

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 6, 2021; Proper 5B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

1 Samuel 8:4-11-20, 11:14-15; Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

For the last several months our weekly services have commemorated events in the life of Jesus—his birth, the revelation of his divinity, his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. And then we had a brief celebration of the Holy Spirit. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost—nearly half a year of commemorations. All of this has been overlayed, of course, by our lives—our day-to-day living through a pandemic.

Really, it has been three pandemics—there is the virus, of course, that has led us to change our habits—covering our faces and distancing ourselves from one another. The pandemic is waning here in Western Massachusetts, at least, but the national crisis of gun violence has not seemed to abate. According to the Gun Violence Archive, there have been 247 mass shootings in the United States in the first five months of 2021, leaving 283 dead and another 1005 injured.¹ And then there is systemic racism and the deep division in our society about what it is, and how to address it, and whether or not we can live through it.

Here in church, we have entered the “Ordinary Time.” The liturgical color has changed to green – the color of growing things. You can see the green on the Altar this morning. This is the time for us to grow in faithfulness, to learn the lessons of Holy Scripture. This is a long season, but then, the lesson of faithfulness takes a long time to practice. It is ordinary time in church, but the world we live in is still rocked by the triple pandemics—and so while the Altar is dressed in green today, I have chosen to wear a rainbow.

The rainbow is the ancient sign of God’s faithfulness—after the Flood that destroyed everyone and everything that was not safe on Noah’s Ark, God promised never to destroy the world again—and put the rainbow in the sky as a sign of that promise. Another way to say that is: with the rainbow, God reminds us of our dominion over the world, and our responsibility to protect it—so that the green of the earth and the blue of the sea would continue to support the life of the people.

Right over my shoulders, the orange reminds me that this first weekend in June is “Wear Orange Sunday,”² a promise to commit to ending the public health epidemic of gun violence. In 2013, 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton was shot and killed in Chicago. Her friends decided to wear bright orange, like hunters, to proclaim “we are human; don’t shoot us.”

And then, there is this fist, a symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement. About a dozen of us here at Atonement are engaged in Sacred Ground³ discussions, learning about the roots of racism in this country and in our church. These have been hard discussions, as we have uncovered things about our families, and the towns we grew up in, and the churches we have attended since childhood. Today, I look at this multi-racial fist as I pray

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mass_shootings_in_the_United_States_in_2021

² <https://wearorange.org/>

³ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sacred-ground/welcome/>

for the 215 native children whose remains were found on the site of the former Kamloops Residential School in Canada.⁴

Let me be clear: I don't own a gun and I have never shot anyone. And for sure, I didn't participate in atrocities against First Nations children. But the violence and sorrow of the world does affect me. If we are faithful to God's call to love one another, then the pain of others hurts. How to respond when the diversity of the world seems to lend itself to violence and injustice? The rainbow reminds me of the faithfulness of God—and it reminds me of the rainbow of diversity in which God creates all humanity. Just as the coronavirus pandemic has forced us all to adopt new habits for the good of others—these other pandemics call for faithful response so that we may love one another as God calls us to do. So, for a while in this ordinary time, I have adopted the rainbow to go along with the liturgical green.

In this time when the church teaches us to grow in faithfulness, we will read in course through the books of First and Second Samuel, Paul's Letters to the Corinthians and Ephesians, and the Gospel of Mark, Sunday by Sunday. The record of Holy Scripture is the story of God's faithfulness to us, and our faithfulness to God. For the next several weeks, we will see how faith grows. And maybe our faith will grow, too. Let's check in on these stories and see where we are joining them today.

Do you remember the story of the little boy Samuel, who heard the voice of God waking him up in the middle of the night? In today's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, Samuel is all grown up. He has become a judge of the people. His sons have joined the family business, but they are not doing a very good job of it. The judges are a unique feature of the nation of Israel. But then, the God of Israel has a unique relationship with the people. There is a covenant between God and the people. They will obey God; God will listen to them. And so, power and authority come from God. Samuel and the judges are there to make sure that things flow smoothly, but the power comes directly from God to the people.

Only, the people want to try something new. The neighboring nations have kings. It might be good to have a king. A king would be in charge! A king would make sure that battles were won, and people had food! A king would have power to rule the people, and not let things get messy the way the judges have done.

Samuel thinks it's a terrible idea, and so does God. But here's the thing. The people want it. And so, God lets them have what they want. Why? Why would God let the people have something that God doesn't think is best for them? It might be because God knows that at length there will be a king over Israel named David, and David will be the one to start to accomplish God's purposes for the people. It might be that. Or it might simply be that the God of love created us to use our hearts and minds and learn from our actions. It might be that God desires us to grow in heart and mind and behavior.

In our second lesson, Paul is writing a second letter to the young church in Corinth. They are being persecuted from the outside, and some of them are losing faith. Wouldn't it just be easier to go with the prevailing culture? It's too hard to follow a God who requires justice and mercy when you yourself are oppressed and scared. And Paul, in some of the

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/28/world/children-remains-discovered-canada-kamloops-school/index.html>

most encouraging words of the Bible, tries to pull this struggling group of disciples into faithfulness.

We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. It is easy to misunderstand Paul, because he often seems at war in his own body. But in this passage, Paul is talking less about the body, and more about the community, the group of Christians who are following Jesus together. They are living in a place and time where it is dangerous to be followers of Jesus. The government and culture persecute them for their beliefs and their practice. And still, Paul promises them that Jesus renews the church day by day. Our “inner nature” is strengthened by our growth in the life of Christ.

Paul taught the church in Corinth how to become the body of Christ. And we know what he told them to do. We know it, because it is exactly what we remind ourselves every time we baptize new members. “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?” we ask. And then we all answer, “I will with God’s help.”

Imagine what we could do together if each one of us renewed our commitment to pray every day and gather as the Body of Christ every week (virtually or in person, ensuring the safety of all) and continue to walk in the way of Jesus. We might help one another get vaccinated! We might feed the hungry here in Westfield! We might make our society safer and more just!

That’s where following in the way of Jesus will take us. So let’s check in on Jesus in the Gospel we have for today. We are only three chapters in to the Gospel of Mark. And the people think Jesus is crazy. The scribes think he is possessed by a demon. His mother and siblings have come to drag him home. Just what has Jesus done that is so crazy?

Already, in two and a half chapters, he has healed many people, including the mother-in-law of a close friend, he has fed people on the Sabbath, and he has gathered a group of friends who travel with him, who are also able to heal people. That is, Jesus has helped people who need it, and called out the very best in others so that even more good can be done.

And it really is kind of crazy. Jesus meets people where they are, and gives them what they need. And those with power decide that he must be evil, because good people can’t get that much done. And his family is so worried that they come to gather him back into the household, so that maybe they can shut him up. This behavior could get Jesus into trouble.

But Jesus upsets family values. *“Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”* You know that’s the Blessed Virgin Mary that Jesus seems to be casting aside, right? But mothers and brothers and sisters, and most of all, each one of us, may be so anxious about all the pandemics that are affecting us that we forget what is most important.

It is the faithful love of God that is most important thing. And we know how to be faithful. We know how to keep heart. We pray together, we care for one another. We do the will of God by caring for the least and the lost. And then we will be the faithful people that God desires us to be.