

June 28

St. Paul writes in our passage from his letter to the church in Rome (6:12-23) that we ought to recognize and live in accordance with three inter-related ideas.

One, we all live in obedience to something, (whether we were made that way isn't really clear here)—that is, it is in our nature for us humans to give ourselves, align ourselves, with something larger and outside ourselves. Think of it this way, theoretically, we could travel overland on our own—through dale and over hill—but in practice we turn out to chose a path, a highway, already there because that's the way we are made, we say.

Second, there is more than one path to choose from. To chose the Christian way has its requirements and rewards and challenges. But Christianity is not the only path out there, and it is certainly not often the obvious choice to a great many people. In fact, from some vantage points, Christianity may not seem a salubrious choice at all. Christianity does not promise health, wealth, or longevity, for example.

Third, to chose the Christian path does not mean there are no difficulties or challenges ahead. However, there are assurances that living as God intended from the beginning is going to bring good things into being for us. If we think about it for a moment, the many incidents in the gospels between the coming of Jesus and his passion-his earthly ministry—are all about the challenges people face and what he says and does in response to that.

Why is it that choosing to be a disciple of Christ is hard—joyous, but hard from time to time, like now? It has never been easy, but this is a rough time. We're in isolation and fearful about a terrible disease. The world economy is wavering.

Here in the USA, as we struggle with the public health crisis, we are also beginning to face in a deeper way our long, painful, shameful history of racism—people of color simply don't live in the same America white people live in, as both the disease statistics and the violence done to people of color make more obvious every day.

I hope I am not fooling myself that the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor from needless violence that led to unjust, unfair, cruel deaths, these sadly unremarkable incidents (truly horrible to have to write that) came before the us at a time when we could be grabbed and held by the reality these tragedies reveal.

We have far fewer distractions and demands on us just now as we live in 'lockdown'. The obvious cruelty and uncaring violence billowing up at us from the video and news reports about these incidents and uncounted others just lands on us harder than it would have otherwise—and in our way, "We can't breathe". This stuff chokes us, as it should.

Without the virus, and with video cameras, we all have been presented with undeniable truth that these times will not let us deflect, neglect, ignore, deny what is plainly common and long-standing in our society.

I am not one for looking around to find silver linings in tragedies, yet I don't want to deny that being given the chance of facing up to our society's systemic racism in the midst of the death and tragedy COVID 19 has produced is a good thing. Perhaps we shall see a good outcome from a bad thing, the sort of outcome that doesn't make up for the bad stuff, but which somehow brings forth something new.

There are seeds which require a forest fire to quicken them—this does not make the fire less devastating, but something good gets set in motion, too. One wants to be very careful not to suggest that our pandemic is somehow made less horrible because we are now facing racism with more focus and attention than before. That would be cruel and thoughtless. But it is true that these two things are happening at the same time.

Lincoln wrote about God doing a great work within the horrors of the Civil War in his Second Inaugural Address. Reminding everyone that the war came because of our social and personal human failings—esp., slavery—Lincoln also stood in humility before the idea that God could make something come of the catastrophe—not least a renewed commitment to our national heritage. I know I often refer to Lincoln in these times. I think about him and his circumstances and our national situation then a great deal. He was a deep thinker, shaped by the practicalities of his profession as a lawyer (he argued as defense counsel and plaintiff's council, both civil and criminal cases, and a magistrate from time to time), and his deep reading of the Bible and the plays of Shakespeare. All of which led him to appreciate the depths underlying human behavior and an awareness of something greater at work.

For us now, seeing more clearly what is wrong and choosing to address it, to see it for what it is, gives our otherwise catastrophically bad circumstances value. It puts me in mind of that phrase from the hymn, Come, labor on: “redeem the time”. That outlook is what we can give ourselves to work on in our hearts and in our conversation, as we observe what is now happening in the streets.

God bless you all.