**Black Lives Matter**

**Matthew 28:16-20**

**Parkminster United Church, Sunday, June 7, 2020**

**Rev. Heather Power**

There have been times over the length of my life when I have stopped to wonder how I ever got the idea that I wanted to be a minister. I was a minister’s kid after all – born and raised in The United Church of Canada. In fact, within days after my birth, my very first outing was to a church finance meeting.

Like many young people, I stepped away from the church for a time. It was as if I had become unmoored from the center of what gave my life meaning. It was at that point that I knew I was eternally captivated by the spiritual quest and that it would always shape, not only the interior of my life, but the exterior as well.

Who knows how we decide upon our life path and how we become who we are.  There are many factors in each person’s life story that help them to carve out a life and a calling. I’m pretty sure it isn’t one specific thing, but a mosaic of experiences and events—some purposeful, some happenstance. There are clues scattered through our stories about what we might do or think about studying in school. There are quiet themes and subtle directions for creating a life and even a career. Sometimes the messages are muddled and at other times, we may hear a strong directive either deep within or from those around us.

My mother was ordained as a minister with The United Church of Canada in the early 1960’s – at a time when few women were being ordained. She was without question, one of the finest pastoral ministers you could ever know. Her commitment and gifts for pastoral care are recalled by many congregants – even after her death. But my mother was also (surprisingly to me) a bit of a rebel – in many quiet ways – but one story in particular always causes me to pause and smile.

Back when my mother was ordained it was common for one’s graduation photo to be taken wearing a clergy shirt and collar. Well, that is if you were a male student. Women at that time were not supposed to wear them. And yet, if you look at the graduating photograph of Emmanuel College the year my mother graduated and was ordained, she wore a clergy shirt and collar – borrowed from one of her friends – the only woman to do so in that photo.

Now I know that the clergy collar is filled with challenging connotations for many – and many of them painful and negative. But in that moment, wearing the clergy collar was a statement of equality. It was a radical nudge to an existing system. My mother, like many before her, and many after her responded to the Holy Spirit’s beckoning and responded to the call of the church while simultaneously working hard for equality.

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the risen Jesus is with the eleven on a mountain in Galilee.  Jesus is about to give them the charge—to “Go into the world.”  Jesus is about to trust the future to these folks and place everything in their hands. We are told that they worshipped him, but that they also had their doubts. We have to wonder if they felt fully equipped and ready to head out and change the world.

It strikes me that Jesus doesn’t condemn the doubters, nor does he try to talk them out of their questions. Instead of casting them aside, Jesus comes to them and promises them some help.  Jesus reminds us that there is work to be done, but that the Spirit will be given to us and shared in the midst of this work.

It is the week after Pentecost, a day when we recognize the Holy Spirit’s presence in the life of Christ’s followers. The Spirit descended upon the disciples and fairly pushed them into the world with a big shove—Go!

Go. For those of us who may have doubts about our own calling, for those who hear “Go” and want to turn around, the Holy Spirit is present as guide and comforter. If we are having a hard time coping with the mega and miniscule changes in our world these days, the Holy Spirit can be our guide. If we are having trouble with seeing the presence of the divine in our midst, the Spirit can help inspire and infuse our passion for the possible once again. And if we are having trouble going into the world with a hopeful and healing message, the Spirit gives us energy to move out with courage once again. Like the early church, we can rely on the Spirit to guide us in our calling and in our response to the world. But we need to go – we need to respond.

Our region responded this week. So did our country, the US and places around the world crying out against racism and injustice. This past week, organizers for the Kitchener-Waterloo Solidarity March for Black Lives Matter engaged over 40,000 people wanting to respond and to participate in protest either in person or online, in activism, in donations, in education, and more.

And these past few weeks have highlighted for me something that I need to respond to and pay more attention to in my own life. A clear challenge to move beyond performative or optical allyship. The response of a lifelong journey of what it means to be anti-racist and live with white privilege. To go beyond knowing it is “wrong” to be racist, to an understanding of the ways in which systemic racism has harmed others while benefitting me because of the colour of my skin. A call to let go of guilt, defensiveness, and process reactions to feelings that does not serve this work. How will I – and the denomination of which we are a part of The United Church of Canada - speak up against injustice based on the colour of a person’s skin? This is important because Black Lives Matter.

Who are the Black voices, the Indigenous voices, the voices of People of Colour that we need to be listening to, learning from and amplifying? This friends, is a GO moment and staying still, staying silent….is harmful. Silence is not an option. In the prophetic words of Austin Channing Brown, “What if instead of longing for ease, we were made for more – made to advocate, made to dig in, made to speak out, made for complexity, made for this moment? What if we believed so deeply in our own capacity to rise to this occasion that getting to work wasn’t a tiring chore, but a life-giving opportunity to invest in something larger than ourselves?” (From a Facebook post by Austin Channing Brown.)

Theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds those of us who are white not be fooled that our response is “because this is what it looks like to be righteous right now, it’s not because doing so will mean you are a ‘good’ person, it’s not because others are doing it. And it’s not to earn the approval of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.” She writes, “I want this for you and for me because I believe it brings life and life abundant.” (Adapted, Nadia Bolz-Weber, *A Pastoral Letter for such a time as this*, June 5, 2020.)

I have hard work that I must continue to do: work that involves listening, learning, and acting. Work that will involve uncomfortable realizations about myself and difficult conversations with others. Work that we ourselves must commit to and not expect Black, Indigenous and People of Colour to be the ones to educate us. I’m going to make mistakes along the way, as will all of us committed to the work of anti-racism, but we must learn and work and keep going. I am in the midst of a book study with other colleagues reading Austin Channing Brown’s book, *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness.* If you would like to start – or continue – doing the work of anti-racism, I invite you to join me.

As a community whose Statement of Welcome proclaims an open, affirming and inclusive community, we are called to be prophetic voices of truth and justice. We are called to do the work of anti-racism. To proclaim that Black Lives Matter. This is a prophetic moment my friends. We cannot stay still. We cannot stay silent. Today, I am praying that the Spirit will continue to be about the transformational work of us all who love the world enough to “Go” and who trust the Spirit who will work in us and help us bring forth the Gospel call - and insistence - for life abundant for every person. Thanks be to God. Amen.