

“Led by the Spirit”

Galatians 5:19-26

Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2020

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts

It's been nearly two weeks since Memorial Day, when the murder of a black man by municipal police in Minneapolis, Minnesota touched off a firestorm of protest that has engulfed our nation and the world beyond. The sheer volume of these demonstrations, affecting dozens of cities and towns across our land, has not been seen since the Civil Rights marches of the 1960's.

The protesters have been chanting one name: George Floyd, as if the injustice of his death alone were enough to spark these protests. But there is far more to this than that. There have been other names—too many names—names like Trayvon Martin, Rodney King and Emmet Till—which have produced the same outcry, and more. But this man's name: George Floyd, has set off a conflagration of national protest not seen since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself. That took place 52 years ago, when I was 13 years old. What has taken place over the past two weeks underscores the inescapable truth that black lives must matter; that none of us will live as free people in America until all of us do.

Racism has been described as America's "original sin," the direct result of the largest implementation of human slavery in world history. But this racism has an even longer pedigree: going back to the Rise of the West, to Crusaders and Conquistadors, the Age of Colonialization, and the unholy marriage of White Supremacy to the Protestant Church. Those historical events are largely over, but the stain survives in the systemic racism America must recognize and resist today. Abraham Lincoln wrote in 1859, "Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and, under a just God, cannot long retain it." The march for justice continues.

Our text from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia is all about freedom: our freedom in Christ. At the beginning of Chapter Five, Paul states, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The slavery he was speaking of was servitude to the laws of Judaism in a vain attempt to become righteous. Jesus changed all that, by carrying our sins to his Cross—and not ours alone, but the sins of the whole world. Christ became our righteousness, a gift of inexpressible grace which is unwrapped in you and me by our response of faith. "If you love me, obey my commandments," Jesus said in the 14th Chapter of the Gospel of John, "and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. This is the Holy

Spirit, who leads you into truth.” As he said earlier in John’s Gospel, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth, the means of God’s creative power. In the beginning of Genesis, the Spirit “broods” over the waters of Chaos, and when God said, “Let there be light,” the Holy Spirit made it so. That same creative power is still at work in the world today. In Psalm 104, the Psalmist sings, “You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; you renew the face of the earth” (Ps. 104:30).

The power of the Holy Spirit also renews us, as King David knew well. In Psalm 51, he prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” The full realization of that prayer takes place when we become new creations in Christ.

So what does this have to do with what Paul is saying to the Galatian churches, when he sets forth a list of human sins that captures each and every one of us, telling us we cannot inherit God’s Kingdom while doing them? The list of those sins comprises the opposite of freedom, because the freedom the Gospel celebrates is the freedom to serve. And the key to such serving lies in the content and character of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity, whose prevailing work is the work of creation, renewal and revelation of the truth. Through the work of the Spirit we are born—and born again. It is the Spirit which gives birth to the Church. In Galatians 5:22 we are shown nine attributes of the Holy Spirit; enduring virtues which are meant to bear fruit in each of us. Beginning with Love, the greatest fruit of the Spirit, these spiritual gifts continue, including joy and peace; patience, kindness and generosity; faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These spiritual gifts cannot be separated from the love of God for us in and through his Son. They are meant for us and for all, and they are exactly what Jesus meant when he told his followers he would send us the Spirit to lead us to the truth. What are these nine virtues? They represent the inward condition of every human being that God originally planned for us. So what happened? In our pride and folly, we chose to reject God’s kingship, and embrace the false freedom to sin. Chief among these is the sin of racism, which, as Nelson Mandela told us, is a sin which must be learned.

Over the past two weeks, God has held a mirror before us, and caused us to look on “the good, the bad, and the ugly” taking place in our midst. For many, the experience has opened our eyes. For others, our eyes have remained firmly shut. What do you see? Some may see only the reflection of their own prejudice, but when we have the humility to ask, “Come, Holy Spirit” and the tiniest trust to think that things like patience, kindness and generosity can ripen and blossom in us—where do you think that will lead?

-to the truth that God is love?

-to the hope for a kinder, gentler nation?

-to a dream of justice: a justice achieved through the content of our character, rather than abused through the color of our skin, as Dr. King once dreamed?

It all begins when we understand that these fruits of the Spirit-- our kindness, our gentleness, our patience and our self-control—not only can, but will, lead us into freedom, which means loving our neighbor as we wish to be loved ourselves.

There's an old hymn written by an old church organist (not you, Barry!) named Samuel Sebastian Wesley, the grandson of Charles Wesley himself. It's entitled "Lead Me On," and it reminds me that we've all been invited to nail that list of sins to the Cross of Christ, and receive these heavenly gifts by faith, in order that we might be led by the Spirit into what God intended for us all along: life together, where every child of God—white, black or brown—will be cherished, and safeguarded, and free.

"Lead me on, lead me in thy righteousness,

Make thy way plain before my face.

For it is thou, Lord, thou only,

That makes me dwell in safety."

Amen.