



“Marching Orders”
Scripture – Matthew 9:35-10:8
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 14, 2020

Covid-19 has kept many of us in our homes 90 percent of the time. One of the benefits is that people are taking time to walk more than ever. For years, Camilla has walked every day by herself or with a friend, but for the last three months, the two of us have been taking more walks together.

Danny Murphy, a Presbyterian minister in South Carolina was recently walking with his wife through his neighborhood. When he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, his driver’s license fell to the ground.

His wife, Judy, asked, “Why do you have your driver’s license?”

He replied, “Because I’m a black man living in America. If a white police officer happened to stop me, I’m prepared to prove that I live in this community.”

Such a thought would never cross my mind. When Camilla and I walk around our neighborhood the only thing I need to carry is a house key. There would be no reason for me to have any identification.

Some might think Pastor Murphy is unnecessarily worried about being stopped by the police, but he has good reason to be ready. His first encounter with white police officers was when he was only eight years old. He “was playing in a vacant lot near his house with several of his friends. A patrol car pulled up. Two white police officers walked over to the children and asked what they were doing.”

“We’re playing,” Murphy replied.

The officer said, “Well, one of you is going to jail, today!” Then the officer grabbed Murphy by the arm, walked him to the police car, opened the back door, and ordered him to get in the back seat.”

“The officers climbed into the front seat and drove away with young Danny crying hysterically. Over and over again, he said, “Officers, I didn’t do anything! I don’t want to go to jail! Please take me home! I want my mama!”

“The officers were laughing. They drove the little boy around for about five minutes and then dropped him back at the vacant lot. One of them said, ‘If you tell anyone what happened today, we’ll come back and arrest you and take you to jail for real next time.’ All of his friends had scattered. He stood there alone. While he was glad to be back in his neighborhood, he was traumatized by what happened that day. He walked home and never told anyone about this incident until recently.”¹

Years later he was “driving with a friend when a white police officer pulled him over. He did what every African American male has been taught to do to increase his chances of getting home alive. He rolled down the driver’s

window and made sure that both of his hands were grasping the top of the steering wheel, so that his hands would be in full view when the officer looked inside the car.”

The officer said, “Let me see your driver’s license.” Before making the slightest movement, Murphy said, “My driver’s license is in my wallet. My wallet is in my right back pocket. I’m going to use my right hand to retrieve it so that I can give you my driver’s license. Is that alright, officer?”

After slowly pulling out his wallet and handing it over, the police officer said, “What’s a black man like you doing driving a nice car like this?”

After a few moments, the officer walked back to his patrol car. “It seemed like an eternity before he returned. Fortunately, he handed back the license and let him go...but the officer kept on his tail for several blocks before heading in another direction.”²

As I mentioned in last week’s sermon, the great majority of police officers are honest public servants dedicated to protecting us. But enough black men have been pulled over for driving while black and enough have been intimidated by police to rightfully be wary.

It is impossible for a white person to understand the experience of a black person growing up in America. White parents teach their children to trust the police and to call on them if they are in trouble. Black parents teach their children to fear the police and to stay away from them if at all possible. I suspect nearly every black adult knows the humiliation of being called the N word. Most know the sting of being the butt of a racist joke. Just as a man cannot fully understand the experience of a woman, I don’t believe Caucasians can fully understand the experience of African Americans, but we must begin to understand as best we can. When we better recognize the experience of another, we can create bonds of trust and be energized to desire fair treatment for others.

In today’s gospel lectionary reading, we learn that Jesus has been traveling to various towns and villages carrying out his ministry of teaching and healing. Seeing multitudes of people in need, he feels compassion for them. He notices that they have been harassed and need help.

I suspect a similar feeling welled up in many of the white people young and old who joined the protests over the past couple of weeks. They have heard enough about the experience of African Americans to know that too often they have been harassed, and they could use the help of their white brothers and sisters.

In our passage, Jesus adopts a new strategy. Perhaps he feels overwhelmed by the number of people needing his care, like doctors and nurses swamped with Covid-19 patients. Or, perhaps it was his way of training his disciples for the time when he would no longer be with them. Or, perhaps it was a bit of both.

Jesus calls together his 12 disciples, and passes the baton. He has been caring for the bruised and broken; now it is their turn. The New Revised Standard Version says that Jesus gave them authority to cast out unclean spirits and to cure every disease and sickness. I especially like the way The Message version of the Bible puts it. Jesus “gave them power to kick out the evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives.”

This is the mission Jesus gave to his followers 2,000 years ago and these are the marching orders Jesus gives to us today. We are to be in the world to battle the demons of racism and violence and oppression and injustice. We are to throw ourselves into curing the ills that are shredding the fabric of America and ravaging people’s lives. The time for silence has passed.

Have you been following the transformation of Drew Brees, the celebrated quarterback of the New Orleans Saints? Back in 2016, Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, ignited a controversy in the

NFL by refusing to stand for the playing of the National Anthem. It was his way of protesting racism and violence against blacks. Many other players along with a few coaches and owners knelt in protest with him.

However, a backlash ensued when some claimed it was all about disrespecting the flag. That is how Drew Brees felt. Both of his grandfather's fought in World War II, putting their lives on the line on behalf of our country.

I can understand his pride in his grandparents. My father and Camilla's father both served in World War II to protect not only our nation, but the world, from the fascist dictator Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. We are awed by their sense of duty and their willingness to make such a sacrifice to secure liberty and justice and to make the world safer.

However, Drew Brees had missed the point. He had not connected the fact that his grandfathers' fought alongside black men who also fought for this country; but when the war was over, the Federal Housing Authority that insured mortgages for countless white servicemen, refused to insure mortgages in and near African American neighborhoods. Further, "the FHA was subsidizing builders who were mass-producing entire subdivisions for whites – with the requirement that none of the homes be sold to African-Americans."³ If you have difficulty understanding systemic racism, that's a prime example.

Fortunately, despite being one of the greatest quarterbacks in NFL history, Drew Brees is also humble – not something you can say about a lot of professional athletes. But Brees is humble enough to listen and to admit he was wrong in his opposition to players protesting by kneeling.

A few days ago, he wrote on Instagram: "Through my ongoing conversations with friends, teammates, and leaders in the black community, I realize this is not an issue about the American flag. It has never been. We can no longer use the flag to turn people away or distract them from the real issues that face our black communities. We did this back in 2017, and regretfully I brought it back with my comments this week. We must stop talking about the flag and shift our attention to the real issues of systemic racial injustice, economic oppression, police brutality, and judicial and prison reform. We are at a critical juncture in our nation's history! If not now, then when?"

Brees went on to say, "We as a white community need to listen and learn from the pain and suffering of our black communities. We must acknowledge the problems, identify the solutions, and then put them into action. The black community cannot do it alone. This will require all of us."

Can we – like Drew Brees – humble ourselves enough to listen? To listen with an open soul to suffering, anger, and despair of people who have had a knee on their necks their entire lives? Can we be humble enough to admit that, as white people, we have enjoyed the invisible perks of white privilege, and cannot fully understand what it is like to be a victim of racism? Can we be humble enough to recognize that racism not only dehumanizes blacks, but all of us? It skews how we see others and how we treat others. It blinds us to unjust systems that treat blacks differently than whites.

My hope and prayer is that we white followers of Jesus will be good listeners and not become defensive. One of the core beliefs of the Christian faith is that no one is perfect, but when we acknowledge how we fall short, we can be transformed and become more like Christ. That is step one.

Step two is to take our marching orders seriously and kick out the demons that wreak havoc in our nation and in our souls.

NOTES

1. The Reverend Dr. Danny C. Murphy, "My Thoughts on George Floyd" *Journal for Preachers*, June 5, 2020.
2. Ibid.
3. Terry Gross, "A 'Forgotten History of How the U.S. Government Segregated America,'" *Fresh Air*, May 3, 2017. More details of this practice can be found in Richard Rothstein's book, *The Color of Law*.

Prayers of the People ~ The Reverend Dr. Eric Ruoss

Our Creator God, we approach you today, as always, knowing that your time is eternal and that ours is limited; your universe is infinite and our world is bounded. We look to receive your Peace and Guidance so we must open our hearts and minds to your greater perspective.

With this awareness we ask you to help us begin each new day with the resolve to treat each hour as the rarest of gifts and to be grateful for the consciousness that allows us to experience it.

We believe in your ancient message that holding an attitude of faith and hope toward this life and all that it brings will profoundly alter the path of our life.

We ask that you remind us each day that our experience of the infinite, your hidden and hallowed power, is within the relationship that we build with our fellow beings.

We are blessed with the facility to change our world by changing our relationship to it.

Our God, you carry, guide, and strengthen us throughout our lives, but we confess that we only listen to your guidance when we need it most.

Hard as we might try to hide from you, you find us. You come to us through the gift of memory so that we can learn from our past. You bless us with the gift of hope so that we can act today in ways that will make your world the place that you want it to be.

Through the use of our blessings of creativity, adaptability, and empathy we can help all of your children to live fully empowered, happy, healthy, and productive lives.

Our God, we know that all in this world get stronger as each of your children gains strength. We know that we depend on each other, friend and stranger alike, for guidance, support, and encouragement.

Our God, your spirit within us carries us through dark moments, and presents us with the opportunity to seek the light, to see the light, to follow the light, to share the light.

You always bring your people out of darkness and give them peace when they summon the will to follow.

We ask that you give us the strength, this day, to recognize the blessings of memory and hope, creativity and adaptability, empathy and compassion so that:

We want only what we need
We shed resentments
We encourage good humor
We show mercy to those in pain

And so that we put our precious gift of life to use in service to you. All of this we ask with the guidance of our Lord Jesus, Who taught us to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.