

“WELCOME BACK!” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, June 14, 2020

Congregation, back in the 1970s, which is already deep, deep history to many, there was a popular television show called “Welcome Back, Kotter.” It was about a young man, surnamed Kotter, who returns to his old high school to teach kids not unlike himself a few years earlier. The whole series is about Kotter’s interactions with his students and the lives of these kids taught. One of the young actors in that series was John Travolta, who later went on to even greater fame. As we gather today, resuming sanctuary services here at St. Paul, the strains of the weekly theme song for “Welcome Back, Kotter” play across my own mind. It is good to be back, friends. It’s great to see members of our congregation worshipping together in this sacred space.

Of course, even in the weeks of the Covid-19 health crisis, we’ve been worshipping all along. Technology and tech-savvy church members Michael Isaacs, Dan Case, and Gary Peters made it possible for us to livestream services. That’s going to continue. And that remains important because for the foreseeable future we are limited in the number of men and women who can gather for sanctuary worship. On top of that, it’s still necessary as we gather in person to take many further precautions. In fact, the list of precautions is a little sobering.

This morning I just want to say that, whether we are sitting in this beloved sanctuary or participating in worship livestreamed in our homes, we are one church together. We can rejoice in everyone coming to the Lord today through the ministry of our church. As you may have already heard before, we have viewers beyond Michigan in Florida, Arkansas, and Alaska. I count this broader reach as an unexpected blessing.

Foundational to my personal theology is a two-fold conviction. First, as revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God loves us, deeply and profoundly. Secondly, God will always make a path for those who, staying alert for opportunity, wait on him with faithfulness and patience. Here at St. Paul we have been patient, faithful, and alert—with some good results under trying circumstances. Amen, congregation? Amen!

The Chinese are said to have an ancient saying, “May you live in interesting times.” Some presume that this was meant as a blessing. However, more likely, it’s always been pronounced as a curse. After all, calm, tranquil times are usually not half as interesting. All debate aside, we do live in interesting, tumultuous times. We started with a health crisis, which spiraled into an economic crisis—or the prospect of one. Now, in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis Police, we have a full-fledged political crisis—and what appears to be the emergence of a new, more encompassing Civil Rights movement. In the midst of all our concerns about the spread of Covid-19, it has been astonishing to see thousands of people coming together in city

streets across the nation to protest injustice and call for major changes in the way that we police and administer justice in America.

Over the past weeks of the nation's health crisis I've said more than once that as Christians we need to be courageous without being careless. In the scenes from the streets of this great land that we all love I think we have been witnesses to acts both courageous and careless. And in an even larger sense we have seen folks acting responsibly and irresponsibly, as well as creatively and destructively.

The cause of justice is not just important. For us as both Americans and Christians it is fundamental—or should be. Who can forget as televised for all eyes the terrible scene of George Floyd under the knee of the Minneapolis police officer for over eight minutes despite pleas that he couldn't breathe? It jars and shocks our nation's conscience. This should not be happening in an America that respects human life. This is what has brought so many to American streets in protest. Can anyone seriously dispute that what happened to George Floyd in Minneapolis was homicide? Moreover, though some may be loath to acknowledge it, there's a broader, indefensible pattern of deep racism at work here, which has protected rogue police officers, allowing them to get away with brutality and murder.

At the same time, in the midst of legitimate uproar, there has been some galling behavior on the part of others that brings no honor to the protest at hand. Public buildings and private businesses have been looted and burned. In some cases, this has been driven by sheer rage and resentment, especially by those who feel completely left out when it comes to civic or economic justice. Yet there are some morally deluded individuals who simply prefer anarchy and will use every available opportunity to tear down institutions. And there are still others who are just plain greedy and selfish. They are the worst kind of opportunists.

Alongside the death of George Floyd, there are probably other recent moments from America's streets, captured in televised video reportage, that stand out for you. Although it can never approach in vividness and distress what happened for George Floyd, I can't get out of my head televised footage of a couple of masked, baseball-hatted, beefy white looters wielding hammers in broad daylight against the plate glass windows of a posh store on the main drag of Santa Monica, California. In those moments recorded, a young female protester boldly tries to stop them only to be cuffed or body slammed by these two guys. Yet, not to be deterred, she comes right back at them trying to wave her protest sign in their faces, as if to say: *"This is a protest for George Floyd; not some carte blanche for theft and mayhem."* Amazingly, perhaps embarrassed, or more likely afraid that this woman is going to attract others' attention, the two guys cease and desist and dart away, leaving the hammer-shattered windows

behind. If I was that young woman's father, I would be proud of her for stepping up as she did against lawlessness and greed. On the other hand, I would also probably be saying to her: "How could you be so foolish? Those guys with the hammers could have maimed or killed you in broad daylight!"

Congregation, abusive, lethal policing is what spawned our nation's protests. At the same time, the way that some tried to take advantage of the tumult is why we need police. This is what we will always need police—*albeit, those committed to a fair, impartial, and unprejudiced administration of public safety and justice*. Sin is not going to go away. Greed is not going to go away. There will always be those who seek to exploit others amid confused and troubled circumstances at hand in ways destructive to fellow citizens and the common good. Such criminal behavior impacts folks of all races and socioeconomic classes.

As we look at change and reform so that what happened for George Floyd doesn't happen again to others, we also need to be sober about the dangers of chaos. Rather than demonizing law enforcement in America, we need to empower police leadership to remove rogue officers and address more systemic, underlying attitudes that allow bad apples to operate with impunity. Meanwhile, we need to honor and reward those with police badges who, true to their oath, stand committed to upholding the law, rather than becoming a law unto themselves without accountability.

Right now, there are loud calls to "defund the police." Ironically, even before our present economic crisis kicked in, cities across America have been defunding the police in ways that no one cared to notice. While our federal government has been spending millions and millions of dollars on heavy-duty combat equipment that have militarized our police forces, municipalities have been capping pay and abolishing pension programs for our officers walking or driving the neighborhood beat. This is not the way to attract the best talent—least of all in the realm of public safety where skill is needed to maintain the public peace peaceably and men and women in uniform inevitably put their lives on the line daily. It's a testament to the character of most of our police officers that we have the many truly dedicated public servants in their ranks that we do. The same goes for our firemen and our EMS workers.

Although Jesus our Savior was a man of non-violence who called upon his own apostles and disciples to put away any weapons, he had an abiding respect for the Roman Centurion who combined a sincere faith and a keen sense of morals with a big heart for the welfare of others. (*Matthew 26:52; Matthew 8:5-13*) As Christian disciples, we should have the same kind of abiding respect and appreciation for those who perform their public safety duties with moral and emotional integrity and without meanness, bias, and prejudice.

Right now, our nation's focus is on policing issues. That's understandable given George Floyd's death and the number of earlier lethal episodes victimizing African-Americans. But amid this turmoil in America today I can't help but feel many chickens are coming home to roost. The Covid-19 crisis has exposed more clearly than ever before deeper problems in our society—moral, spiritual, political, and economic. These issues overlap. In many cases, they exacerbate each other.

As a pastor I can personally attest to the fact that we have unfairly expected police to handle human issues often precipitated by poverty and mental illness that are beyond their resources to resolve. I can't tell you how many late-night calls I have received over the years from local police departments trying to save a homeless person from freezing to death. In those conversations and others, I have talked with police officers traumatized by some of the things they've witnessed, exposing human nature at its worst. These are officers who care, who have to daily struggle against becoming cynical and jaded. Let's not demonize all police. And let's not beat up each other as we talk about the situation at hand. Instead, as both American citizens and Christians we need to *honestly* acknowledge what's going on, as well as *responsibly* assess the root causes of our problems. Last but not least, it's imperative that we work hard *together* to correct what's amiss with the goal of healing the wounds that afflict and divide our nation. Most likely, that means investing in education, health care, and jobs creation so that more people feel included and invested in the promise of America, rather than excluded, abandoned, and forgotten, creating a larger environment which may lend itself to crime.

Amid the tumult of the 1960s, which saw American cities devastated by riot, Martin Luther King observed that we have a choice between community and chaos. And that's the choice we have before us today. Are we in the spirit of Christ going to renew and build up our community? Or are we stubbornly going to do our own thing and insist on our opinions and old ways of doing things and let everything slide into chaos? That is only likely to give rise to dictatorial, authoritarian law-and-order solutions that are not solutions at all—at least not Christ-minded, Christ-hearted solutions. More than ever, we need, following Christ's own example, to be a caring, collaborative, cooperative people, balancing idealism with pragmatism--not afraid to compromise so long as we are not jettisoning our greater principles and integrity. In all things, we should remember that we are called to be Christians first. For us, love matters. So does justice. Racism, which is undeniably real, is wrong. Greed is wrong. Violence is wrong.

In times of the most acute distress and worry, I always keep returning to the wisdom of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. There our Savior expresses God's love for the disenfranchised of the earth. The late Pope John Paul II spoke of this love as God's "preferential option" for the poor. But if you read Jesus' sermon and take it heart you know it's that, but more. In his hallowed words, Jesus invokes God's blessing upon those

poor in spirit, those mourning, those meek, those hungering and thirsting for righteousness. (*Matthew 5:3-6*) He then goes on to called “blessed” those who are peacemakers and those who are persecuted for their righteousness in God’s name, which is very different from self-righteousness. (*Matthew 5:10*) God loves and cherishes such brave and faithful men and women, even as the world heaps insults and falsehoods upon their heads. (*Matthew 5:11*)

Congregation, we need to be brave and faithful too in word and deed. This is what being *salty* means, in the way that Jesus talks about it in his sermon. (*Matthew 5:13*) I hope that future generations are going to be able to look back on how we respond to events and not find us wanting in our fidelity to him and his way for us in Jesus Christ. The kind of nation and world that our children inherit depends on us, setting aside rancor and demonization that only tear down community, and doing the right thing, the just thing, the loving thing that builds up community.

You and I both know that we’re not first generation to face huge challenges. In their day, our own parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents embraced change brought on by the Civil Rights Movement and before that fought two world wars and suffered through the Great Depression. A century previously the United States was engulfed in the Civil War as we tried to resolve the terrible sin of human slavery that haunts us still in ways seen and unseen. Indeed, we can go all the way back to the Biblical times, Old and New Testament days alike, where there were cascading crises. Faithfulness to God and his truth got people through darker days, just as faithfulness to God will strengthen us to face honestly our present problems, helping us all be better people.

How wise we would be to have the courage and vision of the Old Testament leader Nehemiah who saw the ruin of Jerusalem all around him but was determined to rebuild. (*Nehemiah 2:11-18*) This great leader, who was also concerned about justice for the poor, trusted that God would guide and sustain that worthy rebuilding project if ordinary people like us remained properly devoted to their Creator and Maker. (*Nehemiah 5:1-19*) In the end, as the Bible informs us, the people were faithful and the job of rebuilding Jerusalem got done. (*Nehemiah 6:15*)

Congregation, let me finish by saying as I did when we starting: welcome back! Yes, it’s good to be together again, though none of us were really gone; none of us had really left behind this ministry shared that we all cherish. What’s different is that some of us, representing our whole congregation, are able to be *in person together* again, a lot closer without being cheek to jowl! May our desire to be together in this way, with all precautions undertaken, be a symbol of the larger unity in Christ that we seek as we renew daily our commitment to walk with him and in his ways of love and justice. May God abide with us all, whether here or there, near or far. **Amen.**