

Text: 1 John 4:7-21
Revelation 21:1-4

One evening I was talking on the phone with my brother Craig. As we talked, we were watching the same live news feed on the national news. It was live video of a store that was looted and set on fire in downtown Los Angeles. We could see a man on the roof trying in vain to stop the flames from spreading by spraying it with a garden hose. My brother, at that time, was a cosmetics salesman and this store was one of his customers. He personally knew the man who was risking his life to save that store, and as we watched, Craig was telling me about this man and his family. They were Koreans who had come to this country to make a better life. They worked hard to build this business and it was all that they had. Craig told me how kind they had always been to him; how they taught him some Korean words and laughed at his really bad Korean accent. To most, this man was a faceless victim of random violence, only to Craig, he was not faceless, he was his friend, someone he worked with, ate with, and laughed with. Someone who had a family and was working hard to do the right things and make a good living for his family.

That was back in 1992. An African American taxi driver in Los Angeles had been brutally beaten by the police. The policemen responsible were put on trial and acquitted of all charges, and the violence erupted. Years of poverty and injustice all spilled out in the form of anger and violence that went on for days. The NY Daily News reported:

“Looking more like Beirut than the laid-back land of glitter and glitz, Los Angeles endured its third day of rioting, looting and arson that left 39 people dead, 1,419 injured, 4,393 arrested and an estimated \$550 million in damage and rising.”¹

There was concern about violence all over the country. In the hills of Northeast Georgia where Cheryl and I were living at the time, people were literally taking up arms to defend themselves. Guns and ammunition were flying off the shelves. The news media was filled with stories about racism, injustice and hatred. The Atlanta Braves, who were at the top of their game and playing to sell out crowds night after night, were so concern about violence in downtown Atlanta, they offered refunds to anyone who was afraid to come to their games.

In the midst of all of this, a shocked and frightened Rodney King, the taxi driver who had been beaten, appeared on television saying, “It’s just not right; it’s not right; and it’s not going to change anything.” Then he said those now famous words, “Can we all get along?”²

When the fires were finally put out and peace restored, in Los Angeles alone, 53 were dead, over 2000 were injured, over 11,000 were arrested.³ And those words echoed hauntingly in our ears, “Can we all get along?” Sound familiar?

¹ <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/rodney-king-calls-riots-article-1.2201892>

² <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/rodney-king-calls-riots-article-1.2201892>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1992_Los_Angeles_riots

Two weeks ago today, I woke up to come to this church and preach the Word of God, only to learn that five police officers had been gunned down while others were protesting the killing of two African American men by white police officers. And everyday in the past two weeks, the news and social media have been filled with talk about racism, injustice, and hatred. Almost 25 years later and nothing seems to have changed. Almost 25 years later and we don't seem to have learned a thing. In fact, it seems to be getting worse.

We hear the words "oppression" and "injustice" a lot, but when we hear those words we think about other places that are far away. Countries that are not as "civilized and developed" as we are. Places where human life has no value and human rights don't exist. But we are no longer talking about an undeveloped country, ruled by a vicious dictator half a world away, we are talking about cities, right here in our own country. We are talking about our own country that was founded on the rights of all people to be equal, and has laws to protect those rights. A country where countless men and women have given their lives to defend the right of all people to be equal. We are talking about the richest and most privileged country in the world where everyone has the opportunity to make their dreams come true, like that Korean man, my brother's friend. And yet, in this country, people are so tired of inequality and injustice that we are boiling over in anger and resorting to mob violence. A country where we are so tired of inequality and injustice that we no longer value life. And in 25 years, we have done nothing to address that anger.

We can put names on some of the victims: Rodney King, Michael Brown, Freddie Grey, Alton Sterling and Philander Castile. We can name the officers who died trying to protect the protestors: Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, and Lorne Ehrens. But there are hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent victims that remain nameless, silent victims of injustice, racism, and hatred that quietly go about their business, quietly living the life they have given.

The violence, and the injustice that sparks that violence, makes victims of all of us because it diminishes our worth as human beings and takes away any respect we have for life. We cannot beat people into tolerance. We cannot scare people into being caring and compassionate. Violence does not solve anything, violence only creates more violence and unless we decide to address the real issues that are causing this anger, the hatred will only get worse.

So much of the Bible is filled with rich, deep words that are difficult to understand, but the words in the letters of John are simple and easy to understand: “God loves us so how can we not love and respect each other?” No one knows who wrote these letters of John; no one knows when or to whom they was written; but they offer some of the most profound statements about God and Christ in all of the New Testament.

Love is not a thought or a feeling, love is not something we strive for. Love is a state of being, love is a relationship. God is love, and love is the relationship we have with God. God loves humanity and gave us that love in human form; God demonstrated that love by sending one who showed perfect love for all people. When someone needed to help and called out to Jesus, he did not ask if they were rich, or gay, or Presbyterian, or evangelical. In fact, he rarely asked

anything, he simply gave them what they needed. Even in own his death, as he hung in agony on that cross, he showed that perfect love: “God forgive them, they just don’t understand.”

John says, “...since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:11-12, NRSV) We may not be able to see God, but God is love and when we love one another we see God, and God is present in and through us.

After making his case about why we must love, John makes a startling accusation: “If someone hates a brother or sister, but says they love God, they are a liar. For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love a God whom they cannot see.” (1 John 4:20-21, NSRV) It is just not possible to love God and oppress or do violence or in any way maliciously hurt another human being.

It is in God’s love that we find hope; hope that can change our world. John’s vision in Revelation describes a new heaven and a new earth where God will live among us. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes; we will no longer fear death; we will no longer cry and will no longer be in pain; because the first things will have passed away; the world of injustice and violence will be no more.

In the last two weeks, Cheryl and I have driven to North Carolina and Virginia to attend three wonderful worship services that made us realize that even in the midst of all this evil, that God is still good and that God’s goodness is with us and can overcome all evil. The first was a memorial service for Cheryl’s aunt. She was 96 years old and one of the happiest people I have ever known. She was completely deaf, but overcame that disability and taught others to overcome similar disabilities. She had a wicked sense of humor, always smiled and laughed

most of the time. She was kind and loving, someone who changed your life just to meet her once. You truly could see God in her life.

The second service was the ordination of a extraordinarily gifted young woman as a minister of Word and Sacrament. Someone with intelligence, compassion, and an undying desire to serve God. Someone who believes more strongly than anyone I have ever known, in the hope of God's love.

The third was the marriage of two of our closest friends. Two people who were getting married later in life because they finally found the love that they had always wanted. The service and liturgy was nothing particularly special, just the basic Presbyterian wedding, but the way they looked at each other, the love in their eyes, the feeling in the words that they spoke, showed everyone that God's love is more powerful than anything any human can muster.

Every night when I go to bed, I thank God for that day. Some days are good, and some not so good, but I am thankful for another day and hopeful that in God's love tomorrow will be even better. It is in that hope that I can close my eyes and find peace to sleep well and be refreshed to face another day. Unfortunately, all too often I wake up the next morning, turn on the news and feel hopeless again. But knowing that God has loved us so much as to send that love to us, and seeing that love in everything around me, always gives me hope for that new heaven and new earth.

The problem with being a preacher is that every Sunday morning I preach both figuratively and literally to the choir. You are here because you see, know, and live God's love. You are here because you want to be better people. You are here because you want to do

something to make the world better. But what can we do? How can we, sitting in our little corner of the world, even begin to change the injustice and hatred?

We can begin by taking time to pray. Pray intentionally and pray with conviction. Pray like you know there is a God who is grieving for our world as much, if not more, than we are. Pray for an end to inequality, for a world where all life is valued and respected. Pray for an end to injustice, where all people can live without fear of being hurt because of what they believe, or the color of their skin. Pray for the victims of violence, those who we can name and those who are nameless, innocent victims. Pray that we can all swallow our pride, get past our anger, and reach out to others who hurt. Pray that everyone can feel loved and can share that love with others. When we take time in our busy lives to pray intentionally and with conviction, pray like we truly believe that there is a God who not only cares, but truly loves us, those prayers will not only change the world, but maybe more importantly, they will change us. We will begin to live differently, think differently, make different decisions. We will change our business dealings, change the way we treat others. We will wake up in the morning with hope in our hearts, offering a smile and a kind word to those we meet. In order to change the world, we have to change hearts, and through prayer, kindness, consideration, and compassion we can change the world, one heart at a time.

Can we all get along? Yeah, we can. But we can only get along if everyone is willing to trust in God enough, to put aside their own anger and reach out in the hope of God's love.

Amen.