

**Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 July 2021**  
**Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa**  
**James Knutsen**

[Proper 11B, track 2: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34,53-56]

In the summer of 1953, in Baltimore, four boys went swimming together in the Patapsco River. One of them, 13 year old Tommy Cummings, drowned in the dangerous waters. Imagine the devastation to his family, and to his three friends. His death was the more tragic because Baltimore had seven safe public swimming pools. But none of those seven public pools permitted interracial swimming, and Tommy was Black, as was one of his buddies, and the other two were white.

In fact, Tommy was one of three Black children who drowned in open waters in Baltimore that summer. The NAACP sued the city, and three years later won on appeal and so, as Heather McGhee writes, “on June 23, 1956, for the first time, all Baltimore children had the chance to swim with other children, without regard to skin color.”<sup>1</sup>

But guess what? McGhee tells the story in her recent book *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. She writes: “White children stopped going to the pools that Black children could easily access, and white adults informally policed (through intimidation and violence) the public pools in white neighborhoods.”<sup>2</sup>

Most of us are not old enough to remember that by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there were thousands of large, resort quality *public* swimming pools in cities and towns across America. They were enormously popular. Where did they go?

Today, thinking about so many large swimming pools, and drought-conscious as we are, we might think, “Wow, so much water! How could that be

sustainable?” But water was abundant; drought had nothing to do with the disappearance of those pools. Or, if you grew up when I did, when backyard swimming pools were very common in the suburbs (my family had one), you might think *that* was the reason all those public pools disappeared.

But no. Public pools ended up being closed, filled in, covered over, all over America, and swimming went private—either private swimming clubs or those suburban backyard pools—because white people decided or were persuaded they’d rather pay to swim, or go without, than share with Black people.

Of course, the same white people packed into their white Christian churches on Sundays. What did their leaders, their shepherds, have to say about all this?

And the same thing that happened with swimming pools happened with health care, housing, education, job opportunities: if you can’t afford to pay for it yourself, better to go without than to share with *them*. That was white America’s response to the Civil Rights Movement.

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Today’s Gospel is a bit odd, basically two pieces of connective tissue smooshed together to make a reading. All the same, it offers an interesting portrait of the ministry of Jesus. We hear of Jesus’s loving concern for his disciples, inviting them to “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” We hear of the crowds irresistibly drawn to Jesus, and of his compassion for them, “because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” We hear of healing energy radiating out from Jesus, drawing people to him, healing the sick. And, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021), 24

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

middle of all that, we hear that “he began to teach them many things.”

What things? Mark doesn’t say, obviously, but perhaps this provides us a challenge, an opportunity, to consider all we know of Jesus’s teaching, and offer our own summary.

What things does Jesus teach?

What comes to mind for you?

This might be a worthwhile exercise: perhaps later this week, without opening a Bible, write down for yourself your own brief synopsis of the teaching of Jesus; not everything you can remember, necessarily, but rather the core of how his teaching as found in the Gospels is telling you to live your life. Make it, say, just one paragraph, or two. Then perhaps read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (5:1—7:27) or the Sermon on the Plain in Luke (6:20-49), and see how your summary compares to those.

Here’s my own attempt at a very brief summary:

*Don’t hate: love! Don’t exclude: include! Don’t be afraid: trust! Don’t hoard: give, and share! Don’t judge others. Don’t blame victims. Don’t keep track of how you’ve been hurt and what you are owed, but forgive. Forgive hurts and offenses, forgive debts. Speak the truth simply. Be generous. Be reconciled. Refuse to be resentful, violent, fearful, or vengeful, no matter the cost to you. The love of God is infinite, unending, all-embracing, indiscriminate: rejoice in that! and become like that yourselves. Struggle and pray that who God really is might be manifest, recognized, and celebrated throughout the earth, as it is in heaven.*

So, it seems to me, says the good shepherd. This teaching, needless to say, is not always easy. Sometimes it comes as a gift that transforms us in a moment of grace, but more often, it is slow, complicated, even confusing, the struggle of a lifetime, but there’s grace in that, too. And this teaching is not unrelated to the healing energy that today’s Gospel also describes radiating out from Jesus.

The teaching and the healing go together, they are really the same thing, they are Jesus himself, and Jesus is simply God saying to us, “*This is who I am.*”

But we might well ask, what has happened to this teaching in white “Christian” America? Where did it go?

*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.*

Jeremiah’s words ring strong today.

Today’s junk Christianity has become almost laughable in its departure from, its opposition to, its rejection of, the teaching of Jesus—laughable except the damage and devastation and division are so vast and deep. Shepherds—leaders in politics, in religion, in business, in society—have misled and lied to and exploited the flock for their own gain. Today’s junk Christianity has become all about grievance and exclusion, and especially, all about fear. But there’s no laughing it off: white Christians (liberals included) in America need to look long and hard at how we got here. And this is hard work.

But it’s not about guilt, it’s about love.

What do you think?

The Letter to the Ephesians also speaks powerfully to us today. This passage focuses especially on the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in Christ, since the distinction and division of Jew and Gentile was an especially acute question in the first generations of the church. But it’s good to remember that “Gentiles”—in Greek *ta ethne*, “the nations”—refers, in contrast to the people of the covenants of Israel, to *everyone else*, to *all other humans*. So, in this context, for Paul or whoever wrote Ephesians, distinctions among “white” or “black” or “brown” people weren’t even worth mentioning; they were all *ta ethne*, the nations, and they had *all* been made forever one in the flesh of Jesus.

Think for just a moment of how central it is to Christian faith, to say that we are reconciled to God through the death of Jesus on the cross. That's why we display crosses in our churches and on our bodies. Different theologians and different churches in different ages have probed and nuanced that mystery in different and more or less helpful ways, but it is central to our faith. We in the modern (white) West have tended to put a rather individualistic spin on this: as if each of us is individually reconciled to God through the death of Jesus in some kind of private transaction.

But listen closely to Ephesians:

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.*

(Again...)

*He is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups (Jews on the one hand and everyone else on the other) into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.*

What do you hear in that?

What I hear is this: the reconciliation with God that Jesus accomplishes on the cross is inseparable from—is *one* with—his reconciliation of *all people* with one another.

*There is no salvation in Christ apart from our being made one by Christ with all people. All.*

So? Racism—in its intentions and in its effects—is a denial and rejection of our salvation, a rejection of Christ himself, and therefore of God. Racism is a

blasphemous, anti-Christian heresy, and it always has been, and that is reason enough for us to root it out of ourselves and to make every effort to root it out of our churches and our society.

Not out of guilt, out of love.

Don't hate: love! Don't exclude: include! Don't be afraid: trust! Don't hoard: give, and share! Don't judge others. Don't blame victims. Don't keep track of how you've been hurt and what you are owed, but forgive! Forgive hurts and offenses, forgive debts. Speak the truth simply. Be generous. Be reconciled. Refuse to be resentful, violent, fearful, or vengeful, no matter the cost to you. The love of God is infinite, unending, all-embracing, indiscriminate.

May we rejoice in that, and by God's grace joined with our own struggles, may we become like that ourselves, that who God really is might be manifest, recognized, and celebrated throughout the earth, as it is in heaven.