

May 30, 2020

My friends,

At times like this, I have an internal struggle over knowing that words need to be said while, at the same time, knowing there are no words that are adequate.

How can I respond to yet one more example of hatred, objectification, oppression, privilege, supremacy...things that have been happening for generations but privileged communities are only becoming more aware of now because they're being caught on video?

How much longer, O God? When will your people have ears to hear?

I don't feel that I have the words. And yet, I must. For those of us who can must speak out. Those of us who are in leadership must lead. Those of us who have the ability to influence must influence.

I find hope in this quotation from Howard Thurman:

"Two kinds of ideals are always at work in the lives of [people]. There are those ideals that are ultimate and in a very real sense always far out beyond anything that can be achieved. Or as one person puts it, they are like far-off lighthouses whose glow is far away in the distance. They belong to the realm of the absolute and are never marred by the soreness of the surroundings in which [people] work and struggle. . . . They are very important in the life of the race because they keep alive a perennial hope that the best may yet sometime come to be in fact what it is in fancy.

There are also those ideals that seem to be created out of the stubborn realities, in the midst of which [people] work and live. They belong essentially to the stuff of life, the very raw materials of experience. . . . Always they are close at hand, a part of the immediate possibility, always being achieved but never quite fully achieved. . . . Their chief characteristic is that they belong. . . . It is well within the range of possibility that these two kinds of ideals will in time prove to be of one piece." (Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1999, 34-35. Gender-inclusive language mine.)

We talk about beloved community, and yet it's still a far-off ideal. But we can't just leave it there, shrugging our shoulders and walking away. No. Thurman says there are ideals that are "created out of the stubborn realities." How can we be at work together, to bring into *fact* what is currently in *fancy*? How can we merge the ideal of the glow from the far-off lighthouse with the ideal in the stubborn reality?

I don't know the answers. But here's what I do know.

ABC Rochester/Genesee Region, especially in moments like these, is called to live into its deep legacy of social justice. Although we are now spread throughout the country, our region has its roots planted firmly in the soil of the city of Frederick Douglass, Helen Barrett Montgomery, Walter Rauschenbusch, Susan B. Anthony...and so many others. We became immersed in the heritage of Martin Luther King, Jr., when Crozer Theological Seminary merged to become part of what is now Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. So many women and men who fought oppression, who sacrificed for justice, who used word and deed as they sought the ideal of God's realm here on earth...this is who we are. This is who we have been, and this is who we need to be right now, for our neighbors, our sons, our daughters, our mothers and fathers, those we know and those we don't know.

We are the ABC Rochester/Genesee Region, and we have the words "Reconciliation" and "Justice" right in our logo. May these words be our call to action!

I was reminded yesterday of a Hebrew Scripture that never fails to move me. I'm only going to quote two lines from Isaiah 58, but I'd encourage you to pray over the whole chapter.

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (v6)

and

"You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." (v 12b)

Our anger, our pain, our frustration, our fear...it needs to be turned to loosening the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke. We are to be repairers of the breach, and restorers of streets to live in.

Let us not just wring our hands in despair but, rather, get ourselves connected with legal systems, community organizations, and networks of people working for the betterment of all. Let us dig our toes into the fertile soil of our heritage as we continue the work done by our forebears generations ago towards equity. The real work isn't always caught on TV, nor is it even always public. And we're certainly not going to get instant gratification. It doesn't take a few days but, rather, a few years. It's painstaking. It can be *painful*. But remember Thurman's words about the ideal that is created out of stubborn realities. That moment when you look around yourself and realize that right there, in that moment, you're experiencing beloved community in its wholeness? That is true worship.

These are conversations we need to continue to have as a region, and I give you my word that we will continue to have them. Together, we wield more influence than each of us does alone. We'll be engaging in the painstaking and sometimes painful conversations we need to have together, in all our diversity as a region, to discern how God is guiding us to move forward.

May we truly be repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in.

Amen, and amen.

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