

Dear friends in Christ



“Who is This That Darkens Counsel?”

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
Fourth Sunday of Pentecost, June 20, 2021
Proper 7

Job 38:1-11; Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32;
2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

A few days ago, I was speaking to a friend about the previous Sunday’s sermon. When he had heard that I was still serving a parish -- yes, at my advanced years, somehow funk’d retirement, I did – he had requested that I send him one of my efforts.

You know me. It was chock-a-block full of the straight gospel. The social gospel, because the movement of God’s people and all the rest is a group effort. I had spoken to our responsibility to live sustainably. I had spoken to our political indifference to the misuse of our wealth, and voter suppression.

After listening for a while, he said, “You’re almost there, but it didn’t speak to me personally.” As if he were the only one who mattered.

These days there’s an awful lot that has hit the fan. And as a corollary to Murphy’s Law states, “Everything that hits the fan is not equally distributed.” COVID-19, voter suppression, hate crimes – and myriad other social ills - disproportionately impact our most vulnerable.

For the entitled, when things don’t go according to our liking, our first

response is often to moan and groan. Dissemble. Shift the blame, or like the FBI director testifying before Congress this week about their dereliction of duty on January 6th, refuse to answer the questions. Lie.

We become so consumed by grievance, we think the whole universe revolves around our pity party. As Jesus said somewhere, “Get over yourself.” “Consider the lilies of the field.”

I recently read of a new program to compensate black farmers for the discrimination by the Department of Agriculture in various loan and crop subsidy programs. Inequities, often stemming from the inception of some of these programs, disadvantaged Black farmers. This systemic racism led to the loss of farms and the impoverishment of share croppers for generations. This, from the so called enlightened New Deal of Roosevelt.

The point being, the descendants of these farmers should have been compensated for way they were cheated. It’s the only moral and patriotic thing to do. I salute President Biden and his administration for righting this historical wrong – too many years in the waiting.

The next days, white farmers are up in arms about this redress. Where’s our handout? Huh? What about us? The program’s now on hold. My salute was aspirational, I guess.

“Who is this that darkens counsel without knowledge?” God must be demanding from the heavens. Gird up your loins like honest men and women. I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.”¹

Where were you at the inception of these agricultural programs when it was decided that some were worthy and some were not? All based on skin color? Tell me if you know. Declare it to me, God demands. Let’s have a little honesty about your feigned grievance, your pity party.

Let me switch the metaphor to Mark’s passage of Jesus disciples in

¹ Job 1:1 ff. New Revised Version.

their frail bark tossed about in a vast sea. Surely another apt metaphor for our time.

As I told my friend, the personal touch is good. I've been noted to recount such stories: the recovery story of Bo Cox, the transformation story from prison to upstanding community member of Albert Woodfox. That is what I so appreciate in the novels of Louise Erdrich, stories out of the native reservation lives from the Dakotas and Montana.

But the mission of Jesus is not just about "me." It's about "us." The whole of humanity. I'm sorry my friend couldn't see beyond his own situation to the broader whole. Not one will be saved if not the entire company takes hold of the promise of hope and fellowship with our Creator.

Throughout our history there have been individual actors, but those who were successful were always grounded in larger movements, in institutions.

The Ship of State we know as America presently is floundering on high seas. Monstrous populist waves threaten to capsize us all. We share the same terror as those disciples tossed about in pitch dark. We are truly all in one boat. The pandemic wave of COVID-19 threatens to flood our storm-tossed boat. Climate catastrophe, homelessness, families barely making it paycheck to paycheck.

And while many have done their duty, have gotten their vaccinations, worn their masks and kept their distance from the other passengers, there are those who wantonly put the entire passage at risk by refusing even the simplest communal obligations.

This last week a grocery store clerk was gunned down and a police officer wounded, simply because some customer took umbrage at being asked to wear a mask. Imagine, wear a mask, for God's sake.² Who is this who darkens counsel without knowledge and shoots up the rest of us in the boat? Such presumption!

² Associated Press, "Sheriff: Cashier fatally shot after argument over face masks," June 14, 2021.

My friend Susan Russell's response to such assertion of individual rights -- "If we're all in the same boat, yes, you have your rights, but you don't have the right to shoot holes in the bottom of the boat."

To my friend who desires the personal, I will insist on the communal. We're all in the same boat.

Election laws that disenfranchise voters in Georgia and Alabama rob us all of our democracy. Even in California. The crazy autocracy of Number 45 to toss out the results of the 2020 election is a virus infecting the entire Ship of State.

The other night, A.B. Stoddard of *Real Clear Politics* sounded the alarm, loud as a claxon going off. "The 2020 election could well be the last free and fair election of this republic. It's bad enough to suppress the votes. It's a completely different order of magnitude to rig how they are counted."

Joseph Stalin got it right, "It doesn't matter who votes. What matters is who counts the votes." And he would win reelection time and again with over 98 percent of the vote. Autocracy works quite well, thank you.

By Trump's party passing suppression laws in state after state, many giving local legislators the ability to overturn vote tallies after the votes have been cast, we become no more than one of those S... hole countries The Donald derides.

More holes in the Ship of State while rowers and bailers frantically struggle to keep it afloat and moving towards safe harbor.

Our boat is now storm-tossed as never before since the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction. Crazies have been let loose with entire arsenals, automatic weapons at the ready. We, like those twelve rowers whom Jesus approached on the high seas, fear for our lives, for our nation.

He comes to us with the same word he gave to those men: Shalom. Peace. Better translated as, "Get a grip!"

Your caterwauling will get you nothing. Come to your senses. Take a deep breath, and think on the things I have taught you. The Holy One, at your birth, has given you everything necessary. Put it to work.

Where there is disorder, chaos and insurrection, we have laws and norms. Put them to work. It's about solidarity and respect.

Put Gospel instruction to work. That's precisely what one organizer, Opal Lee, did.

When she was ten her family moved into Sycamore Park, a suburb of Fort Worth, Texas. Two years later, when twelve, an angry white mob of over five hundred terrorized her family for days. They threw rocks through the windows and threatened to kill the family.

Meanwhile law enforcement officers stood across the street and did nothing. Finally, the mob drove them out of their home and torched the house.

That was June 19, 1939. No one was arrested. That was a Juneteenth she and her family would never forget.

She could have grown up as a bitter old woman. Many of us would have. I understand that temptation completely.

Opal, known as the "Grandmother of Juneteenth," put that experience to work for good. She began organizing. Racism may have shot a lot of holes in the frail bark that is our democracy, but she was going to be plugging those that she could.

"Experiencing that hate crime pushed Mrs. Lee into a life of teaching, activism and, eventually campaigning. In 2016, at the age of 89, she decided to walk from her home in Fort Worth to Washington, D.C. in an effort to get Juneteenth named a national holiday. She traveled two and a half miles each day to symbolize the two and a half years that Black Texans waited between when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, on January 1, 1863, abolishing slavery, and the day that message arrived in Galveston, where Black people

were still enslaved on June 19, 1865.”³

Mrs. Lee’s march became a march of Black and White together, as Mrs. Opal says, “None of us are free until all of us are free.”

There are still millions more of us who believe in this glorious experiment in self-rule. Millions more working for a greater freedom for all.

We presently stand at an all-hands-on-deck moment. Write that letter, make that call. Summon your elected representatives to Democracy’s Altar. We need voting rights to be secured by national legislation, given that over 400 laws have now been enacted, or are presently proposed, in over 40 states to suppress voting.

Be instruments of blessed trouble, as John Lewis, the patron saint of Necessary Trouble, summons us in this hour of peril. Be disruptors for justice. As Opal still is at 95.

“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Jesus asks today of us. We have so much to celebrate. It’s Juneteenth this weekend. Let Opal Lee be our drum major.

We have a national anthem, but Rep. James Clyburn will be introducing legislation next week to give America a national hymn. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” would be a most fitting step towards bringing America through our dark night of racial bitterness.

Known as the Black National Anthem, written by James Weldon Johnson, this poem certainly captures the soul of Juneteenth, and the unfulfilled promise of America. As Rep. Clyburn said, it “would be an act of bringing the country together”.

“Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty.
Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies;
let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

³ Julia Carmel, “Opal Lee’s Juneteenth Vision Is Becoming Reality,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2021.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on, till victory is won.”

America has trod a shameful path, but redemption is at hand.
In the words of the second verse, we have come,
“over a way that with tears has been watered;
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the
slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

Keep marching on, Opal Lee at our side. The work is not done.
Happy Juneteenth! Amen.