



SUNDAY SERMON

The Day of Fire is Now

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.

Dear Ones, it's been quite a week, quite a month, quite a year. One hundred thousand deaths, forty-two million unemployed, the murder of George Floyd revealing yet again the relentless systematic oppression of African-American and other peoples of color – bleeding out, crying out. As one friend wrote (Bishop Sean Rowe), "it is not enough to be outraged, but I am outraged. It is not enough to yearn for justice, but I do yearn. It is not enough to be fair and kind in our personal dealings with people of all races, although I hope that as Christians, we can manage this at a minimum."

This is the day each year when we celebrate our patron, Saint Columba.

Columba was a builder. He committed his life to building the realm of God, to building beloved community, a community of all people that begins and ends in God's love. If Columba spoke to us today, he would first tell us to remember. Remember who you are: you are beloved of God. And he would tell us that this moment in time – painful as it is – this moment is given to us that we might recall and recommit to our deepest calling in life, which is to participate in building God's realm, a realm of love manifest through justice.

Columba is credited with planting Christianity in Scotland. In the year 560, he sailed from Ireland and settled on the island of Iona. There he built an abbey that became a center for learning and literacy, and from which he established many other monastic communities. We have several hymns and poems written by him. Known as a holy man, he was often called upon to help settle disputes. Known too as a prophetic seer and miracle-worker, he banished a great water beast - perhaps the Loch Ness monster. He also made mistakes; he went to Scotland because he'd gotten so embroiled in a theological debate that it resulted in bloodshed. He thought it best if he exiled himself.

So, if Columba spoke to us today, he might remind us that this work we have of building the beloved community is hard and it takes a long time. Knowing how far we stray, he might quote the very words we heard from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Paul, too, was a builder. After starting the church in Corinth, he moved on to Ephesus. But word came to him, as one commentary describes, about "serious disorders, the jockeying of rival groups for control, an indifference to cases of flagrant immorality, and the marginalizing of disadvantaged members." (NRSV)

continued

DATE
Columba Day
Sunday, June 7, 2020

PREACHER
The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

St. Columba's is a welcoming Christian community that seeks to be open in spirit, deep in faith, rich in worship, active in service.

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So Paul wrote: "If anyone builds on the foundation of Christ with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done." The Day will disclose it. For Paul, this "day" is the time when God's purposes are fulfilled. It is the day when the choices we've made, the handiwork of our lives, the societies we've created, are laid bare for all to see. When the chickens come home to roost. That day is now.

Collectively over many years, we've been building our church, our nation, our economy, our communities – with the precious stones of true ideals, and the straw of sinful greed and fear, with the gold of justice, and the rotted hay of white supremacy and institutional racism – all layered together. The fire next time, wrote James Baldwin – "for the Day will disclose it, it will be revealed, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done."

Do you not know that you are God's temple, he asked them? In this, Paul is not speaking to individuals; he is speaking to the community. This is a plural, collective "you." For Paul salvation is never about the individual; it is not for the individual; salvation comes for the entire community – and until it comes for everyone, then it is not yet salvation, we have not yet arrived at the beloved community.

Into this moment, Paul might have said as Mother Teresa did about the abandonment of the poor of Calcutta, "we've forgotten that we belong to one another." The fire of this moment is revealing to us as a nation and as a people that we have forgotten, and it is time we remember that we belong to one another. Blessedly, all around us we see signs of hope. Police officers and protesters kneeling together. When I was down at St. John's on Tuesday, praying in solidarity, there were white and black, young and old, crying out with common voice. "For God's temple is holy, and you – you together – are that temple."

What now can we do? is a question I am hearing. There is no one right answer to this. We each need to begin where we are. But truths about white supremacy and institutional racism are being revealed – laid bare before us. So now is the time to look. As Joshua reminded us, to not look away. Now is the time especially for primarily white communities and primarily white churches such as ours to examine ourselves, to acknowledge the ways in which we benefit from an illness that takes a devastating toll on our black and brown siblings, to repent, and change our ways. It is simply not acceptable for those of us who are white to claim innocence or ignorance. I don't mean that in a chastising way or a politically correct way, I mean it with the heart of a Christian whose God is love.

When I picture the layers of silver and straw, I am reminded of an exercise I did with a large group in my former diocese of Pennsylvania. With paper on the walls of a large hall, we extended a time-line that reached from the early 1600's when the first cornerstone of a church was laid in that land, up to the present day. We drew a line through the middle. Beneath the line, we marked those events and acts – of the church, the state, and the nation – that established or reinforced institutional racism. When the yellow fever swept through Philadelphia in the 1780's and church leaders called upon enslaved and free African-Americans to tend the sick and dying; essential workers put their lives on the line while those same church leaders retreated to gracious homes outside the city.

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Or when the first African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas was founded and admitted into the diocese but for decades was denied a vote in convention and barred from establishing any endowment, a crippling wound that inflicted many subsequent historically black churches. Or the church's silence as the nation erupted in Civil War.

Above the line, we marked those events and acts that dismantled racism and furthered the arc of justice. When in 1802 the church ordained Absalom Jones, a man who had been born into slavery. When the church marched in the Civil Rights movement, and more recently began to lay out a path for reparations.

This is but one tool of many that can be used to do what is called system-mapping or structural analysis. It can help us see, can open the eyes, minds, and hearts of a community to see what people of color – or women or the LGBT community – have known forever, that the system is not just. The system functions in ways that you and I probably did not instigate or choose, may make us squirm, and may call us to act. So I believe looking is precisely what we need to do. Derick Dawson worked with me on that time line and said, "We have inherited a system and there's nothing we can do about that except acknowledge it and dismantle it. But if we don't acknowledge it, then we are actually maintaining it."

I don't know what we'll find when we do an exercise like this here at St. Columba's. How did the Holy Spirit prompt those good folks down at St. Alban's to make their way out toward Tenleytown to start a church here in 1874? How did we Columbans, Episcopalians participate in the development of this neighborhood – in the 1890's or the 1940's or the 2020's? Some of you know some of the answers. It will be good for all of us to find out.

In our baptismal covenant we promise that "with God's help we will persevere in resisting evil, will seek and serve Christ in all persons, strive for justice, and respect the dignity of every human being." Now is the time for us to recall and recommit to Living God's Love, to strive for justice and beloved community for all.

Paul began his letter to the church in Corinth with cleansing fire. Along the way, he sang the hymn that begins "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong." And he concludes the letter with words for you and me (16:13-14): "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love."

We are the church. Be the church – the beloved community. Amen.