

GEORGE FLOYD

Luke 10:25-37

June 7, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Gospel According to Luke, chapter 10, verses 25 through 37. Please stand as you are able. From Luke 10, beginning at verse 25, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

On Monday, May 25, in the city of Minneapolis, a black man by the name of George Floyd walked into a store. He used a piece of paper with the number twenty on it. Apparently that piece of paper was not genuine U.S. currency. Whether or not George Floyd knew this when he used that piece of paper, I have no idea.

And, frankly, whether or not he knew this at the time has little importance to his story now. Because, shortly later, George Floyd was lying face down in the street, handcuffed, with three police officers pinning him down, including one with his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck. Later that day, George Floyd died. This is not just.

A video of the police officer with his knee on George Floyd's neck went viral on the internet. The entire nation was outraged. Within days, rioting and looting broke out in South Minneapolis. It continued night after night and spread to other cities as well. Innocent people, including both police officers and protestors, have been injured or killed. Hundreds of businesses have been destroyed, looted, or damaged in some way. This, also, is not just.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's the one Sunday of the year on which we pay particular attention to the doctrine of the Trinity—that God is three persons, and, yet, one. We typically use the sermon on Trinity Sunday to talk about this mysterious biblical teaching, and we look at how each member of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, works for our good in creation, redemption, and sanctification.

I'm not doing that today. It doesn't mean the doctrine of the Trinity doesn't matter. It does matter, and perhaps we'll come back to it sometime later this summer to make up for skipping it today. And we will most certainly continue to notice the doctrine of the Trinity in the many places it shows up in Scripture. But sometimes there are issues that we need to talk about now, because the world is talking about them now. His name is George Floyd.

I have a few disclaimers for you:

First, I know that sometimes it's wise for the Church to leave sensitive issues alone. Most people have already made up their minds, and I'm unlikely to change them. If someone agrees with what the Church says, then we might not be telling them anything new. And if someone disagrees, we might offend them and sabotage our opportunity to proclaim Christ to them. Sometimes there's no upside. Sometimes it's wise for the Church to leave sensitive issues alone.

However, if the Church has something to say, and doesn't say it, then the world is left listening to the voices of the world. The Church must speak the voice of God to the world, and I'm convinced we are facing issues today that the Church needs to speak to. So we are going to talk about this. And I hope you will resolve from the outset to listen humbly and give fair consideration.

Second, this is not a political speech. I'm not trying to speak to public policy. I'm trying to speak to your heart. This needs to be stated, because much of our news media treats everything as political. This trains us, as news consumers, to also think of those things as political. One of my peeves is the way religion is often treated as a subset of politics. There is little regard for what different churches believe or practice, but merely where they fall on the political spectrum. So when the Church speaks to an issue that is also related to politics, our brains are wired to think, "Where does this church fall on the political spectrum? Are they on the right? Are they on the left? Somewhere in between?" But religion is not a subset of politics. The Church does not fit into the political spectrum. If left is over here, and right is over here, the Church might be up here, or over here, or back here somewhere. The Church's message does not fit into the simplistic categories of political left and political right. The Church's message transcends politics, and it speaks to individual hearts, rather than focusing on institutions. You can hear the voice of the left by going to one channel. You can hear the voice of the right by going to another channel. The Church needs to proclaim the voice of God. So, as much as you are able, please, don't think of this sermon in terms of politics. Think of it in terms of God, you, and your neighbor, whom you are called to love.

Third, I'm not an expert on racial issues. I probably don't know all of the politically correct buzzwords to say. I'm a white guy who has spent most of his life around other white people. So if I say something wrong, please put the best construction on it, and gently correct me. Part of what I'm going to say to you is that we need to learn how to listen to one another and treat one another respectfully. I hope you will do that with me.

Fourth, I'm operating on the information that is available to me. Five minutes after this service, I may learn something new that completely changes the way I look at it. We all need to

be willing to change our minds when new information comes to light. But there also comes a point where it is appropriate to speak based on the information we know.

Finally, if you think that's a lot of disclaimers, I agree. There are probably an infinite number of disclaimers I could make. I'm trying to think of all the possible ways I might offend someone, so that I can make a disclaimer about it beforehand. I could go on and on making disclaimer after disclaimer, but I would never get around to the content. In the end, all I can say is, *please be gentle and humble. If I say something wrong, come and talk to me about it. The worst thing we can do is get offended and just stew over it. Then you're mad at me, and I don't know why, and I never learn from a mistake that you could have helped me with.* All of that is just a complicated way of saying, *please be nice.*

Let's get into the meat.

The death of George Floyd was unjust. It should not have happened. Also, the riots are unjust. They should not happen. Both of these events are unjust, and I think every reasonable person acknowledges that. I have yet to hear any voice anywhere say that any of this is okay. So I could just pontificate about how unjust these things are, you would all agree with me, and I would feel like I did my job by speaking out. But that would just be virtue signaling. That's when you don't really say anything substantial; you just demonstrate that you're outraged about something so that people will think you are virtuous. That's virtue signaling, and it's not worth much. I'm aiming higher. I want to challenge you.

When I first heard about the death of George Floyd, I was hesitant to watch the video. I read a few descriptions of the video, and it sounded pretty bad. Eventually I thought, *I need to watch this to see if it's really as bad as they say.* So I watched it. I thought it was worse than the descriptions.

George Floyd said, "I can't breathe." The officer kept his knee on his neck.

Then George Floyd called out for his mama to help him. That's about the least macho thing you can do. When a grown man cries out for his mama to help him, he's not a threat. The officer kept his knee on his neck.

Then George Floyd stopped moving, and he stopped speaking. The officer kept his knee on his neck.

The bystanders pointed this out to the police. They were pleading with them. And it wasn't just black people. There were white people and black people pleading with them. They should have known that this was wrong. The officer kept his knee on his neck.

Then the ambulance arrived. They dragged George Floyd onto a stretcher and took him away. This is the part that troubled me the most. Maybe there's an explanation, I'm willing to listen if there is one, but right now I can't even imagine what it is. If an ambulance arrives at the end, then the officers would have known an ambulance was coming. I assume they're the ones that called for it. So they knew George Floyd needed an ambulance. That means, for several minutes, the officer kept his knee on the neck of an unresponsive man who needed an ambulance. For several minutes, the officer kept his knee on the neck of an unresponsive man who needed an ambulance. And he knew it.

The video was far more disturbing than what I expected. I didn't cry, but I was disturbed.

I don't know what the officer was thinking. I don't know what his motivation was. There may be a good explanation. And this is the part of the sermon that may outrage those who are already outraged. But if the officer or someone close to the situation provides an explanation for what happened, we need to listen. That, after all, is what I'm arguing for. That's what I'm

pleading with all of you to do. Listen to people who are different from you. Try to understand them. That doesn't mean we should just assume there is a good explanation for George Floyd's death. George Floyd should not have died. Period. In the absence of a good explanation, we don't have to assume there is one.

We're close enough to Minneapolis that many of us are familiar with the city. We're close enough that when someone says, "I'm going to the cities," we know what they mean. I know many people who live there. I used to live there. I've been on Lake Street. The riots spread to about a dozen blocks from where I used to go to church. Many of you can relate.

But here in Grand Forks, we have all experienced the outrage differently than most of the country, because on Wednesday, May 27, two days after George Floyd was killed, a police officer named Cody Holte was shot and killed in the line of duty. He did not initiate the gunfire. He did not kill anyone. He showed up to a gunfight that was already in progress. He came to protect his fellow officers, as well as any citizens who may have been nearby, and he lost his life. It's the classic example of heroism.

We all mourned.

The day after Officer Holte died, his name was released and we started seeing pictures of him. The one that really got me, and I'm guessing some of you can relate, was the picture of him in his regular uniform with his wife and infant son. I cried. Why? Part of it, of course, was that I saw a young wife who lost her husband and a baby boy who will never remember his dad. That's tragic, and that's part of why I cried. I also saw a young white male, with short facial hair, a wife, and a baby. Who does that sound like? It sounds like me. I was more affected more by that photo because I could relate to it. And even though I didn't know officer Holte, he looked like someone I would like, simply because, from a visual perspective, I saw that we had things in common.

And then it clicked for me. Somehow I made the connection that when a black person watches the video of George Floyd with an officer's knee on his neck, they relate to someone in that video, and it's not the officer. They cry, because they either see themselves or someone they know under that knee. That's what white people like me need to understand.

We hurt more when we see something bad happen to someone we relate with. Once every few years there is a shooting at a church somewhere in America. We, as churchgoers, are naturally more concerned about that than unchurched Americans. In other parts of the world, Christians are routinely persecuted or killed, simply for being Christians. We take more notice of that, and we hurt more deeply, because we have something in common with them. So when a black person watches the George Floyd video it creates more sadness, more anger, and more fear in them than it does for a white person. A black person sees it as something that could happen to them or someone they love.

So when a black person sees lights in their rearview mirror, they feel more fear than a white person does. And that doesn't mean a black person thinks all police officers are racist. More likely, they're thinking, "This officer could be part of the 2% (or whatever percent it is) that will give me a problem, even if I didn't do anything wrong." That is a fear that no one should have to live with.

Injuries have a far greater impact when they come from an authority figure. Think of a child. If a child is injured, that's always sad. But if a child is injured by a parent, that is exponentially worse, because it creates fear where there should be trust. And this doesn't just happen in the child who is injured. If there are other children who see it happen, they develop the same fear. So

when a black person sees another black person killed by a police officer, for no apparent reason, that will create fear, and there is no way to prevent it from happening. You can explain it away. You can prove that 99% of police officers are awesome. You can fire the other 1%. The fear is still there. The only way to counter that fear is by rebuilding trust. And trust is a whole lot harder to create than fear.

One way to approach racism in America is to say, "I'm colorblind. Black, white, Asian, Hispanic, it doesn't matter. I treat everyone the same." And there is certainly virtue to that. The mere concept of race is contrary to both biblical teaching and the scientific data. In the Old Testament lesson we read that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). We are all related. And we don't even have to go all the way back to Adam to see how we are related. We're all cousins from super-great-grandpa Noah. Every human being is valuable by virtue of being created by God. Therefore, we should treat every human being with the utmost respect, because man was created in the image of God. This is a basic biblical principle.

But there is a problem with the colorblind approach. If white people take the colorblind approach to the George Floyd video, we see *a* police officer kneeling on *a* man's neck, and we're not seeing what black Americans can't not see. I can't speak for black Americans. But I'm trying to listen, and this is what I hear. They want white Americans to see George Floyd as a black man. And they want white Americans to see them as black men and women, not in the sense that we discriminate against them for being black, but in the sense that we have compassion and sympathy, because they hurt when they see this happen to a black man.

Human beings feel more empathy for those individuals with whom we can relate. We all do it. I do it. You do it. And in those instances where we don't feel empathy, we need to recognize that someone else does.

When we recognize this, we can start to realize why many black people express fear of police. I'm still convinced that most police officers are good at what they do and are respectful to all people. I believed before that there were bad ones here and there, and I still think that. But I've grown in my appreciation for the vast majority of good police, because now, during riots, they have to protect peaceful protestors and private property while rioters insult them and even attack them for something they didn't even do. I can't even imagine how much restraint that takes.

Earlier this week someone asked me, "Why are people rioting? Why would they destroy their own communities?" I don't think my answer satisfied her, but I'm sticking with it. I said, "It's human nature." One theologian put it this way: "The law ... structures sinful society and keeps us from eating each other!" (J.W. Montgomery, *Christ as Centre and Circumference*, 580).

Riots are a raw picture of human nature when the Law is taken out of the equation. When we see riots or the aftermath of riots on our screens, we are appalled by the behavior. But we should also be humbled, because we share that same sinful nature. If we are angry enough, each of us is capable of the same thing. I don't mean that if the police announce they are taking a day off, everyone will go looting. Some will, but most people won't. But I am saying that each of us, if we are so mad about something that it overrides our consciences, we are all capable of rioting, looting, and even worse sins. When we see riots or the aftermath of them that is a raw picture of our own sinful nature.

Riots are also a picture of the brokenness and fear in the world. Without approving of violence, we can still sympathize with those who are angry and fearful. We can also sympathize with police who are trying to manage an unmanageable situation, one which most of them did nothing to create. I suspect there is a lot of fear among police as well. We can, and should, sympathize with all sides. We can say, “Black lives matter,” and, “Blue lives matter,” in the same sentence. I’m not hearing anyone say, “*Only* black lives matter,” or “Black lives matter *more*.” Nor am I hearing anyone say that about blue lives. These truths are self-evident, and they are in perfect harmony with each other.

When you hear a person say, “Black lives matter,” you don’t have to say, “So do white lives.” No one is saying they don’t. Rather, we should sympathize and recognize that the phrase “Black lives matter,” comes from a place of fear, anger, and frustration. It comes from the perception that black lives are being treated as less valuable. Now you don’t even have to agree with that perception in order to sympathize with it. The perception is there. So what are you going to do with it? Are you going to argue with the person who says, “Black lives matter”? Are you going to just ignore them? Or will you have compassion?

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the hero, a Samaritan, had compassion for a man in need. The man in need was a Jew. These two men were very different. There was no compelling reason for the Samaritan to relate to the Jew. He didn’t see himself lying in the ditch. They were from different tribes. The only point of contact was their shared humanity. The Samaritan had compassion for a man who was very different from himself. And he acted on that compassion. We call that love.

The Good Samaritan is a picture of Jesus. I’ve demonstrated this before when I’ve preached on this parable, once in 2016 and again in 2019. But today, for the sake of time, I’m going to take that previous work for granted. The Good Samaritan is a picture of Jesus.

In Jesus we see a human being who is like us in almost every respect. He took on human flesh and came among us. He is one of us. He chose to share humanity with us. But, at the same time, he is more different from us than any other person. No two people are more different from one another than Jesus is different from each of us. You can find the two most opposite people in the entire world. The difference between them will be less than the difference between either of them and Jesus. That is because, while Jesus is fully human, he is also fully God. This cannot be said about any other human. He is also without sin. This, also, cannot be said about any other human. He chose to share our humanity, but he is also more different from us than any other human.

That means that when Jesus sacrificed himself for us, he chose to sacrifice himself for people who could not be more different from him. In fact, the only reason he shared humanity with us at all is because he willingly chose to share it with us and suffer all of the things we suffer. It was a matter of Jesus offering himself for people who are different from him, and not just different in a neutral sense, but different in a depraved sense, different in the sense that we hate those with whom we disagree, different in the sense that we fight for our own rights, while we have little regard for the rights of others. It wasn’t a matter of the good Jesus seeing the goodness in humanity and relating to it. It was a matter of the good Jesus seeing the depravity in humanity and sacrificing himself to clean it up.

These last few weeks, I feel like we’ve seen the worst in humanity. Believe me, when God looked at us, what he saw was worse. And that is why he sent his Son. It’s not a matter of God relating to us. It’s a matter of us being different from God in the worst way possible, and him

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deciding to have pity on us and relate to us and take our place. That is compassion. That is the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.