

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – June 7, 2020 – In Order Matthew 28:16-20 and 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

On May 25, 2020, a white police officer in Minneapolis killed an unarmed African-American man named George Floyd during a routine arrest. When video of Floyd’s final words, actions, and subsequent death emerged, nationwide protests, riots, and looting followed. An independent autopsy revealed that Floyd died of homicide by means of asphyxiation, triggering criminal charges for each of the four officers involved.

From coast to coast, people of every race have expressed their anger in both constructive and destructive ways. Many have exercised their right to protest and to demonstrate peacefully in the streets. Sadly, others have resorted to vandalism, theft, and violence. Our country is hurting.

I believe that at the heart of the current crisis is the matter of compassion. There is a desire to be heard, to be treated fairly, and to live in peace. Collectively, we are being invited to enter into the pain and needs of others and to value “others as they are.”¹ Engaging in that process is an expression of self-giving love. For

¹Post, Stephen G., Lynn G. Underwood, Jeffrey P. Schloss, and William B. Hurlbut. *Altruism and Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Dialogue*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Pg. 86.

“Insofar as one assumes that God loves my neighbor as much as [God] loves me, it stands to reason that God would want my neighbor to be treated as well as I am treated.”² Such an ethic is foundational to the process of discipleship, “in which the needs of others gradually become as important as one’s own.”³

At a fundamental level, “Being with Jesus suggests companionship with Jesus, sharing in his success and failure, his acceptance and rejection; it entails identifying with and being shaped by Jesus’ own life and mission.” This is why “Congregations are to be characterized by relationships of mutual care and service, which build up the body.”⁴ As disciples of Jesus Christ, self-concern is not our deepest need. Rather, we will find ourselves as we lose ourselves in caring for others.⁵

The gospels offer many examples of Jesus as being “‘moved with compassion’ when he encountered people’s pain. From within the core of his humanity, he experienced a visceral reaction to suffering, abuse, abandonment, dehumanization, oppression, and injustice. This feeling was so intense, it drove

² Christopher M. Hays. *Renouncing Everything: Money and Discipleship in Luke*. New York: Paulist Press, 2016. Pg. 27.

³ Osmer, Richard R. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008. Pg. 195.

⁴ Osmer. Pg. 189.

⁵ Osmer. Pg. 195.

him to come into the pain.”⁶ And now, we recognize that same, visceral reaction in the pleas of protestors who fill the streets following the death of George Floyd and in the weary eyes of his family members.

A movement is now emerging in which individuals and communities seek to stand in solidarity with their neighbors. From a Christian perspective, “Whatever it means to be sent with compassion into a cruel world, it has never implied a call to personal comfort. It is difficult. Testing. Challenging.”⁷ And “When compassion sends you outside your comfort zone, it will plop you down in a disorienting position.”⁸

2020 could easily be described as the year of disorientation. The COVID-19 global pandemic has changed everything. We are now collectively questing for health, safety, wellness, economic stability, and personal relationship in ways that we had not imagined before. Many of us are learning new skills, learning to do things differently, and learning to cope with changes that have demonstrated our ability to persevere and adapt to the new circumstances of our lives.

⁶ Taylor, Gregg L. *Here, Now, With You: Six Movements of Compassion for Life and Leadership*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019. Pg. 29.

⁷ Taylor. Pg. 42.

⁸ Taylor. Pg. 43.

As schools, churches, and businesses suspended in person activities, social distancing policies left many struggling in isolation. This was especially true for those living in retirement homes, where outbreaks of infection have been particularly acute. Increasingly, those employees with the ability and permission to do so are working remotely, as millions of families seek to juggle both professional and personal responsibilities from home. Many of our neighbors, and perhaps even we, ourselves, are sad, angry, depressed, and lonely.

Yet, while some have argued that the present pandemic is the great equalizer, it has not affected all communities equally. In fact, some have borne the burdens disproportionately. Early reports suggest that African-Americans, along with other people of color, have faced greater hardships in the current crisis. There are a greater proportion of African-Americans in service professions, for example, relative to the population as a whole.

These positions often pay lower wages, and involve increased numbers of interactions with customers or co-workers. When considered essential to the functioning of our society, there is often less flexibility to work from home. This leaves people of color repeatedly exposed to possible infection through close contact with others in professional settings.

Generally speaking, members of the Black community also have less money in savings, more pre-existing health conditions, and less access to healthcare, making them more susceptible to infection and less able to maintain their existing standard of living and quality of life in the sudden absence of work, as so many are now experiencing. So too, African-Americans are coping with the additional stress associated with the deaths of unarmed Black men in city streets.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we profess that “God is the antidote to the temptation among some to turn to the world’s wealth or to violence in times of need.”⁹ In the end, the Gospel “cannot be adequately summed up by appeals that we should love our neighbor as ourselves but is meant to transform us by teaching us to be God’s peaceable people.”¹⁰ Yes. “The world has always been violent,” notes one scholar, “but when our own civilization seems to lack the means to secure peace within itself we seem hopelessly lost.”¹¹ Indeed, there is a “tragic gap between the world in which we stand and the kingdom to which we would witness.”¹²

⁹ Joel B. Green. *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011, Pg. 31-32.

¹⁰ Hauerwas, Stanley. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002. Pg. 60.

¹¹ Hauerwas. Pg. 6.

¹² Hauerwas. Pg. x.

Finally, how we choose to respond to this tragic gap has much to do with our willingness to act with compassion and with justice. Together, let us endeavor to put things in order, not by violent means, but with the heart and mind of Christ in whose eyes we are each called beloved children of God. May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.