

In 1607, a group of English colonists arrived inland from the coast of Virginia to settle on an island that would eventually be known as Jamestown. Not long after, they built a small wooden church where services were conducted according to the liturgy of the Church of England, predecessor of our own Episcopal Church. Religion in Jamestown was no laughing matter – people were expected to attend church twice each day, not to mention on Sundays. When they gathered on the weekdays for Morning Prayer, near the end of the service, the minister would intone the carefully crafted words of the Elizabethan prayer book: “O GOD, whiche art authour of peace, and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal lyfe, whose service is perfect freedom; defend us thy humble servants in al assaultes of our enemies that we surely trusting in thy defence, may not feare the power of any adversaries : through the might of Jesu Christ our lord, Amen.”

If those words sound familiar, they should – this prayer, known as the collect for peace, remains a part of our own Book of Common Prayer, in slightly updated form, as do many of the words that would have been spoken in that Jamestown church.

Here we have a mythic narrative of continuity in American and Virginia history: from Jamestown to Chesterfield, from that little church to our own slightly bigger church.

And yet the past few weeks have reminded us that *that* narrative tells at best only a fraction of the story. There are other narratives of continuity in American history, far more distressing and disturbing.

In 1619, only 12 years after the Jamestown colony was founded, the first group of African people were brought forcibly to Jamestown after being captured on a Portuguese ship. The exploitation of their unpaid labor quickly evolved into the long and sordid system of American slavery. It would be almost another 350 years before their descendants and the descendants of so many other Africans brought to America would even be technically or legally free -- an achievement recognized with the recently established state holiday of Juneteenth this past Friday.

But we should also remember that even after slavery ended, it would be another hundred years before interracial couples like Brittney and me could marry legally

without fear of prosecution, and another ten years after – only 45 years ago – before Virginia’s school systems were fully integrated.

Sadly, our denomination had its role to play in this flip side of the American historical narrative as well. Many southern Anglicans and then Episcopalians became defenders of slavery, and later of the system of racial segregation that followed it in the South. And in Virginia during the Civil War, most Episcopalians joined a breakaway group, the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States in America, that was formed explicitly to defend slavery and the Southern cause.

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In today’s epistle reading, St. Paul challenges the Christians of Rome: “What then shall we say? Shall we continue in sin?”

This morning, I want to suggest that slavery and racism *are* America’s original sins. “Shall we continue in sin?” Paul asks. Sadly our society did and does continue in the sin of racism – sometimes individual, more often institutional; sometimes open, more often hidden; sometimes explicit, more often implicit and built into the fabric of societal inequality.

Just a few verses later in Chapter 6 of Romans, Paul will speak about the consequences or “wages” of sin. Over the past few weeks, I think we have all been reminded in dramatic and visceral ways of the consequences of our country’s original sin of racism.

The day after my birthday, I finally forced myself to watch the video of the murder of George Floyd, which had taken place a few days earlier. I sat in horror, with my mouth open, not just because I was seeing the extrajudicial murder of an American on my computer screen but because, once again, I was watching someone who was supposed to be protecting law and order, and whose skin is the color of mine, bring about the death of someone with skin the color of my wife and my stepchildren. There could be no more powerful and horrific evidence of the continuation of racism 401 years after the first Africans were forcibly brought to the English New World.

Of course, we don’t even need to go to Minneapolis or watch videos on the internet for evidence of this. We know it simply from being part of the Richmond

community and driving around our metropolitan area – from the many statues and historical sites celebrating ardent defenders of slavery to the obvious, huge economic inequalities in our neighborhoods and districts, and the obvious connection between race and these economic injustices. Something as simple as a trip up the entire length of Midlothian Turnpike or Hull Street from western Chesterfield to south Richmond will provide ample evidence of the structures of economic injustice that divide our community.

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In the face of all this, like Paul and the Romans, we ask, “What then shall we say?” What then shall we say?

In the past weeks, we have seen different responses we may be drawn to. One is a kind of rage that may be justified but is often directionless and without a clear purpose. The past few weeks, we’ve seen how this directionless rage can lead to violence that often disproportionately impacts the very communities that are already most affected by economic injustice.

On the other extreme, we may just want to turn our eyes away from everything that is happening. Sometimes this is out of apathy, for sure, but it can also just be out of a sense of despair about seeing tragic injustices unfold again and again, with nothing seeming to change.

But I think there is a third way, and the reading from Paul today gives us a clue to what it is. In response to his original question – “Shall we continue in sin?” – Paul responds with a powerful Greek interjection – *me genoito*, “God forbid!” or “Absolutely not!”

The reason for this is that Paul believes that Jesus has brought about the death of sin, by demonstrating God’s love for us.

This may indeed be a time when both rage and despair are justifiable emotions. And yet the Gospel calls us to something more. What we need is neither rage nor despair but *change*.

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This is a sermon, not a political speech. I don't think it is either the right or the responsibility of preachers to tell you how to vote or how to feel about political issues.

But the continuing reality of racism is a simple fact, not a political argument. And to emphasize the sinfulness of racism and racial injustice is not to proclaim a political position, but to articulate a fundamental moral truth.

We must work to free our society from what I have called its "original sin," just as we have been set free by the love of Jesus Christ.

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In the past month, I too have felt both rage and despair. But as I think about what is happening in our country today, I want to emphasize hope.

There is hope in the beginning of real conversations about race that have been needed for a long time. While race is a social construct, not a biological reality, it is a social construct that has real and powerful impacts on our lives and our communities. For too long we've swept these needed conversations under the rug, in fear of being either too confrontational or too politically-correct.

There is hope in the fact that we *are* recapturing parts of the American historical narrative that have been neglected, especially the experiences of African Americans and Native Americans, which we should remember include not just the story of oppression but also so many stories of heroic achievement. The establishment of the Juneteenth holiday is a good example of this shift, though there is a long way to go.

But our hope runs even deeper than all this. As Episcopal Christians, we realize our great teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, was someone who reached out to those who were the objects of discrimination and injustice – Samaritans and women being prime examples in the first century. And in light of what happened to George Floyd, we also should remember that we too follow a savior who was executed in a travesty of justice by those who were supposed to be in charge of law and order in society.

Above all our hope is rooted in the faith that this world really can, in Paul's words, "abound with grace." If we could just love each other a little more, what a

different world we would live in. If we could become just a little kinder, a little more aware of the needs of those around us, we could transform our society. The change we need will begin not in the White House or the State Capitol, but in the chambers of our own spirits. We might not ever make this world into a paradise, but we could move so far toward bringing about God's community here on earth, as it is heaven.

So as we emerge from the weekend of our state's very first Juneteenth holiday, let us recommit ourselves to proclaiming the message of the Gospel with boldness and courage and clarity. St Paul tells us that Jesus has already put an end to the dominion of death. How will we work to construct a community of life and love to replace it?