work in love to outflank fear by greater evidence of love, by outrageous gestures and policies of love, by foolish giveaways of life’s resources with nothing held back. Love is “the great giveaway” that can be acted out in terms of health, wellbeing, education, and housing. We are in a contest between love and fear.

In this time of social upheaval, with huge blocks of information coming at us every day, all day, from all directions, we can easily become emotionally and energetically depleted. Emotions are running high, and the flood of images showing racially biased force and brutality can be hard to take in. Explaining these images to our children and grandchildren can be even more difficult. Here at the Community Congregational Church in Tiburon, California, our desire is to help you step aside for a few moments each week, while we provide an experience designed to help you stop and reflect on who you really are in this crazy world, to ponder what really matters to you, and receive some energy that might help you go on. You might think of us as a gas station for the soul, somewhere that you can stop and fill up, clean the windshield, and check under the hood before heading back out into the harsh realities that form our current cultural highway. And this fueling center isn’t just open one day a week. We host a number of regular gatherings, including discussion and prayer times, a brief weekly communion service, and a variety of contemplative practices, yoga programs, and social justice actions, many of them delivered by way of video and Zoom conferencing. If you would like to receive linked invitations to these online offerings, all you need to do is visit cctiburon.org and subscribe to our email list. You’ll easily find the link to do that on our home page.

Our virtual community is growing, and one thing that has become very clear to us is that when we reach a time when the current pandemic is less threatening, we will never go back to the four walls of our church building without the rest of you. Our online offerings will continue and increase. So we hope that you'll keep hanging out with us, and also share us with your friends.

It is impossible to talk to you today without acknowledging the unprecedented crowds of people gathering in our nation's capital and other places throughout our country and beyond—people of all races and ethnicities, of many traditions and backgrounds all united around one simple truth, that black lives matter. One of the most important photographs that came to my attention this week is one that I have posted on my Facebook page. It shows a young girl, an African-American child who appears to be maybe six or seven years old. With a big smile on her face, she holds up a sign that's nearly as big as she is, and it reads:

We said "Black lives matter." We NEVER said "only black lives matter." We know that all lives matter. We just need your help with "black lives matter" because black lives are in danger.

Of everything I've seen expressed in the world over the last ten days, this statement, held in the hands of a child, deserves more than just our eyes and ears this morning. It deserves our commitment to help her in any way we can.

I know that many of you are expressing that commitment each and every day by taking action, writing letters, taking part in public demonstrations. You're reading, you're talking, you're writing, you're using the full power of media and communications to spread clear and truthful information from reliable sources. I am proud to be part of such a community. We know that this situation has moved far beyond anything that could be called politics, and has entered the realm of what is morally imperative. Silence is no longer an option. Our common humanity requires us to do all that we can from where we are with what we have. The George Floyds of this world, along with their families, deserve our attention, our energy and our focus, and we cannot give up, not until real and lasting change happens, not until the inherent dignity and equal worth of every human being is held not only as our law, but as our practice.

As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has so eloquently said, it is time for us to name the one single thread of human emotion which is at the core of this struggle. That emotion is fear. Let's be clear: fear has its rightful place in the catalogue of human emotions. The "fight or flight" response, in evolutionary terms, is necessary for our survival. There are certain threats to our existence that ought to be feared, but fearing the loss of one's power or domination over another is not a valid one. Fearing the loss of one's life at the hands of racially biased and bigoted police and/or civilians—that is a valid one.

The very founders of our nation whose flaws and omissions have left room for racial bias and injustice, nonetheless put their names to a piece of paper that said that we have all been created equal, and that we also have inherent rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Those inherent rights extend far beyond the "all men" who are mentioned in the founding documents. They extend to women; they extend to those who are differently abled; they belong also to sexual minorities. They are the rights of people of every spiritual and faith tradition, every ethnic and racial background, and as hard as it is to hear, to every political persuasion.

It was in an early letter to the churches of Galatia, attributed to Paul the Apostle, that the idea of human equality was elevated and heightened in the early church, and modeled after the words and practices of Jesus. "There is neither Jew nor Gentile," the letter states. "There is neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." So the ideal of human equality is deeply ingrained in the Christian tradition, just as it is in every other major tradition. There have been many attempts to thwart it, and we're living through one of those attempts right now. You cannot stand on sacred ground and hold up a sacred book in an attempt to dominate and threaten the rights of others. The sacred book itself decries such a thing, and as a Christian minister I am honor-bound to say so.

I will say honestly that I am summoned here today by my own fears. I fear for my country, I fear for my church, I fear for my family, and I fear for all people of color. These are rational fears, given the current climate. But the really good news is that they can be outflanked by love. It is the first epistle of John that reminds us that "there is no fear in love; love, when it is complete casts out all fear." In the contest between love and fear, love wins. It might be difficult right now to sift through all that is happening in order to find evidence of that, but if you take a long look at that little girl holding the sign, and place a hand over your heart center, I think this will be all the evidence you need.

