**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

 **United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon June 21, 2020**

**THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

PRELUDE Jieun Kim Newland

Aria | Flor Peeters (1903-1986)

ANNOUNCEMENTS Lori Yamashiro

CALL TO WORSHIP Rev. Jeannie Thompson

God cares for us completely

and calls for our total commitment.

Christ gave his life that we might live

and calls us to give our lives to him.

Through Christ we have died to sin;

in Christ we are fully alive to God.

Come, let us worship God.

OPENING SENTENCES

God has the power to make a desert a place of renewal, and a cross a sign of redemption. How amazing and beautiful, that all of God’s power is grounded in compassion and caring for the beloved community, and for all of creation. How different this is from the world where power is measured in material goods, oppression, and control. Let us turn our lives to the source of all life. Let us entrust ourselves completely to God’s loving and righteous power. Come, Holy Spirit, lead us, and speak to us so that we can hear God’s ways, and follow in God’s paths.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Friends, let us prepare ourselves to hear God’s holy word by putting down all that

 burdens us and makes hesitant:

We acknowledge that sin destroys life,

 relationships, and even hope.

However, through the saving death and resurrection of Christ,

 our lives and our future are no longer enslaved to sin.

Therefore, let us trust in the love of God and confess our sin.

That we might receive grace and find true freedom.

Let us pray: *(Unison)*

**Holy God, forgive us for failing to understand and accept the great demands placed upon us by your love. We enlist in your causes, but find ourselves losing interest. We promise to be courageous, but find ourselves afraid. We want to be sensitive, but find ourselves indifferent and hard. Forgive us; take our limitations and turn them into possibilities for service. Have mercy on us and grant us your peace. Amen.**

Assurance of Pardon

Listen! Here is our good news: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners;”

- to forgive us our follies and foibles;

- to strengthen our hearts and spirits with the Holy Spirit;

- to set us free from evil’s power and make us what we were meant to be.

Thanks be to God!

PASSING THE PEACE OF GOD

*Even while keeping our “social distance” from one another,*

*let us extend God’s peace to each other.*

A READING FROM THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST Emily Pascua

Matthew 10:24-39

*24‘A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; 25it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!*

*26‘So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 28Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. 30And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

*32‘Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; 33but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.*

*34‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
35 For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
36 and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.
37Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

SERMON *“Plenipotentiary”* Pastor

As I was preparing this sermon, I came across a word that I had not heard or seen in print for a long time. It is the word, “*plenipotentiary.”* It was used in one of the commentaries I was reading and I actually laughed out loud when I saw it on the page because it is such a long, old fashioned word. It is used mostly, these days, in hyper formal diplomatic situations. The word most of us use in its place is “ambassador.”

Although I was amused at the author’s use of a formal, exalted, rather self-important word like *plenipotentiary,* I had to admit that it was appropriate in a way that the writer may not have intended. Which is to say: the first disciples may very well have thought of themselves *plenipotentiaries.* They may well have thought of themselves as being groomed to become Jesus’ *plenipotentiaries*, that is: men with power and authority. Men who were going to move through the world with all kinds of rights and privileges, all sorts of respect and admiration.

Plenipotentiaries. Ambassadors.

I could not help thinking about the neighborhood that surrounds our church. We are located in a very exclusive part of the island. I believe this part of Pali Highway is called “Embassy Row.” (I wonder…do you suppose there are people who call it *Plenipotentiary Road*? I guess they could.)

Although we are some two thousand years removed from the first disciples, the role of an ambassador is, I imagine, very much the same. You are sent from one seat of power—as its representative—to another seat of power. As such, you carry the authority of your government and your countrymen and women. Thus, you have the expectation that you will be received and shown a level of deference and esteem as is proper for one in such a position.

Certainly, your own government treats you with the kind of respect and honor that it expects from the country into which you are sent. Hence the beautiful residencies that surround us here in Nu‘uanu Valley. Each residence is supposed to say something about the dignitaries within: they are important people under the protection of a powerful government, and should be treated accordingly.

This part of Jesus’ teaching was supposed to *remove* those kinds of thoughts from the disciples’ minds—Jesus knew they were illusions that were best discarded. All of the trappings of such power were to be left behind as they embarked on Jesus’ behalf.

To be a disciple, nay, an apostle—this is a great honor. However, in verses 16-23, Jesus reveals the underside of their *honor*. Jesus’ focus now moves away from the disciples themselves, and he tells them about the actions and motivations of those who will *oppose* them. He describes for them the reality of rejection, refusal and active persecution that they will face as *his* plenipotentiaries.

The picture he paints is painful and frightening. So, we really do need to give lots of credit to the twelve. Their mission has gone from being glamorous and exciting to appearing to be a thankless, dangerous, fearful and possibly a one-way trial of endurance.

We need to give them credit for not sneaking off, or *running off* after this description, and we need to give them credit for what they seem to have learned and come to accept.

In all they will encounter, in the face of every challenge and even during outright persecution, the disciples know—they have accepted—that they are to find their strength, and their identity, in being like Jesus, their teacher. Indeed, when they are degraded and physically persecuted, they will know that it is because their testimony and their ministry is a true reflection—or likeness—of their master.

Jesus had just summarily been slandered by some Pharisees who suggested that his healing abilities came not from God but from “the prince of demons” or Beelzebub [Matthew 9:32-3]). Clearly, if the disciples faithfully carry out their mission, they should expect to encounter the sting of similar epithets.

So, why do this kind of work? Why follow Jesus at all? It is such a hard road!

Yes, it is, and each one of us needs to ask that question of ourselves—why follow a way that asks so much of us?

A couple of weekends ago, I was fortunate enough to be in the midst of a huge crowd of people who were demonstrating for *Black Lives Matter*. I did not walk with them from the park to the capitol building. Instead, I got there early, found a parking space, and a shady place to sit in the rotunda.

As I was sitting there, a large group of muscular young men began to collect around me. They all wore the same shirt with gold patches on their arms or chest. Most seemed to wear the same kind of sunglasses making them all look quite formidable.

I don’t know who they were. I asked one young man but his answer was drowned out by the chanting of the demonstrators who were beginning to also file into the space. Sitting where I was, I was able to hear bits of conversation of the police as they stood by with their radios and billy-clubs.

At one point, I was able to hear as one officer turned to several others and told them that the demonstrators would be allowed into the rotunda just so far—and he indicated a line on the pavement. I could not help but wonder, and be a little afraid of, what was going to happen if the line was crossed.

At this point, I got up and began to move around a little. Much to my relief, the crowd was not following an orderly line of movement. Some were coming in the Beretania Street side, but a lot were filtering in through the Iolani Palace side—they were coming in from all directions.

The police did not really have a chance to form a line of resistance against them. What is more: the people were peaceful—they were *very* vocal and insistent, but they were also committed to having a peaceful demonstration. They were organized and committed. I was relieved as the crowd—demonstrators and police—became one big group milling around, listening to the group leaders.

One part of their organization of this group, was people walking around to distribute bottles of water—not leaflets, but bottles of water.

It was a simple gesture that most of us would think of but it was also, I believe, different and indicative of the movement. They did not choose to deliver yet another appeal for agitation or protest. They passed out bottles of cold water—a gesture of hospitality and concern for the welfare of the participants.

That, I believe, is at the heart of *Black Lives Matter* and all other groups that protest, march demonstrate peacefully for the ethical treatment of other.

*Black Lives Matter* is a response to the brutality and the tendency to forget or deny the humanity of black people—and men in particular. This tendency makes it so much easier to crush the very breath out of them.

What *Black Lives Matter* is saying to us is that, yes, black lives matter, but not only because they are black. Not because they should be given special deference among us.

*Black Lives Matter* because all life is precious and that includes black lives; and because, for too long, black life has not been held with the same respect and caring as other lives.

This is, of course, a part of the history of this country, and many of us would like to leave all of this shame and turmoil in the past, and we could if the past did not continue to haunt our present with scenes like the one that played-out on a street in Minneapolis, and that is played-out in so many other streets in many other parts of the country and the world, on other black lives, on women’s lives, among people of different religions, people whose eyes are shaped differently, people whose skin is a different color—we all have one thing in common: our humanity is often forgotten or denied—the preciousness of our lives is often forgotten, or held differently, often cheaply.

Into these circles of life, Jesus enters and invites us to follow, peacefully but often, not quietly. Indeed, we are to shout Christ’s truth from the rooftops: that all are beloved children of God whose humanity is real, whose lives are dear to God, and all should be held with honor compassion.

And we follow—we must—the alternative is to let brutality prevail, and in so doing, we deny ourselves, we deny Christ, himself.

Some people will follow that route. They will deny the spirit—or what has been called: “the angels of our better selves,” and continue to live and work their savage ways that deny whole categories of people their humanity, and would divide-up the whole world into armed camps.

But there are others, and I was surrounded by a lot of them a couple of weeks ago. A lot of them were young people—very young people who saw, in this tragedy, a chance to help make an important change come about—not only for black people, yes, but also for all people. They saw a chance for what they hoped is to be their own future—a future of justice and equality.

They were like the disciples who continued to follow Jesus because they came to understand that the key to Jesus’ teaching is to think beyond the narrow meaning of the term “family.” In Jesus’ day, family meant a vast, extended network of relationships forming an economic and sometimes political entity known as a “clan.” Loyalty to the clan was expected above all else. Understood in this context we begin to see the implications of Jesus’ command. Jesus’ words put each person in a position of responsibility for his or her own heart and soul.

The final challenge to a disciple’s worth—the willingness to—“take up the cross”—brings us back to the reality that Jesus faced and the reality he wanted his disciples to fully grasp. By bringing us back to the cross, Jesus suggests that there will be a shared solidarity of suffering between himself and his disciples.

No one, not the strangers who physically torture the body, not the family members who emotionally tear at the loyalty of our hearts, can take away the kind of life that Jesus offers to share with us. And we embrace it not only with the reality of what we may face, but also because we are assured that this is what will usher into the world the peace and compassion that all God’s beloved children are meant to have. This is what will glorify God.

This is what we are called into doing and being—plenipotentiaries of Christ, ambassadors of justice and love. It is not an easy road to travel, but Jesus promised that it would bless us and the world in ways more deeply and completely than we can imagine. Will we follow—each of us in our own lives, and all of us as a church?

I know what my prayer for myself and for you is, but this is what Jesus promised. He said: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

This, then, is what I say to you: find life!

Amen.

HYMN OF RESPONSE *“Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me”* Rachel and Deanna Wong

PRAYER OF INTERSESSION

God of our ancestors, you are the God of our future. You showed mercy to Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, just as you answered Sarah’s laughter with Isaac’s birth. We pray that you heal the deathly divisions between all peoples of the earth today. We pray that the descendants of both Isaac and Ishmael may know forgiveness and peace with each other.

We pray that the church of Jesus Christ will be so filled with the Holy Spirit, so committed to the head of the church that we will have Christ’s mind among us. May the sword of the Word pierce our hearts and give us compassion for a suffering world. May it cut away all hidden bias and preconceptions in our minds and hearts.

We pray for world leaders and diplomats who seek to make peace among nations. May their success be measured in generations who live free from fear of injustice, oppression, and war.

We pray for medical professional committed to healing. Especially those in areas of poverty and violence. May they be guided by the Spirit who lifts up the brokenhearted and even raises the dead.

We pray for your promised kingdom to come, when all wars will cease, and there will be no disease; when courageous faith, hope and love cast out hatred and poverty. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray saying… *“Our Creator, who art in heaven…”*

DOXOLOGY Lianne Chung

**Ho‘o-na-ni i\_ka Ma-ku-a mau,**

**Ke Kei-ki me ka\_ ‘U-ha-ne no,**

**Ke Aku-a mau ho‘o-mai-ka‘i pu,**

**Ko ke-ia ao, ko\_ke-la ao. A-mene**

**BENEDICTION**

 **The God of all mercy,**

**who answers the cries of the helpless**

**and raises you from death,**

**keep you safe in Christ Jesus,**

**now and forever. Amen.**

POSTLUDE Jieun Kim Newland

Fanfare | William Mathias (1934-1992)