

St. James' E-pistle: **SPECIAL EDITION**

A Letter from the Rector for June 5, 2020

Dear People of St. James' Church,

Last week, I shared with you all some thoughts about what we as individuals can do now to move ourselves from “not being racist” to “taking anti-racist action.” Since then, much has happened in our church and our community. One event, however, has been particularly offensive to me as a priest of the Episcopal Church, and so I thought it worthwhile to pause and reflect for a moment with you.

On Monday evening, June 1st, a protest against the systemic racism that has been killing our fellow Americans for hundreds of years was forcibly cleared from the area in front of St. John's Episcopal Church in Lafayette Square, Washington DC. Tear gas and rubber bullets were employed, so that the President could walk from the White House onto the church grounds, stand before the church sign, raise a Bible in his hand, and pose for a photograph. The bishops of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut have shared their response to this action [here](#). The Episcopal bishops of New England (Province 1) have together penned their response [here](#), and Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's has offered his perspective [here](#).

Here's what I have to say, as the Rector of St. James' Church. What the President did in clearing the protest was within his power, and what he did in front the church was not illegal. Anyone, Christian or not, can go stand in front of one of our church signs and hold up a Bible. When we say “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You,” that sort of thing just comes with the package. Symbolically, however, the move was deeply misleading, and repugnant in its mendacity. We know from subsequent interviews with the Bishop of Washington and the clergy of St. John's Church that they were not consulted about the move beforehand, and, most importantly, that they would not have granted permission if they had been asked. The apparent intention of the photo-op was to imply that the President's recent actions and words enjoyed the support of the Church (and the Episcopal Church in particular), and of Christianity more broadly. I could here offer many examples from Christian Ethics and the Holy Scriptures rebutting that assertion, and would be happy to have that conversation together as a parish with any who are interested. But instead, I will just offer this thought: if

you approach one of our Episcopal churches with Christian intent; that is, if you come to pray your prayers, to read your Holy Bible, to join a community and stand before God in love, peace, gratitude, and humility—then you probably won't have to clear a way for yourself with tear gas and rubber bullets. If you *do*, then something has gone terribly wrong.

Many things *have* gone terribly wrong lately, as they have for generations. But this week, in our own community, well over a thousand people gathered on Wednesday to take the right action, and speak up with one voice against the sin of racism that pervades so many aspects of our society still. As a priest and pastor in our community, I found it necessary to publicly push back against Monday evening's distorted impression of where and with whom the Episcopal Church stands. So, as our community's own anti-racism protest was passing up West Street from the Public Library towards City Hall, I stepped up before our own church's sign, with clericals on and Bible in hand, and added my own voice to the condemnation of racism's violent, insidious, and pernicious effects on us all. In doing so, I hopefully clarified any notion about whose side the Episcopal Church in Danbury stands with in the fight of light against darkness, truth against deception, and life against death.

I realize that public statement and that position may have been unsettling to some, and threatening to others, even within our congregation. But the hard truth is that while the Gospel of Jesus is wonderful good news for all, it also comes at a cost to many. The rich, the powerful, and the comfortable stand to lose much, if we are to accept the way of love that Jesus teaches. That's just how the Kingdom of God works. Episcopalians throughout the world remember that truth every day, as we pray The Song of Mary during our Evening Prayers (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 115). There, we read that after the angel Gabriel had announced to Mary the role she would play in the salvation of the world, her awestruck words to Elizabeth were: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord...He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty...." (*Luke 1:46-55*) That is welcome news, indeed, to the lowly and the hungry, but not so much for the mighty on their thrones and the rich! That is why both the religious and political authorities of the time felt so threatened by this Galilean nobody named Jesus. His egalitarian view of the world stood in stark contrast to that of the Roman Empire and the religious expression of his day. Still to this day, we disciples of Jesus struggle to follow his quite clear and direct teachings about respecting the dignity and worth of all people, to pry ourselves free from the grips of power and complacency, and to subdue within us the urge to make peace with a "tolerable" level of injustice and inequality as a necessarily evil in a prospering society.

Jesus has always pushed his followers into deep self-examination, painful as that can be at times. Many, in fact, find it an intolerable experience. Mark tells us the story of a rich man seeking eternal life, whom Jesus told to sell all his wealth and give the money to the poor. (*Mark 10:17-22*) That man wandered away from Jesus grieving, never to be heard from again, because he had much to lose. So the question I raise today is, how will we, especially those of us who are benefitting, consciously or not, from the imbalance of power and the unjust distribution of resources in our society--how will we ever find the strength to do the work Jesus calls us to do?

We will find the strength and courage we seek, when we remember that Jesus promised us the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide and sustain us. And we will stir up the power of that Spirit whenever we come together in our churches for worship, whether in-person or on-line; when we open our Bibles, and then read them; and when we stop to pray our prayers, every day, without ceasing. There we will find the wisdom, the humility, the courage, and the strength for the hard journey that lies before us. And as your Rector, that is the place where I will be standing with you.

As we now imagine standing in that place, and occupying that sacred ground in the future, I leave you with the comforting and encouraging words of [The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston](#), retired Bishop of The Episcopal Diocese of Alaska:

Now is the moment for which a lifetime of faith has prepared you. All of those years of prayer and study, all of the worship services, all of the time devoted to a community of faith: it all comes down to this, this sorrowful moment when life seems chaotic and the anarchy of fear haunts the thin borders of reason. Your faith has prepared you for this. It has given you the tools you need to respond: to proclaim justice while standing for peace. Long ago the Spirit called you to commit your life to faith. Now you know why. You are a source of strength for those who have lost hope. You are a voice of calm in the midst of chaos. You are a steady light in days of darkness. The time has come to be what you believe.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Dustin+