

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:14—4:6

For this reason I bow my knees before the God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Parent of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Prayer before the sermon

Uniting God, we pray that the church may be one in Christ, a true fellowship of the cloud of witnesses who know their oneness in you and speak the word of healing to this troubled world. For the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen. (STS #202)

Where were you January 6 mid-afternoon? I had just finished a visit while walking on the Meewasin Trail and climbed into my vehicle. CBC radio was doing non-stop reporting about violence in some capital, so I knew something significant was happening. Imagine my shock when they gave the location of this news making event as Washington, D.C. Word of a riot shocked me. At that point I returned home rather than the office declaring that the Capitol was under siege. Patty responded, “What?; where?” “Washington,” I replied. We watched news that afternoon for far too long.

Several thoughts went through my mind as scenes rolled across the screen of marauding white folk cloaked in Confederate, neo-Nazi, and other insidious flags pillaging halls of democracy. Wow, I thought, the Rotunda hasn’t seen this kind of action since 1814 when the British sailed up the Potamic. I also found myself considering the March on Washington in August 1963 and how different that Great March was from what I was witnessing. It was at that event that Martin Luther King Jr. made his “I have a dream” speech; you know the one—where a person might be judged by the content of their character rather than the colour of their skin. Tomorrow is MLK Day in the U.S. In August 1963 they preached moving sermons; on January 6 they carried assault rifles. It is remarkable the ways in which theology can shape attitudes and action. Today I will take some time to consider what being the church means in the face of the racial and physical violence we saw unleashed in Washington D.C.

I begin this ambitious topic by returning to the differing outcomes of the Civil Rights March of 1963 and the mayhem we witnessed on January 6. The Civil Rights struggle was undergirded with a different set of theological assumptions than the 2021 march on Washington. John Lewis was a church leader, major presence in the Civil Rights movement and statesman. He died in July, 2020 after faithfully serving his constituency in the U.S. House of Representatives for 37 years. Much of the theology he expressed resonates with my understanding of what it means to be a Mennonite and a Mennonite Church rooted in the peace tradition. It is worth exploring some of his story as we consider Being Church in Riotous Times.

Growing up in Troy, Alabama in the 1950’s in a segregated world, church was comforting and restorative for the Lewis family. From the beginning of his engagement with scripture as a child, John Lewis was drawn to the scope of the Christian story—the story of a created order disrupted by sin and redeemed by Jesus. For a youngster of great imagination and quickening faith, there could be no more moving saga than the bible stories of deliverance—themes in scripture and music that shaped Lewis’ life from his earliest days, particularly the stories of the Israelite exodus from slavery in Egypt.

John Lewis' vocation as a minister began with his chief chore on the farm: the care of the family's poultry. "We had a lot of chickens," Lewis recalled. "I literally started preaching to the chickens...They became members of my first church...I remember my first act of nonviolent protest was when my parents would kill one of the chickens and I would refuse to eat the chicken." As is often the case, there were pastoral mishaps. "When I was about five or six years old, I wanted to save the soul of a chicken, and I accidentally drowned it during an attempted baptism."

When one of his feathered charges died, Lewis would conduct a full funeral, complete with readings from scripture and a eulogy. It describes John Lewis to a T: an earnest young farm boy presiding over an unruly flock, concerned for their well-being and insistently offering the gospel to an audience disinclined to heed it. Lewis long saw his work in the coop as formative.¹

John Lewis' work in civil rights began as a teenager when his local public library in Troy, Alabama allowed only white patrons. He got a petition and worked to get the library integrated. From there he went to college in Nashville and met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and together with activist Diane Nash worked at getting the lunch counters in Nashville integrated. John Lewis believed that God was on their side for integration and in spite of the pushbacks, the beatings, the bombings, the burnings, that God's truth of love of all people would prevail".² "The civil rights movement was born in the churches," Lewis said, "with sermons and spirituals and our belief that we are all God's children who are called to actualize the fruits of the Spirit in our lives and in our nation".³

Preaching not to the chickens but to those in power gathered in the Washington National Cathedral in 2018, John Lewis said, "We truly believed that through the discipline of nonviolence, through the power of peace and the power of love, that we could transform America into something Martin Luther King, Jr. called a Beloved Community. This was our conscious goal. We worked, we struggled and we suffered to make that dream a reality. Consider those two words "Beloved Community". Beloved - meaning not hateful, not violent, not uncaring, not unkind; and Community - meaning not separated, not polarized, not locked in struggle. The Beloved Community is an all-inclusive world society based on simple justice that values the dignity and the worth of every human being [of] the Kingdom of God."

"We rode the Freedom Buses because of our faith. If Martin Luther King Jr were here today, he would still be saying we are all in this together. Our ancestors

¹ John Meacham, *His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope* (Toronto: Random House Canada: 2020), p. 27.

² Ibid, p. 245.

³ Ibid, p. 234.

maybe came to this land on different boats, mine came on the slave ships from Africa, yours came on the ships from Europe but now we are all in the same boat. Whether we are black or white or Hispanic or Asian American or First Nations, we have to find a way to live together. We have to find a way to understand each other. We have to find a way to make peace with each other”⁴.

We Shall Overcome became an anthem song of the Civil Rights Movement with strengthened and inspire people. At this time I would invite Lynn to sing this powerful folk hymn for us.

We have the same scripture text this week as we had last week. I have done this not because other scriptures are unworthy, but on account of the power this passage has as we consider being Christians and Church in riotous times. As I mentioned last week, the first three chapters of Ephesians carefully outline the role Jesus Christ plays in the redemption and healing of all things. Hear these snippets mindful of Jan 6. Jesus Christ has a name that is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (1:21). By the faith of Jesus we have been saved, “and this is not our doing; it is the gift of God” (2:8). In Christ Jesus the walls between people have been broken down, that is the hostility among us (2:14), and through the cross has actually put enmity to death (2:16). And lest we doubt the comprehensive nature of God’s plan, we are reminded that God is the parent “from whom **every** family in heaven and on earth takes its name” (3:14). The apostle does suggest that in Christ Jesus we have been created for “good works” (1: 10), and this becomes the focus of chapters 4-6. Consider Jan 6 as I quote from this section.

Based upon all God and Christ have done, we are to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called (4:1). We are to value the varied gifts of the community which build up the body (4:11-13). We are to speak the truth **in love** both in and beyond the Church (4:15, 25). We are reminded to avoid ignorance and greed (4:18-19). “Be angry”, Paul writes, “but do not sin” (4:26). Share with the needy (4:28). Let words be used to build up and not tear down (4:29). We are to forgive as we have been forgiven (4:32). The “House Hold Codes” detail how those with power ought to care for those with little power (5:21—6:9). And because this is tough to do, we are told to dress ourselves in divine non-violent garb which will keep us spiritually safe (6:10-17) in the struggle. Finally, pray at all times (6:18-20).

These are very concrete directives and a clear guide for how we might be Church in these days, and yet I will highlight one or two areas of specific application for us for Mennonites and Mennonite congregations in this oft broken world.

⁴ Ibid, p. 235.

First, we have a biblical, historical, and church tradition which understands that the essential Christian response to violence and racism and nationalism is to stand alongside the oppressed. In a book published last year Drew Hart, a Black Anabaptist who teaches at Messiah college in Pennsylvania, wrote about coming to be in our Peace tradition from a black Evangelical background. In a chapel service at the university he attended, a Black church man from the Anabaptist community spoke about God taking sides with the oppressed and standing against injustice. God did this all throughout the Old Testament, the speaker said. Jesus did the same thing in the New Testament, he said. The early church did this in the Roman empire, he said. Why has the modern white church been indifferent to slavery, to the Jim Crow laws, to the present moments of racial violence?, he asked. Why has the white church of various denominations not repented of white supremacy.⁵

The guest preacher was speaking the truth in love. Mennonites should get what it means to have property confiscated and loved ones executed. We should get what it means to be a refugee seeking a new start. When we walk with our indigenous communities; when we create space in our hearts and churches for those with different last names than us; when we advocate for the least of these we are doing so for Christ (see Mt 25:31ff). In a different book Drew Hart would suggest our churches have room to grow in these areas.⁶

Secondly, words are important. I am struck with the attention Paul gives to words in those last chapters of Ephesians. We live well as Christians and a faith community when we use our words to build up and not tear down. As we saw on January 6 at the pre-riot rally, words have the power to foment hate. There are dire consequences for dis-information, mis-formation, and undercutting the truth.⁷ Written words and spoken words—to those power, to those of our family, to those of our community—are important. There are some things about being the “still in the Land” that we might need to unlearn.

Finally, for today, we learn again to pray. Not unlike other eras there is a spiritual struggle out there, and prayer reminds us who we are and whose we are. Prayer is real, and it makes a difference. So let us learn again to pray for protection and that we might be equipped for the challenges before us.

More can be said and will be said on “Being the Church”, just not today. Amen.

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⁵ Drew Hart, *Who Will Be a Witness?* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press 2020), p. 103

⁶ Drew Hart, *Trouble I've Seen* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press).

⁷ “Witness to the Siege” is a powerful conversation from PBS staff which aired January 12, 2021 and can be found on their website: