

Fair warning! This is much more a reflection piece than a devotional. And so I issue an apology to all of the following:

- those who really needed a devotional today;
- those who wish I would steer clear of controversial topics especially when they involve race, politics, or both and;
- those who wish I would have spoken out sooner. I needed some time to think.

I'll remind you that we are all processing the events of the past couple of weeks differently. It's important that we respect each person's journey. This is simply where I am in this particular moment in time, and my honest effort to share something with you both from a personal and pastoral perspective based on my own experience, that I hope is helpful.

So let me begin by saying that I know I've been silent. It seemed more prudent that I listen more and speak less. One more white (male) voice projected into the already crowded public square was not all that necessary. And so I listened. Mostly to people of color who offered a variety of perspectives, and were rightly angered, disappointed, outraged, and just sick and tired of being sick and tired. Four hundred years is a long time to put up with a knee on their necks, their breathing choked off, jailed for crimes they didn't commit, pulled over for DWB, and watching their loved ones beaten and sometimes murdered in the streets by the very people who are supposed to keep us all safe. All for no other reason than the color of their skin. What right did I have to speak about that?

Instead, I forced myself to painfully remember the messages I had received when I was growing up in my lily white, working class, west side Cleveland neighborhood. Black people are to be feared. Black people are inferior. Black people cannot be trusted. Black people are violent. Black people are stupid and lazy. Keep your mouth shut in school. Don't say anything that might make a black student angry. Lock your doors when you drive through certain areas of town. The warning to "never bring a colored girl into this house." I heard every conceivable racial epithet you can imagine, and they were applied liberally to the people we now regard as heroes and standard bearers of the civil rights movement.

The process of unlearning what amounted to a methodical indoctrination by family members, classmates, neighbors and yes, even people in my home congregation is still ongoing. It takes hard work that is intentional and persistent. It's often uncomfortable and disturbing, but absolutely necessary if I am ever going to make any progress. Even though I think I have moved forward there still remains a little voice in the back of my mind whispering something that I heard once or read once or saw once that makes me second guess the "enlightened" perspective and "refined" understanding I sometimes arrogantly think I have obtained.

Nobody needs me to say that the killing of George Floyd by four white police officers is immoral. Nobody needs me to point out that the killing of Ahmaud Arbery by two white men in a pick-up truck is nothing more than a modern day lynching. Nobody needs me to call out the names of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray. Their names have been invoked many times over because what happened to them is just an extension of what has been going on in this country since its inception.

So what do we need? Well, strong, courageous, consistent leadership for one. We need intelligent, open-minded, articulate, even-handed, empathetic leadership that is willing to listen and learn. We need leadership that will not fan the flames of violence. We need leadership that unites rather than

divides, leadership that has the capacity to lift people up rather than tear them down, and leadership that believes diversity is a gift to be cherished rather than a bogeyman that evokes fear.

We need honest, robust conversation. We need white people to be quiet and listen as people of color tell their stories. We need to ask disconcerting questions and trust that answers will be validated with respect and dignity. Posting well-intentioned memes of quotes from Dr. King or pictures that distinguish peaceful protesting from rioting are nice and all, but they don't really serve to move the conversation forward. They just hang there as a solitary moment in time. There must be genuine, in-person, face-to-face interaction. We need these conversations to happen not just at the top levels of government, but in our places of worship, in our schools, in police stations, in corner bars and coffee shops, and around our dinner tables. We all have grand aspirations of a just society, and that's a lovely vision, but it won't become a reality until we give ourselves over to the hard work of sitting down with someone who is different from us and talking about issues that really matter. And, because change won't happen with a mere waving of a magic wand, we must commit to being in it for the long haul.

And, for those of us who claim to follow Jesus, we should realize that we owe him more than just lip service. Everything he said about justice for the oppressed, and loving the neighbor, and the only way to abundant life is to die to sin and self-centeredness, and giving up one's life for the sake of another, and that his death and resurrection was for the salvation of all people, he actually meant every single one of those things. You've heard me say a million times that following Jesus is difficult, and that it's not for the faint of heart. I can't think of a more appropriate time where that would apply than right now.

Perhaps more than ever before, now is the time for each of us to find the best way to be a living, breathing disciple of Jesus Christ, to stand up for what he taught, to embrace the life he has called us into through our baptism, to take up the cross, and trust that God's love has the power to transform the world.

May God's peace be with you.

Pastor Chuck

Let us pray. Have mercy upon us, Lord God. Forgive us for the times we have not listened to our neighbor. Help us to be quiet when we need to be, so that we can hear the cries of our brothers and sisters who are in pain. Guide us in the hard work of overcoming our fear and prejudice. Grant us grace to be faithful disciples, and may your Holy Spirit be at work in the world to reconcile our brokenness. Amen