

“Putting Things in Order”
Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Cunningham
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, June 7, 2020

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

The Apostle Paul had spent a couple of years living amongst the people who were part of the growing Christian community in Corinth. However, the initial joyful sense of community of this new Christian group soon became a memory, as lines became drawn within the community that distinguished some from others, voices grew louder to attract allegiance, sides were picked, and arguments grew larger. Paul would from time to time travel to other Christian communities to visit, and with each return to Corinth, he saw the divisions grow deeper and uglier.

And in this second letter to the Corinthians, in the last few lines, he sprinkles these words of grace into the path: “Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.” And then he concludes with, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Paul appeals to *communitas*, the spirit of community, the remembrance of what they had but can no longer find. He calls them to this deeper sense of identity that they once knew and rejoiced in – a calling that was rooted in acceptance, and love for the other.

The closing words of Paul’s letter are known within the church for they are often used in worship as a blessing. ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.’ Often, that word communion is translated as fellowship, so you’ll hear, ‘and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.’ But the sense is the same – that we will be joined together as one through the movement of the Holy Spirit, that connects and binds our hearts as one. This sense of community is a living thing. It warms the heart through its welcome and sustains and nourishes through love.

Diana Butler Bass writes about this sense of *communitas* in her book *Grounded*. She says, “*Communitas* is a Latin noun for the spirit of community, typically those groups that form beyond regular institutions and organizations and create a profound sense of equality and togetherness. It is the opposite of the feeling of alienation and isolation. Instead, it is the movement of some sort of spirit in which people discover that solidarity is possible.”¹

You will find a spirit of *communitas* in this congregation of Stouffville United Church. But *communitas* isn’t limited to only church congregations. It is part of the public place, part of the *commons*, found in the places where the community lives and works and plays.

The spirit of *communitas* has been missing for a very long time in North America. For 400 years, once the white Europeans set foot on the shores of this continent, there has been no

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 249.

true spirit of *communitas*. For decisions were made, not based on the spirit of *communitas*, but rather in the determination that someone was ‘less than’ them. And a power imbalance took hold and that power imbalance became part of the structures and the institutions that filled the land. And that power imbalance still continues to hold people down, most horrifically displayed this past week in the United States by the knee of someone ‘in authority’ pressing down on the neck of a black man, who was held down on the ground by attending officers. His name was George Floyd. Calling out for mercy, calling out to his mother, calling out that he couldn’t breathe, George Floyd’s life slowly left his body.

His murder has been met by mass protests in the United States for the last week and a half, with looting and burning of police cars and buildings. The protesters have been met by riot police in full gear, shooting rubber bullets, tossing tear gas canisters, backed by a federal government that is using muscle and weapons to claim law and order in the face of this civil unrest.

In Canada, there have been protest marches in all major cities, some breaking into violence. As Prime Minister Trudeau said this past week, “It is a time to listen, it is a time to learn what injustices continue despite progress over years and decades.” Trudeau continued, “There is systemic discrimination in Canada, which means our systems treat Canadians of colour, Canadians who are racialized, differently than they do others.”²

Broken community. And its been broken a very long time. You can look back to see if you can fix what was broken – but that is not what is called for. The black community is telling us that there is nothing to go back to, because there was never a relationship worth keeping. There was no beloved community. We will get there, not by looking backwards at what was, but by looking forward. The beloved community is ahead of us. White people are only now, as the protests continue, and as the passions rise, witnessing and seeing, sometimes for the very first time, the suffering that people of colour, that indigenous peoples have suffered for hundreds of years at the hands of white colonial supremacist power.

Here’s something I didn’t know. In James Cone’s book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, I found out that in June, 2005, the U.S. Senate issued a historic apology to the “families of more than 5,000 lynching victims across the country for its failure to enact an anti-lynching law first proposed 105 years ago.” Lynching is the killing of a person, especially by hanging, by mob action and without legal authority. It is sanctioned by the community. Lynching began “after the Civil War and the end of slavery in 1876. Lynching continued unabated, uncontested by the law.”³ George Floyd’s death is a lynching. James Cone continues, “the House of Representatives passed the ... anti-lynching legislation several times, but it was always defeated in the Senate, whose members, especially in the South, insisted that lynching was a necessary tool to protect the purity of the white race.”⁴

² <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/as-us-boils-over-trudeau-says-systemic-racism-in-canada-must-be-addressed/ar-BB14VsVp?ocid=spartandhp>

³ James Cone, 99.

⁴ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 99.

Did you get that part – “to protect the purity of the white race?” Did you get the part that it was only 15 years ago, in 2005, that an apology was *finally* offered to the families of over 5,000 black men, women, and children who were murdered by lynching in the twentieth century?

Rev. Michael Blair is the Executive Minister of the Church in Mission, in the United Church of Canada. And he told us in a recent Facebook post⁵ how and what it is that we do, as a white person, that makes it hard for him, as a black person, to breathe. I want to share some of his post. “I can't breathe, when you leave it to me to name the racism that is in your face yet you keep silent... When you take the system as a given, and don't question assumptions or the way things are, and are silent...you leave me gasping and fighting for air... I can't breathe when you want me to represent and you do not ask why there are so few people like me around...and you keep silent. I can't breathe when you see pictures of the institutions you are a part of that only show white people...and you stay silent and don't ask why... If you are serious about taking steps to name anti-black racism and racial violence (not just the physical) then your starting point is a commitment to stay silent no more...”⁶

Stay silent no more. I will use my white voice to put things in order. I will use my white voice to dismantle the systems that oppress, I will use my white voice to re-learn the relationships, to re-order what is in disorder. And maybe then we will begin to remember the vision. The vision that speaks through scripture, the vision that sings in the human heart. A vision that brings hope, a vision that restores justice, a vision that welcomes all to the table ... God's vision of community, imbued by the *communitas*, the *same* spirit of community that is found within the Trinity, in the ties that bind the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit into One.

As a commentary wrote, “This is the kind of oneness enjoyed by the triune God, and human beings are invited to participate in it through faith. It is the very goal of God in the world, and we know it by faith as the coming shape of the human future, when all the tragedy, difficulty, and limits of our relationships with each other will be overcome at last.”⁷

As I white person, I shall overcome my white privilege when I do the hard work of learning and re-learning what lies within me that speaks to white privilege. As a white person, you shall overcome when you do the hard work of learning and re-learning what lies within you that speaks to white privilege.

It's time to become allies, and not roadblocks.

And only then will racism be overcome.

Because humanity can't breathe until racism is gone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Michael Blair, Facebook post on his personal Facebook page, May 31, 2020.

⁶ Facebook post by Rev. Michael Blair on his facebook page, May 31, 2020.

⁷ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Theological Perspective, 42.