

“Called for Such a Time”

A Reflection by rev. dr. thom bower

For April 25, 2021, the Fourth Sunday of Easter

Based on Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18

In these weeks after Easter, the lectionary provides us with stories about encountering the resurrected Christ. And then in the middle we arrive at Good Shepherd Sunday, when the scriptures tell us about shepherds and the relationship to sheep. You have heard me say I am the son of a fisherman who was the son of a carpenter. When I was a youth, it looked like my biblical options were to preach or become a shepherd. There are weeks when I wonder if I should not have learned more about shepherding or fishing or carpentry, because the words for preaching seem so difficult to find.

A momentous verdict issued on Tuesday. I'm not sure what more analysis I can offer to you on Sunday morning. You have already heard from professors, pundits, pastors, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, historians, advocates, activists, community organizers. What more analysis can I offer? What can I say that is different than what the media colloquy has already delivered to you?

This verdict is the one I had prayed for, but I am still uncertain that it is justice.

We translate the Hebrew word *tsedek* as “justice”.ⁱ We also translate it as “righteousness”. True justice is the restoration of right relationship between God and humanity and right relationship among humanity. For such a time as this, we are called. For such a time as this, to pursue justice and righteousness, we are called together and together we are called.

Courts cannot legislate justice. Courts can influence behavior. Courts should ensure there are consequences for harmful behavior. This verdict serves as an invitation to repentance for the offender and a caution to others who might think to do the same.

Courts can hold us accountable for our harmful behaviors. This verdict is an act of accountability. It *may* move us toward justice, it *may* move us

toward righteousness. But our relationships are not made right by this verdict. We still have much to repent of. For such a time as this we are called.

Here's a thought that has followed me all week. While imprisoned, Chauvin is *already* better housed, clothed, and fed than immigrant children at the border. He will have better drinking water than people in Detroit. Even in solitary confinement, his safety will be much better monitored than residents of encampments in the Twin Cities. He will have easier access to educational opportunities than many children in specific zip codes. He will most likely receive ongoing medical care and counseling which many others cannot access. My complaint is not about what those imprisoned receive but rather so many others do not have access to these things. For such a time as this, for such issues of justice as this, we are called.

I've heard many commentators asking if this is the inflection point where social justice turns, where civil rights begin to be different. Inflection points are those events that result in significant change. It is a metaphor taken from geometry, the point where a curve changes its direction. The problem with asking if this is an inflection point is that we cannot identify inflection points until after the change has taken place. We can only identify them in retrospect. This moment, this verdict, this week feels like change, but we do not yet know what change will occur.

There are so many injustices we must address. For such a time as this, we are called. Justice is not an end; it is a process. It is a difficult process. It is a complex process. It can be a tiring process. I know doing this work as a community keeps us engaged, keeps us inspired, energizes us, rejuvenates us. I know doing this work of justice as a community is improved because in community we find righteousness.

I give thanks to God for those who are gifted in building community, who are able to unite us, who help me remember how to be in community. I am thankful for people with whom to do ministry, with whom to seek justice and righteousness.

Every congregation I have known has a meeting like we are about to have, a meeting to identify who has already agreed to serve among the

congregation with specified roles and responsibilities, a meeting when ostensibly the congregation is approving a slate of those nominated, but when we are more realistic is actually a meeting to say thank you to those who have agreed to serve.

For such a time as this you are being called.

For such a time as this we are called together.

For such a time as this together we are called.

For such a time as justice calls us to new ways of being.

For such a time as Faith Mennonite examines itself reflectively to consider how you are called as a congregation.

For such a time as to discern together the calling you will share with a settled pastor.

For such a time as a Pandemic.

For such a time as recommitting to ministry in this neighborhood, in the Twin Cities, to families, to children, to retirees, to those whose needs are physical, to those whose needs are emotional, to those whose needs are spiritual.

For such a time as this when God is inviting us into ministry so we may be closer to God and closer to one another.

For such a time as this, the voice of Christ the good shepherd continues to call to us.

We thank God for all who continue to respond to that call. Amen.

Morning Prayerⁱⁱ

God, our guiding shepherd, we have wandered through strange paths of our world. Like sheep, we have gone astray. We have trusted other voices and turned away from your truth. In fear, we have taken your rod and your staff and beaten down others. We have selfishly laid claim to green pastures that really belong to you. We have usurped your role as gatekeeper and not welcomed our neighbors.

Forgive us, we pray, and restore us all to your fold. Give us the courage to hope even when there is danger or uncertainty all around. Stay with us through times of terror and counsel us with your experienced love. Make

known your resurrection power in our lives so that we may offer ourselves fully to the world for its well-being.

Good Shepherd show us what faithful living looks like in our time and grant us the intelligence, spiritual strength, and determination necessary to follow your pathways.

Holy God, who created us in love, we give thanks today for the many people who serve in your name. Just as there are many variety of gifts, so too there a variety of titles we use to recognize this service: deacon, chairperson, commissioner, volunteer. These are ones who let the world know your name and love through their work using heart and hand, strength of body and spirit to profess what great things you, our God, have done and are doing here. The same people aid us, guide us, direct us so together we may profess to be your people. Thank you, God ,for the witness we receive through their service.

Thank you for the service of others who aid us to be people strong in body and spirit so we may our hands and hearts for your purposes. Thank you for physicians, surgeons, nurses, nurses aids, medical researchers, counselors, case workers, administrators ... the list goes on.

While we recognize health care in our nation is not equally accessible for all we are at the same time thankful for the healing that is available to us through these professions of care. And so we also remember in prayer: those recovering from or facing surgery; those with chronic aches and pains; those whose hearts are broken; those who grieve or are in deep, prolonged sadness; those who now seek comfort; even knowing their remaining days are few.

In our compassion for those who hurt, we are led into the works of justice. Lord, it has been a difficult week to understand justice. We want to celebrate, and we continue to mourn. We want to shout about progress, and are reminded of the work yet to be done. We cheer for one act of accountability, and pray for the numerous families who have faced similar tragedy in just this weekend. Cure us of our warring madness, so our pursuit of justice may also be a pursuit of compassion, of wisdom, of right living within our neighborhoods.

We pray in the name of Christ, who unites us as we pray the prayer
Jesus taught:

ⁱ Portions of this paragraph and the two following use material posted by Traci Blackmon on Facebook.

ⁱⁱ Uses and adapts material from

Mitchell Young "Listen to the Shepherd's Voice: Liturgical Resources for PAAM Sunday, Good Shepherd's Sunday, the Fourth Sunday of Easter", *Worship Ways*, Local Church Ministries, Faith Formation Ministry Team, UCC, 2015; and Noelle Damico in *Minister's Annual Manual* for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3rd, 2009.