

JUNE 7 WORSHIP SERVICE

PEACE PRAYER – NANCY STUCKY

Based on the prayer by Jesse Dunigans and Samuel Voth Schrag, 2014, mennoniteusa.org

Dear Lord, We give thanks for the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst, who offers salvation and the gospel of peace. And in this time of conflict in our communities and country, we lift up in prayer all those involved.

We pray for the family of George Floyd, who are grieving in the midst of protest and conflict. We pray with them for peace and for justice to be done.

We pray for the police officers who are faithfully trying to exercise the public trust. We pray that they might all be held safely in the arms of God, and that they might treat all of God's children with respect and fairness.

We pray for the protestors who are seeking justice and to undo racism in our society. For the vast majority of people who have spoken in peaceful and hopeful ways, we ask for courage and protection. And for those who have been moved in anger to looting and violence, we pray that they might channel their anger in more faithful directions in the days to come.

We pray for the leaders who are seeking to find next steps forward in their relationships with their communities, and are discerning how to proceed.

We pray for right relationships between police and citizens, and a bond of trust forged by faithfulness and respect on both sides.

We pray for a transformation of the relationships between races in our nation. We pray for an end to the segregation that has divided our neighborhoods by race and class.

May we all follow God's calling to break down the dividing walls between people, and to stand for justice with those who are oppressed.

We pray this in the name of Jesus, who gives healing and peace, Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Loving God, we are grateful to gather - each in our own home, but together in our desire to know and be faithful to you. We are grateful for health, for your bountiful provisions, for the beauty and wonder of creation, for the arrival of warm summer days. We give thanks for the creativity shown by so many people, a reflection of your creative image, as they think of new and different ways to do things in order to keep people safe as the pandemic continues. We are grateful, God, that the numbers of cases in our area have been relatively low and we ask for continued patience as we move forward with precautions, protecting ourselves and one another as best we can, showing your love and care for the most vulnerable.

O God, it is in *your* creativity that we can find and see the way to our own. In this time of civil unrest and protests, give us eyes to see the injustice and pain in the world, ears to hear the voices of black and brown people who've been crying out, unable to breathe deeply and freely for way too long. Give us hearts that are willing to be opened, broken, transformed by the same Holy Spirit that you poured out on your people so long ago and continue to pour out today. O, Lord, give us courage and conviction to speak out, to stand with, to learn, to listen, to repent.

We pray, O God, for those in positions of leadership - locally and beyond. We ask for your wisdom and clarity of vision as they make decisions that affect people whom they may never meet, nor will they necessarily see how their decisions impact people's lives. Make them responsive, God, to the needs of those in their care.

We pray for those in our community who are lonely, frightened or anxious. We pray for those who are suffering with dis-ease – physical illness or injury, mental illness, spiritual distance from you, God. These are circumstances that *all* of deal with at different points in our lives. We cling to your promise that you never leave us alone, that you are always with us. We ask, God, that you would be especially close in cases where the needs are especially deep.

We thank you, Lord, for the gift of your Holy Spirit - in days of old and now in current times. Help us to be attentive as it moves among us as we go about our daily living. May we learn more each day how to notice and follow and share, how to be faithful messengers of your Spirit as it rests on each one of us. Amen.

SERMON 6/7/20 – THE SPIRIT RESTS ON US – NUMBERS 11:24-30 (4-34)

Our Scripture passage is an unusual choice. Two things jump out at me when I began studying it.

First is that the Holy Spirit was alive and well long before Jesus. Sometimes we talk about Pentecost as the coming of the Holy Spirit. It probably is more accurate to say that Pentecost is the “outpouring” of the Holy Spirit – a new thing that the Spirit accomplished in the birth of the church.

But the Spirit has been active and moving all along, and never has been restricted to just one channel. Moses had a special role to reveal God's will because of the way the Spirit was resting on him, but his Spirit then is shared with 70 elders.

But secondly, if you read the bigger story, I'm struck by the humor. Did you know the Bible can be humorous? It certainly can in order to make a point. We often think that the Bible is above humor, and read it with a kind of seriousness that doesn't see the humor, because we think that's how it's supposed to be read.

So before we see how this speaks to us in our present moment, let's look at the broader passage from Numbers 11:4-34.

The children of Israel left their slavery in Egypt a long time ago. Now they are wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. This wilderness wandering lasted 40 years, even though it should only take 2 weeks to travel from Egypt to Palestine on foot! Waiting on God's timing sometimes means waiting a while, doesn't it?

They have what they need. They have access to God through Moses and through the Tabernacle. They have manna: a special food source given by God for their nourishment. They can only collect it one day at a time and cannot hoard it.

Maybe part of the deeper truth here is that we can't arrive at freedom (entering the Promised Land) without going through deep struggle. That includes deep struggle with our own sinful and selfish tendencies. We want the easy way.

Many of the people get impatient and begin to complain. Their complaint is short-sighted: they forget that in Egypt they were enslaved, and they focus on the foods in Egypt that they miss. They pummel Moses with a demand for meat. At this point of the pandemic, we too are entering the complaining phase. We are ready to be done, ready to do the activities we remember from before.

The humor comes in the next verses, because it gets a little melodramatic.

Moses himself is tired of carrying the burden of leadership and complains to Yahweh, the God of Israel (see verses 10 to 15). To paraphrase, Moses complains, “Yahweh, why have you ruined my life with the burden of leading

these people? I didn't give them birth, and yet you want me to be their wet nurse, take care of these crying babies. Just kill me now and take me out of my misery!"

You might be surprised at how very human this man of God is to talk like this.

Yahweh also reacts strongly, again to paraphrase: "These people want meat? I'll give them meat! I'll give them a whole month's worth till they have meat coming out of their nostrils and hate it!"

But God does hear Moses' request for an ease to his burden and distributes the Holy Spirit that Moses had to the 70 elders. People really expected only Moses to have access to God. It's a surprise for this to come from these others. And what really is surprising is these two individuals Eldad and Medad who aren't at the tent of meeting where the rest are. Even Joshua – Moses' right-hand man – is upset. "Moses, you've got to stop them!"

Moses responds, "I wish everyone had this gift! It would make my life much easier!"

We might sympathize with the people craving meat. I'd have a hard time eating just manna! If you hear this as a spiritual metaphor, it's revealing our human tendency to think we know exactly what we need, rather than receiving the presence and grace of God in life as it comes to us.

Yahweh sends a wind (same word as "spirit"!) bringing mountains of quail – three feet deep for miles. Enough for each person to gather 50 bushels. In the final scene, people controlled by the craving run out to gather the meat, and no sooner than it gets stuck in their teeth, they die. Those who reject God by giving in to their craving make a fatal choice.

We can't be fed by our cravings for power, control, or maybe even the glib satisfaction of always being "right." We have to submit to the humiliating wilderness journey that teaches us the lesson of resting on God's grace.

In our current national moment, we are hearing a lot about the tragic death of George Floyd and others unnecessarily killed by police misconduct. There is a lot of troubling unrest that I hope will force us to listen to people of color and confront our institutionalized and structural racism. I hope we in the white church learn the right lesson from this, rather than being sidetracked by a concern for a return to order, when that order hasn't been working for many in our country.

The black church has a long history of reading the story of the Exodus and the wilderness journey to freedom, applying it to the African American experience of slavery, segregation, discrimination, mass incarceration, and the struggle for the well-being of everyone in the beloved community of faith.

In Exodus 6:9, the Israelite slaves didn't listen to Moses because of "their broken spirit" (NRSV) or their "discouragement" (NIV). The Hebrew literally has "shortness of spirit or breath." They can't breathe.

We need to recognize as white Christians, that unless we've walked closely with people of color, we really don't have an understanding of their experience from the wounds of past segregation, or present experiences of lack of opportunity and over-criminalization of social problems and lower-level offenses that have left so many communities short of breath.

The Exodus story doesn't only apply to African Americans. All of us are on a journey of liberation, and our own liberation is bound to the liberation of brothers and sisters in faith who are not like us. If it's good news only for white believers, then it's not the Gospel.

We humans have short memory. When the going gets rough, we want to turn back. I think of my own feelings of frustration, when my own life path has not felt paved. Sometimes I feel unprepared and unequipped for the challenges of being a pastor, or of being a better father and partner in marriage.

I've had the unrealistic expectation that I'm supposed to feel equipped for every challenge, as I either blame myself or blame others when life doesn't work that way. Recently a conversation challenged me to realize that this expectation that the way ought to feel paved may have been created by my socialization as a white male. Our grandparents' generation learned to expect life to be hard, and likewise people of color know from day one that their way is not paved.

This is where we need to work together, crossing racial, economic, and class boundaries with a vision of God's blessing for all of us. Another's burden becomes my burden. To do that we need many people, like those 70 elders, to discover a prophetic spirit and engage in leadership whether or not you're in a formal leadership position. We don't have to leave this to "great leaders" like Moses, who by the way, was pretty human himself.

I leave you with three points of encouragement.

One of these is to seek ways to be in relationship with someone that has struggles very unlike your own. Educate yourself on topics such as racism. If you want to know where to start, we could point you to some good books. Before judging, listen to a person's story, once you've earned enough trust for them to tell it. Everyone, both people who life has not been kind to – and all of us who have received privilege and advantages they didn't pay for – are on a wilderness journey toward the land of promise.

Second, be kind to yourself, because we all have struggles of different sorts (family, work, mental and emotional health, or addictive behavior), yet God meets us in our weakness. Our personal and social ills mostly come down to our refusal to submit to the piercing grace of God. We only can receive God's grace – the unmerited state of being held in God's love – when we have our eyes opened to see our flaws, our failures, our injustice, and our cravings. We can't receive a gift without seeing the need for it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously contrasted cheap grace and costly grace. Bonhoeffer was offering a call to discipleship. What I will name as costly grace getting past our denial and self-justification in order to see our sin, our part in the problem. Only in letting go of control and self-justification and get real, do we allow God to begin to heal us.

Lastly, remember that the church is a playground where we test out what it looks like to live in God's kingdom. We're meant to be a community that contrasts with the broader culture, while being *in the world* in a way that lets us plant seeds of justice and healing in our world.

If we don't have a way of living out racial reconciliation in the church, then we are hampered in our ability to witness to the good news of the gospel.

Living this out requires a Spirit-inspired imagination, and we need not just one prophet the Spirit rests on, but many. Today we live in the era foreseen by the prophet Joel, who says speaking in God's voice,

"And afterward,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your old men will dream dreams,

your young men will see visions.

Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days. (Joel 2: 28-29)

May it be so.