

Sermon June 21, 2020
Father's Day
Pastor Michael Linderman
Redeemer, Ramsey

Grace mercy and peace from God and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Dear members and friends of Redeemer, I want to thank you all for your gracious concern for me and my family over the last several weeks. Over the course of my mother's illness, her struggle with cancer, and her death, you have all been such a wonderful source of comfort and support to me, to her, and to my family as a whole. I am forever grateful for this grace you have shown to us, and I'm in your debt. I want to thank the members of Redeemer's church council for their concern for me, and the extra support they have given me so that I could take care of my mother and provide for her in her final days. Also, I am grateful to have been able to step away from my pastor duties for the past two Sundays, as my family and I have begun the grieving process and have started to address my mother's personal affairs. I am particularly thankful for Redeemer's staff, Diane McGregor, Fran Morton and Steffanie Doyle, for their support, and together with Jenn Hommez, for continuing to provide for our church community a high quality online worship experience, so that the ministry of this congregation might continue unabated while I needed to step away.

Ove the past two weeks, I have received many phone calls, cards, meals and other expressions of sympathy from you all, and all of these have left a deep impression on me. I have been moved by this outpouring of sympathy to reflect on how we are called to sympathy by the path of Christian discipleship, and how that outpouring of sympathy that we extend within a family is meant to be extended outward to the people of the world around us. During this Sunday's service and next week's service, we have planned a tribute and special blessing for specific people in our lives. Today, of course, is father's day, and so we are remembering our fathers, and praying for all fathers and fatherly figures. Today, we have also chosen to give thanks for our essential workers among us, who have continued to work in their vocations during the pandemic, sometimes at increased personal risk or hardship, for the good of the community and society around them. For our fathers, father-figures, and our essential workers, Redeemer gives thanks, and we

extend our love and care to them out of a sense of love, gratitude and sympathy with their special role in our lives.

Sympathy can be an underappreciated concept in our world. Normally, in our day and age, and certainly more and more in our globalized world, competition and the quest for power and advantage have been fundamental traits. We gird ourselves in our public and work lives to live by these traits, and we teach our children these traits, because we know that it's a dog-eat-dog world out there. Sympathy is seen as not useful to us in the competitive world, because it can get in the way of strategic thinking and cold hard decision making. And yet it is fundamental to our common human experience.

The word sympathy comes from the Greek, to have feeling (pathos), with (sym), or to have feeling with someone, especially someone who has met with some misfortune. The word also comes to be used to describe a mutual feeling or agreement between two people, or to reflect agreement with a cause, opinion or attitude. In the case of your sympathy to me, as someone who is grieving a loved one who has died, it is in the first sense, that of feeling with me in my loss, and expressing condolences that help me deal with what I am going through. In the case where we extend our sympathy out to our fathers and father figures, here we are not feeling sorry for them, but wishing to show love. Most of us might say we are fortunate to feel love toward our fathers, although a few have troubled relations with their fathers, which makes it difficult to love them the way we might want to. Nevertheless, the love we extend to our fathers and father figures is literally a form of sympathy, a "feeling with" them, of being of one heart, if not always of one mind, with them. To feel for someone in such a way that we want to feel "with" them, this is certainly a form of love, and therefore showing this feeling is showing this love.

As for the act of "feeling with" our essential workers, here we are feeling with these people in gratitude and love. We understand the constraints under which they are working, and we have seen, especially in the case of our hospital and healthcare workers, the toll that working in a high-stress Covid19 environment can take on them, both physically and psychologically. We feel with them in their work, because we are grateful for that work, and for how it makes the world continue to work. Teachers, truck drivers, food handlers, and all first responders, from police and fire to ambulance and rescue. Our sympathies lie with them

because we know now, and have thought more than ever about how their work contributes to teaching, feeding, protecting us all. When everyone is at risk of catching the virus, their working so that we can safely and effectively shelter in place is a blessing to us and to the world around us.

It is in the spirit of this wide definition of sympathy that I press you with a more challenging direction for our “feeling with” people, and this is in the direction of our African American brothers and sisters in this particular social and political moment. I would add that for all people, but for Christians especially, times like these present us with a spiritual moment, a unique opening for spiritual growth, that we can either take advantage of or waste. For I think that we are being led by the Holy Spirit to have increasing sympathy with the call for change and reform in our country that has risen up since the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Commentators have acknowledged a constellation of factors that contributed to the explosion of protests over the past three and a half weeks. But the underlying fact was that a much larger portion of the American public, more than in the recent past, suddenly felt sympathy with Floyd and those who have died like him, than had ever felt such sympathy before. This feeling of sympathy, of feeling with those African Americans who have lost their lives in deadly encounters with White Americans, has led to the outpouring of feeling that moved masses of people to protest publicly, even in other countries, despite the ongoing threat of possible exposure to the Corona Virus.

Whether the context of being cooped up because of the corona virus really made a difference or not, I think that this has been a watershed moment, for our nation, and for the world, but especially for white Christians. At least some parts of the church are starting to take more seriously the claims of Black activists, that the deck is stacked against them in ways that it isn't for white people in this country. Although not many in number, my black colleagues among Lutheran clergy are truly unnerved and upset, and are very tired of this ongoing problem in our country. They are increasingly impatient with white inaction, with a lack of sympathy for this cause on the part of white pastors and white church members. So this moment is very important for them, since now they can feel the increased attention and sympathy from people who would normally not say anything or get involved.

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An important factor in the increase in sympathy has been the visual images in cell phone videos, just as images from national television news made a difference in the past history of the civil rights movement. The cause of increased equality and freedom for African Americans saw a similar bump in white sympathy in the now famous 1963 children's march in Birmingham Alabama, where police commissioner Bull Connor trained police dogs and water cannons on peaceful demonstrators. It was partially the effect of televised images of those events that changed the sympathies of more white Americans, especially in the North, in favor of the civil rights movement and its goals. Likewise, in May, the images of the killing of Ahmed Aubury who was killed in February, and then George Floyd, had a similar effect on us. It inspired many people who would have normally been on the sidelines of the issue to feel sympathy, move into action, join demonstrations and make no more excuses for the phrase, "black lives matter".

Our challenge as Americans and Christians, is to reflect on the level of sympathy we have for these people and their situations, but not just because this cause has gained so much public attention lately. We're challenged to reflect on the level of sympathy we have for this cause because of the pain, anger, and frustration African Americans are testifying to in their cries for justice and greater equality under the law. We know we're not jumping on some fad or bandwagon, because we see the emotion in those who are protesting. We can see it in the images. Then we also try to educate ourselves on reliable data and research. Is what they are saying true? Are black people disproportionately killed by the police? The answer is Yes. Are black people disproportionately fatal victims of the corona virus? Yes. Then the list of other questions becomes a mile long. If the data shows that the system is working against them, and this fits patterns we learn about in the history of racism in America, then we also know that their protests, their cause, must be valid.

Finally, we are also challenged to reflect on the level of sympathy we have with this cause because we are white, and therefore we may be missing the fear, anxiety and pain that non-white people are feeling right now. We have come to realize that being white may insulate us from the problems that non-white people have in this country. Not only that, but the perspectives on the protests, from the news outlets we choose to watch and absorb, may insulate us from the problems that are said to be at the heart of the protests. Afterall, if certain cable news perspectives can somehow convince us that the looting and damage to property

are equally or more reprehensible than the unjust killing of black people, then we are suddenly freed from giving our sympathy to their cause. Then we can take umbrage at the damage caused by a few, and dismiss the challenge posed by the many. And in our insulation, we can carry on like normal. Nothing changes for us.

So the question we must ask ourselves is not only about the state of our sympathy for the people in these situations, and for activists who are calling attention to this cause. It is also a question about what obstacles we may have in our head, or in our thinking, or in our heart, or in our theology, that we have to face and reckon with. But we believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We believe in the God of Jesus Christ and the Holy spirit. We consider ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ, and Jesus says to his disciples in today's Gospel lesson, "nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." Now we ask ourselves, could it be true that what is in the process of being uncovered now, for this generation, what secrets are becoming known, are those festering injustices at the heart of this country's historical treatment of its African American citizens? Are we once again witnessing the uncovering of our own complicity in racism, our own inaction in the face of injustice, our own unsympathetic regard for the pain of other people around us?

Saint Paul says in our second lesson, "Therefore, we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." What is this baptism into death, but the death of my ego and all its pretensions and self-protections? What is this death I'm called to but the dying of my desire for self-righteousness, for self-justification, for power, for the feeling of being right? What is this death I am being called to as a disciple of Jesus Christ, but the death of my inability or unwillingness to sympathize with African Americans in their moment of pain and outrage? As Martin Luther says, remembering my baptism is a daily dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ. It is not a one-and-done proposition, but a daily repenting of sin and receiving forgiveness - AS A WAY OF LIFE. As I repent and seek God's grace, as these parts of me die every day, Christ rises from the dead in my soul. As this sin and its effects die within my heart, as I continually challenge my own self-righteousness with the truth of other peoples' pain and vulnerability, I am "feeling with them", and I am learning to be a new person. I am literally growing into a new person. Then, as Paul says, I am walking in newness of life.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, you may have noted the strong language in today's Prayer of the Day, where we prayed, "teach us, Good Lord God, to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labor and not to ask for reward, except that of knowing that we do your will, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen." There was talk on the ELCA Clergy Facebook page this week about tempering the language here, so that, especially in the case of toiling and not seeking rest, we should not promote the idea that there is no slack, no sabbath, no grace in our spirituality. Given our social and political moment, troubled by a global pandemic, and facing hardships of our own, it is true that we need to hear God's Word to us as one of peace, grace, and rest. We are weary, we are grieving, we are weighed down by many things. And now this call to sympathy in our nation that I have described is upon us as well. The job seems truly daunting. But part of Christ's promise to his disciples this morning is that denying him, even in the face of resistance from close family or friends, is worse. When you set that challenge amid the testimony of Jeremiah in the first lesson and David in Psalm 69, who are both trying to remain faithful to God's calling despite the hostile rejection of those around them, then you see why the prayer of the day uses such strong language. This morning's lessons present a call to remain faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, regardless of the cost.

But the final part of Christ's promise is also that the cross he gives us to bear is the one that leads to his new life. As he says, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." You have to play around with each phrase of this paradox literally and figuratively. Finding our life, figuratively, that is, finding success in the eyes of the world, ends with losing it, because as we like to say, you can't take it with you when you go. Likewise, losing your life, figuratively (heck, even literally) for Christ's sake, that is, dying every day to the sin that separates us from the pain and vulnerability of others, means that we find our life in the newness that Paul describes, that is, the newness of being made again and again each day into the blessed and beloved children of God that we were called to be in our baptism. And we know that God is faithful, and that having once called us to his Gospel, God will turn to us, again and again, in his great compassion. Then we with Jeremiah, can sing to the Lord, we can praise the Lord, for he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers. And we can rest, asking for no other reward except that of knowing

that we have done his will. Amen. And May the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

