This morning we come together for worship and prayer after more than a week of daily protests across our city in response to the killing of Breonna Taylor, and then David McAtee, alongside the national outcry over the murders of George Floyd, Ahmad Arbery, and so many others throughout American history. We are of course also still in the midst of a pandemic whose impact we must continue to combat.

It is also Trinity Sunday.

Where is God in all of this? What does it mean to be a Christian right now, and for most of this congregation—particularly a white Christian? What can we do?

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In the understanding of the Trinity that makes the most sense to me—the Trinity is social. It is a community between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is One God in Three Persons, holy, holy, holy. The three persons are co-equal, and co-eternal, and can be imagined in a dance with each other. They are interdependent and interconnected. And as we heard in the Genesis reading, we are made in the image of God and so those relationships between the persons of the Trinity are a model for how we can live out our Christian lives in community. It need not be anymore complicated than that. But, it seems, when we try to live that out, we fall very short of a vision of unified, co-equal love, dancing together. We
fall short because, of course, we are not God. The image of the Trinity as a loving community is a helpful model for us in our Christian lives, but we worship the majesty of perfected, complete equality, love, and unity only found in God’s very self.

James McCarty, a social ethicist, writes* about how we do fall short and how looking to the life of the Trinity can help us move closer to the kind of loving reconciliation we see between the persons of the Trinity, and it can help us answer the difficult question I hear us asking during these last 12 days—what can we do to change things?

McCarty tells the story of the Greensboro Massacre in November of 1979, when four members of the Communist Workers’ Party (CWP) and a male protester were killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party (ANP). Both groups were armed and very few police were present even though a local police officer and an FBI agent had infiltrated the Klan and knew of their plan to confront the protestors. No one was convicted in the killings—each was acquitted at trial. In 2004, 25 years after the massacre, a private group formed the Greensboro Truth & Reconciliation Commission to address the lingering wound and investigate the events.

McCarty describes the work of the commission, which was modeled after the post-apartheid commissions in South Africa. They recognized that the lack of a satisfactory outcome in the legal system only compounded the
pain and distrust in the community. The commission set about its work. They prioritized hearing voices of victims and the re-telling of the history through the experience of the victims; they highlighted patterns of institutional abuse and pushed against the excuses that the violence had been committed by “bad apples.” The Commission also noted that the institutional failures created conditions for individuals to commit acts of violence. Their work forced residents to confront their self-image as a “progressive” city and explained that individuals’ experience of the social institutions of the community shaped how you related to those institutions, and the experience of those institutions was very different between white and black residents. The commission concluded that in order for reconciliation to occur, there must be acts of justice developed out of a true understanding of the victims’ experience.

McCarty suggests that Christians often want to move to reconciliation by sharing a forgiveness that leads to a uniting embrace. He cautions that if the hard work of creating justice is not done as one works toward that uniting embrace, new injustices will occur and the pain will deepen. There can be no justice without the will to embrace, but equally, there can be no genuine and lasting embrace without justice.

McCarty emphasizes that this goes beyond the individual—that while each of us must work toward this just embrace in our individual lives, we must also re-make our social institutions into institutions of justice that are recognized as such by the victims.
If we are all created in the image of God, which is to say, in the image of the Trinity, we are created in community like the three persons—to be interdependent and interconnected. Our dignity, McCarty suggests, rests in the relationships we have with each other.

So how can we, particularly those of us who are white Christians, work to address the deep injustices that Black Americans experience both interpersonally and through our social institutions and begin moving toward reconciliation?

McCarty points to theologian Miroslav Volf* who describes 4 key moments of the reconciling Trinitarian embrace: repentance, forgiveness, making space in oneself for the other, and the healing of memory. These do not happen in a linear way, but are moments that we move in and out of in any relationship. He points out that forgiveness cannot violate justice. It seems to me that we must heal a lot of really painful memories—our own individual memories, our memories as Louisvillians, as Americans. For some that will mean a commitment to repentance. Others will rely on God’s grace to lead them to a place of forgiveness. White Americans will have to make space for Black voices and hear their experiences as true and real and worthy of justice.
Last year I spent my sabbatical studying the Nicene Creed, which meant also studying the Trinity, or, the doctrine of God. One thing I learned was that while most white American Christian theologians begin their doctrine of God just where we did today—with the creation story from Genesis—most Black American Christian theologians begin their doctrine of God with the Exodus story, where Israel, a minority people under oppression, cries out to God and God hears their cries. By delivering the people from Egyptian bondage, “God is revealed as the God of the oppressed.”

It should not be surprising that we have different starting points even for understanding who God is. In one narrative, God’s people are the oppressed crying out from bondage and God delivers them to safety; in another God’s people are mirrors of the divine and given sovereignty over all the earth and all creatures. It’s a striking difference.

Like the Greensboro Commission suggested, in order to move toward reconciliation, we must begin the re-telling of our history through the experience of Black Americans and understand that what they tell us is true and it is unjust. For us Christians, that will mean getting to know the God of the oppressed more deeply. It will mean seeking forgiveness that is sometimes met with distrust and skepticism. It will mean trusting that the difficult work of building unity and justice is rooted in our interdependence and interconnectedness. It will mean that to look more like God’s image, we will have to really look to embrace the truth of our neighbor.
This is what it means to be a Christian Right now, and especially a white Christian. It is the answer to “what can we do?” This is difficult work. It is long work. But we do it with God’s help. And God promises to always be with us, even to the end of the age.

Amen.


**See the book “We Have Been Believers,” James Evans, Jr., page 155 as a starting point.