

“Ready to leap with me?”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 8/16/2020

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:1-5).

This scripture of course is referring to Jesus, and for many of us we can comfortably replace the “Jesus” with “Christ Consciousness” (that is to say, the essence of the Christ—in other words, the spirit of love itself). I John 4:8 says “God is love”. If you replace “Word” with “Love,” the passage reads as follows: “In the beginning was Love, and Love was with God, and Love was God. Love was with God in the beginning. Through Love all things were made; without Love nothing was made that has been made. In Love was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:1-5). I appreciate this reading of the text because it emphasizes the power of love in the context of creation itself. Why is this important?

Because the author of the Gospel of John starts his account as a mirror to the Genesis 1:1 passage, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” we get a sense of its primordial relationship with creation itself; they are interlinked. Also, both passages discuss light and darkness—and the veritable struggle back and forth. Therefore, both accounts reveal a struggle between good and evil—selfishness and selflessness. This sets up the account of Jesus as a quasi second Adam, coming to earth and redeeming it by choosing to be selfless, instead of selfish. And in this way Jesus’ example acts as an invitation for the rest of us to return with him to “The Garden.”

The Garden of Eden represents our beginning as a human race. It is here that we see harmony at work, an ethic of mutual care—where God and humanity walk side by side, hand in hand, and the plants provide fruits and vegetables for sustenance while the human counterparts care for them with symbiotic, mutual respect and love. It is more than just co-existence. It is a place where the word for human (*adam*) and earth (*adamah*) unquestionably abide harmoniously in one another. However, this trust was broken by an act of disharmony and selfishness when humankind (*adam*) chose to diverge from (*adamah*) in eating of the forbidden fruit—putting creation at odds with one another. The rest of our human story is a story of some of us continuing to live into that selfishness by continuing to conquer and hoard resources and some of us choosing to resist that urge, instead choosing a path of some semblance of attempted harmony. After the garden a disease forms when we are at odds with our once symbiotic counterparts; it breeds an impulse to conquer at all costs, toiling the land to milk it for resources, even subjugating one another in order to further impose possession over the metaphorical “garden” we now inhabit. This is the real sin of humankind: Conquest. The drive for conquest can most recently be seen in our own nation’s history.

Simply look at the story of Native American genocide paired with forced removal –all for the cruel acquisition of land, to possess it for one’s own selfish enrichment, and then to compound the sin further, the conquerors stole members from other earth-born tribes, importing them as slave labor to

again continue this sick fetish of sadistic control of “The Garden.” It is undeniably linked, our desire for control of the resources of this Earth and our sickness towards oppressing others in order to accomplish it. They are interwoven. One end tries to remain whole with “the garden” in symbiosis while the other end resists through conquest and possession through subjugation with “manifest destiny” at its helm.

This spiritual community (Church of the Covenant), though, has from its beginning been all about wholeness, figuratively traversing the earth’s many broken pieces in order to call them back to wholeness; this started first between denominations of the Christian Church and then progressed quickly to include racial differences, economic stratifications, sexual orientations and gender identities, and so on—even differences in religions themselves. Wholeness has no boundaries in God’s desire for us to be in sync harmoniously with one another, fully accepting, fully loving. Well, in wrestling with this issue of wholeness there are no doubt anchors of glaring inequities rooted in our society, dating back to its initial establishment and subsequent preservation—vestiges of unbalanced power, resulting in state sponsored and even culturally supported systems of racial injustice that have yet to be fully dismantled—injustices that have yet to be rectified in a worthy manner. Reparations have yet to be made; systems have yet to be completely overhauled to create generational equitability, and there is a dearth of leadership among the privileged willing to lead such a sacrificial movement—because make no mistake, it will take sacrifice!

This church has tried and tried again to dismantle those systems of oppression through genuine counter-moves. When housing was bleak and unsatisfactory, they worked tirelessly to provide good housing for as many as people as they could. When there weren’t enough jobs to sustain families in need, they worked hard to create jobs. When addiction threatened to cast men homeless, they worked night and day to save as many as they could. When women and children were forced onto the street, they banded together to curb homelessness. On and on it goes, a story of revolutionary responses to evolutionary problems—each time providing stop-gaps, putting at least a temporary end to the hemorrhaging. However, the core issues of our larger Lynchburg community have stayed largely intact.

According to Dr. Abell of Randolph College, “the racial dimension of Lynchburg’s persistently high poverty rate [is] currently at 24.3 percent (United States: 15.1 percent). In Lynchburg, 35.8 percent of blacks live in poverty, compared to 18.6 percent of whites. The black unemployment rate (13.3 percent) is nearly three times that of whites (4.5 percent). Regarding higher education — the presumed means to a better life — less than 13 percent of blacks hold bachelor’s degrees; for whites, that number is 41 percent.” He also explains how home ownership opportunities in the early part of the 20th Century by federally supported programs specifically and exponentially advantaged Whites over Blacks in Lynchburg, creating institutionalized inequity in generational wealth. But none of this should surprise us knowing the ill effects of the Jim Crow South, period. Where apartheid policies have been commonplace and mass incarceration conveniently replacing slavery an everyday reality for so many in communities of color, there is no wonder that there has been a build up over the last century of systemic inequities and it has reached a tipping point where people are now decrying it from nearly every corner of this continent: Black lives DO matter!

Now what are we going to do? Well this has been my personal conundrum, my crossroads of indecision: What can I do? What should I do? The answer has become more and more apparent for me, personally.

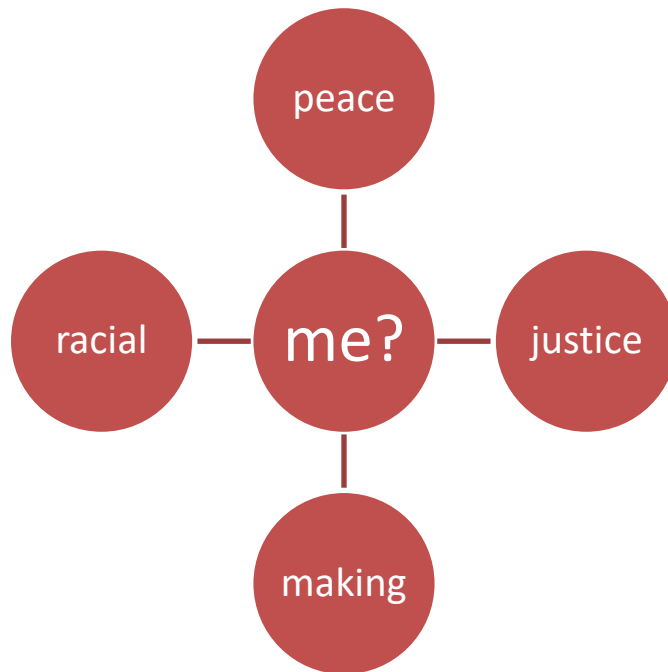
I feel I must rally together and catalyze a movement together with others, that will do four things: **eradicate, educate, compensate, and elevate**. This has potential for real distributive justice, taking us all back to a caring relationship with The Garden, with one another.

<i>Wholeness Initiatives</i>	<i>Definitions</i>	<i>Scriptural References</i>
Eradicate	Remove systemic racism. Work to dismantle systems that favor one race over another.	“And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all races (<i>ethnos</i>)? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” - <i>Mark 11:17</i>
Educate	Majority culture members concerning their privilege, and empower the disenfranchised through more educational access.	“And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” - <i>John 8:32</i>
Compensate	Pay economically tied retribution to those (and/or their descendants) who have been wronged by an unequal system.	“Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a worker overnight.” - <i>Leviticus 19:13</i>
Elevate	Lift those who have been left behind by unfavorable conditions to give them equal advantage in every aspect of our societal systems.	“How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?’ Defend the weak and the abandoned; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” - <i>Psalms 82:2-4</i>

How to accomplish these initiatives? It will take a network of people with a heart for justice, a penchant for sacrifice, and a passion to see it through.

This will take time, energy and resources. It will take brazen leadership and an unapologetic truth-telling. It will require honesty, integrity, and compassion. This was and is the work of Christ in our world, a movement from brokenness to wholeness, from injustice to justice. May we fall in love with Jesus again by falling in love with each other through the work of painful, tear-filled, uncomfortable, but absolutely necessary peacemaking—as our Lord said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). It will require many of us to make it work, but this is where I am at. What is your gut reaction to being couched at this intersection of racial justice and peacemaking? I beckon you to listen to the voice of pain calling from within the cracks of oppression bleeding out from

the often invisible depths of our communities. Listen to the moans and groans of injustice, pain and turmoil—the pain of disharmony and selfishness, and know that we each have a role to play in its reunification.



To summarize, I am preparing to leap! And I pose to you the same question: Will you leap with me?