

## **The Rt. Rev. Kevin S. Brown**

Pentecost 2020 sermon

*Stop the Injustice: Responding to the Sin of Racism*

---

In the last days, God says, "I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams." In the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen, indeed. And as I said at the welcome, I offer each and every one of us, a happy, happy Pentecost, one of the big feast days in the life of the church. When we're able to regather again and celebrate Pentecost again, I know we will have a great time. It's always a party, a big party. Some people think of this and refer to it as the birthday of the church, the day when the church was actually born. It's the day when the Holy Spirit came and shook the church into life and empowered it and encouraged it and strengthened it. As Acts Chapter Two says, that spirit came down that day and enabled them all to speak. And they spoke that day in languages that all could understand.

This day of Pentecost is a day to remember that the spirit comes to enable us to speak and to tell the good news that is within us. It enables us to speak. Pentecost is not a day of silence. In the gospel from John, Jesus speaks about the spirit and he says, noting the spirit is to come, that all who are thirsty, all who are thirsty, all who are thirsty should come to me. And all who believe in me should drink, because as Jesus reminded his disciples and all who would listen — he was shouting from the rooftops at that moment — that he is the bread of life. He is the living water. All people. Anyone who is thirsty is called.

I admit, it's tough to feel joy now on this Pentecost Sunday for two very important reasons. Firstly, this past week, we mark 100,000 deaths and more from the COVID pandemic. It's a sobering milestone. I believe I

saw that this is now the fifth most deadly event in American history. It's hard to be too joyful with that in mind. 100,000 people! That's more people than Wilmington. That's more people than a lot of cities.

This weekend, there has been a massive interfaith observance of prayer. And this is a very important weekend for the three major Abrahamic faiths. On Friday, our Muslim sisters and brothers finished the feast of Ramadan, where they remember the revelation of the Quran to the prophet Muhammad. They are praying this week. This Friday and Saturday, our Jewish brothers and sisters remember God's covenant as they celebrate Shavuot, where they also have prayers of remembrance and now added to those traditional prayers of remembrance, they have prayers for the victims of COVID and for their families.

And here today, Sunday, our own celebration of Pentecost, where we mark the courage the first Christians were given through the reception of the Holy Spirit. Here, we too pray, noting this milestone, this grizzly milestone, praying for health, praying for renewal, and praying for unity. Because, as is envisioned by this interfaith gathering, we are all in this together, and we will all come out of it if we work together.

A statement has been released by leaders across the faith and interfaith community, and it calls us to this time of prayer this weekend. It says, "This vocation the faith community to pray, specifically to stop and to name, and to feel, and to remember, and to memorialize, to pray for the dead, for their families and friends. It unites our traditions and it transcends our politics. May we be united this day in lamentation for those who have died."

It's also tough to feel particularly happy today as our country is in a state of significant turmoil. This past week, Mr. George Floyd, a black man who was in custody of police officers in Minneapolis, suffocated after eight gruesome minutes in custody. A police officer knelt upon his neck and though he pleaded, "I cannot breathe", he slowly suffocated. Even as onlookers watched and begged — begged them to let the man breathe —

the police officer did not release his knee and the officers around him stood and watched. One bystander caught it on video, and it's the video that I, and so many of you, have seen and it breaks the heart.

So, there's widespread response, as you might imagine, across the country, including Delaware, where peaceful protest, people who are energetic and mad and angry, but peaceful altogether move to express that rage and that sense of change and wanting the injustice to be stopped. And in some cases, even here in Wilmington last night, small sections break out and rioting and looting happens. Even right now, portions of downtown Wilmington are blocked off and impassable given the damage last night.

I have spoken, by the way, with our clergy at our downtown parishes. Our clergy are fine. The parishes are fine and no known parishioners have been harmed last night. But overall, this is about more than our churches downtown. This is about our community. It's about all of us. It's about the kinds of things that draw good people together to protest and how protest could somehow become violent and how rage could boil over.

My heart breaks for Mr. George. My heart breaks for his family and for his friends. My heart breaks for the good police officers out there who are trying to do their very job. And when they see a video like this, they know it is wrong and they have spoken out. So many chiefs of police have even said so. My heart breaks for the good people of Minneapolis as they deal with this tragedy, and the good people of this United States as we come, once again, face to face with dark truths about our society.

One thing is so very important, and that is to never, ever confuse people who are protesting with people who are rioting. It's wrong. It's too easy, and it's dismissive. And if you think about it, it is sinister. You know, that's a way to divert the attention away from what the underlying problems are. There's perfectly good reason for good people to protest. There is no good reason for people to riot and to break and to steal and no one condones that. But the mistake is in treating all protesters as if they

were rioters. Do not do it. It is the same mistake when people want to treat all cops as if they are bad cops. It is not fair. It is not right. Do not do it.

Do you see my brothers and sisters, when we get into this kind of broad-brush painting of people, we demonize them, we reduce them, and it is sinful? A few bad cops, a few bad rioters do not mar the whole of the good. And if we are ever going to come out of this morass in which we are, this morass between our races, then we have to admit that, and we have to get past simplification into deeper, deeper questions. We've got to be willing to look at the deeper sins, and there are deeper sins, the deeper sins around humanity. We have lived together for thousands and thousands of years, and we have not always gotten along.

People have had a remarkable, a tragic capacity for finding ways to not get along. If Jesus has been calling for 2,000 years for all people to "come to me, because I am living water", if the Holy Spirit came upon the church for all people, we have found ways to make sure that not exactly all people are entirely welcome, whether it's in the church or in our nation or across the world. Too often, people find reasons to hate other people.

So the oldest, the oldest reason that people found to hate each other, it seems, is tribal. When one tribe would have a plot of land or have some resources and another tribe would come, the tribes would fight one another. They were fighting over resources. And that kind of hatred could go on and on for a very long time.

Very similar people fought very brutally. The Bible records how the Egyptians, next door neighbors to the Hebrews, enslaved them, enslaved them for a very long time. How the Mongols and the Chinese for so very long, were at war. Very, very nearly the same people. And just in the British Isles, the Scots and the Welsh and the Irish were at war, and the Britons — very similar people — tribes fighting against each other. But then we found other ways, too, beyond tribalism, we found ways to fight each other over our religion.

It's easy to think about the crusades, of course, when armed Christians traveled thousands of miles for the express purpose of waging war on another religion. The slaughter of the 30 years' war after the Reformation, when Catholics killed Protestants and Protestants killed Catholics. And yeah, there was politics underneath it, but religion played a combustible part of that mix. And right now, there are Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims who are killing each other in the name of religion. We've let our tribalism make us hate each other. We've let our religion make us hate each other. And now we've taken it up to a national scale with the rise of nations and it isn't even nations — political systems go to war with each other.

And yeah, we can look back to ancient Greece when Athens and Sparta fought against each other, but we'd also see here in the 20th century that the great, horrible wars of our time were about nations, nations rising up against one another.

So, in these cases, over time, whether it's tribe or it's religion or it's nationality, they've always intermixed. They've always intermixed with each other. And they've given us reasons to hate and to fight, and even to enslave. I mean, it still is going on. It's less than 20 years ago when the Good Friday Accords were signed in Ireland that stopped the fighting between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. Barely 20 years ago. It still seems, I'm sad to say, that we're a long way from living water for all people; believing that all people deserve the love of God, the love of each other, one for another.

But beyond this, beyond tribalism, beyond religion, beyond nationality, we humans have come up with another way to hate each other. We invented this one, too. It's a rather new way. It's about 400 years old. It's a way to reject other people, to enslave other people, and even to kill them. It's called race. Killing and war over race is probably the saddest and most pathetic of this long list of sad and pathetic reasons to kill each other. And it's the worst, I think, because it is based on a lie that every one of us

has been taught. The lie is this, that there are differences between people. This is the lie, that there are differences between people based on their skin color or other physical traits. Race is a fiction, there is no biological base for it. It is a pure political fiction created to subjugate black women and black men to whites.

Now, this isn't an opinion, this is historical fact. Sadly, this lie, this sin, was one that was born here in the United States. It's the one we used to help substantiate, to help underlie, the very chattel of slavery that motivated and empowered our country for so long. It really almost started by accident. There weren't a group of people who sat around one day and said, "Let's start racism." But it began, and it did not end. It has been perpetuated, and that has been no accident.

Race is a lie. It will tell you that there are meaningful biological differences between dark people and light people. It'll tell you that white people are actually better, or smarter, or more American than dark people. You see, race will tell you that the white people ought to be all united together because they have something in common that other people don't have, that's the color of their skin. Race is a lie that sparked some white Americans to demean, oppress, attack, and kill fellow Americans, not people from a different tribe or a different religion or a different nation, but just a different color.

Race is a total falsehood, scientifically and logically, and yet it has become a demonic reality in the world. Not only in the world, in our very laws, from the founding of our country. You remember from grade school the Three-Fifths Compromise, that said a white man was worth one vote, but a black man, how much was he worth? Well, he was worth three-fifths of a person. In the Constitution itself.

Here's some more history to remember. Less than a hundred years ago, our Supreme Court upheld a longstanding legal ruling that said a person had to be white to be American. Did you know that? You had to be white to be American? So never mind that people couldn't even agree what whiteness

meant. Some people said, well, white meant that you couldn't have more than one-eighth color in you. Some people said you couldn't have any color in you. White people couldn't agree on what white meant. But they knew that if you weren't white, you were not American. This was law, upheld by the Supreme Court.

The reason they couldn't agree on race is because there's no scientific basis for it. It's culture, it's a fiction. No wonder they couldn't agree. You see, it's something we've all been trained in. It's something that is around us. No one wakes up — I don't know anyone, maybe they're out there, but I have never known anyone — no one has woken up and said that, "Kevin, one day you're going to be racist. I want you to learn these racist things. I want you to know that you are better than black people. I want you to know that you're smarter, and this, or that." That's not the way it works. It's rather insidious, and then it's part of the air that we breathe. But it need not be.

I don't think any police are trained to be racist. I think they are trained to see black and brown people as different, as more dangerous, as more potentially criminal for the color of their skin. You see? They're not trained to hate black or brown people. But we are trained to see differences in skin color, and to see, especially those who are dark, as more dangerous or more criminal. And you and I have been trained in this way, too. We have to resist it. We have to stop it. We have to fight back. It's not enough, my white brothers and sisters, to say, "I'm not a racist," when the training that we get from our culture, when we're taught against our knowledge, oftentimes, and even against our will, when our very culture teaches us that black and brown people are different because they're black or brown.

No wonder our black brothers and sisters are angry. There's been a long, long time, centuries, of brutal unfairness, of being ignored when they speak up. Isn't it interesting, that it's in a time of the internet and video, when it can be documented, that the very grievances our black brothers

and sisters have had for so long are now visible for us all to see, that they become irrefutable? No wonder things are in turmoil.

I know it seems impossible on some days to fix the problem, but it is not. For moral change to happen, my brothers and sisters — and that's what we're talking about here, the moral strength, the moral fiber to stand up and make the political change that needs to happen — for that moral awakening to happen, it has to happen when those in power and those with power stand up and then make a difference. They've got to stand up, and those in power and with power have got to vote for it. They've got to stand up for it. They've got to speak out for it. They've got to fight for it.

We've done this before. We've done this before, my fellow Americans. We Americans have actually done this before. Take the example of women's right, the right to vote 100 years ago, 101 years now. You won't be surprised to remember that in that three-fifths compromise in our Constitution, it was counting men so they could vote. It didn't even worry about women. How about that? You see, you ladies for the first hundred or so years of our existence as a nation, you didn't really have much political right at all. And over the centuries, that's based on a lot of old stuff where men have claimed superiority, a natural superiority over women. So as men who were in power, we found it right to deny our sisters the right to vote, or the right to own land, or the right to choose what job you would have without the permission of your father or your husband.

So, in the 19th century, women began to mobilize and demanded an equal share of the influence in the country, demanded a right to vote and refuse the argument that was given, that said that women do vote through their husbands. Their husbands are smart enough to vote for their wives. That was the argument. And women stood up and said, "No, we'll vote for ourselves."

So, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was eventually ratified in 1919, and it gave women the right to vote. But this is what I mean about



people in power have to do something, because who voted at that time to give women a chance to vote? It was the men, all of the men who were in power at that time who stood up and did the right thing. Now, some men were already there, and already in power, already believed in the truth of it, but many men finally voted for the 19th Amendment because after decades, they were shamed into it. And they saw that the logic that they had been using to suppress women and their rights was faulty, it was empty. And they eventually voted for what was right.

But here's something that I'm sad to say we must still remember, is that there were people who vigorously opposed a woman's right to vote, vigorously opposed it for various reasons, that women were not smart enough to decide, or were too weak, or too frivolous, or whatever ridiculous reason. They resisted and fought against it. And some of those people still remain today in dark corners of the internet who say that women have no business in politics or running our country.

That's why I say we need to remember, because the way that change happens is that people in power stand up and they take their voice and make it a voice for more people to expand the reach, that all people can participate, so that the evil becomes a fringe and it's pushed farther and farther and farther out to the edge until eventually, it dies.

So, for moral change to happen now with race, it is for the very same thing for people in power to stand up and to make a moral difference in their lives and in the world, and to push racism till it dies finally on the fringe. But it will not happen overnight, and it will not happen if those of us in power are silent. Because the fact is that we whites still retain the great majority of power in this country. Political power? Yeah. But even more, economic power. As we know, in our country, money talks.

We, and I'm talking us my fellow white sisters and brothers, must act. Either we make the moral choice to actively reject racism and not simply say, "I'm not racist," and leave that problem to our black and brown brothers and sisters — either we make the choice to reject it, or we get

shamed out of our silence because we sat too long, or we get pushed to the fringe. We've got to speak. We've got to speak, my brothers and sisters, to open our arms so wide.

It's what Christ taught us to do. It's what Christ calls us to do. The Holy Spirit came upon the church to empower and embolden us to speak. What is tragic, my friends, is when too many white men and women simply refuse to speak, and stay silent. The only thing necessary, it is said, for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it so beautifully. Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

So, let's move the conversation from, we've got to stop the riots. Yeah, we've got to stop the riots. Nobody wants rioting. The job of our political leaders is not to say, "We're going to stop the riots." The job of our political leaders and those in power is to say, "We're going to stop the unfairness. We're going to stop the brutality. We're going to stop the injustice that drives good people to extremes." The rioting has to stop, indeed. But it's not enough to blame the cops as if they're all evil racists, we've got to change the way they are trained, and we are trained as a nation, about one another.

I have hope. I'm a believer in the living God and of Jesus Christ. I don't lose hope. It can be shaken sometimes, but it is strong within me, and I pray that it is strong within you, too. The Holy Spirit is here to encourage us and to strengthen us. The more daunting the task, the stronger and more resolved we must be.

To my white sisters and brothers, I especially call on you to learn, to understand that there is unquestionably a truth that our sisters and brothers of color suffer far more disproportionately more than you or I do in this nation. Whether it's quality of education, quality of healthcare, rate of imprisonment, fair housing, fair employment, fair wages, the data are all the same. Why? Ask why, and for God's sake, don't just ask fellow whites. Ask the black community. Ask the people who are living it.

Don't be silent when a friend, or a family member, or someone you know wants to disparage, and then blame all this problem on black and brown people. Don't let that pass. Challenge it. Invite them in a conversation, and to learn. Have courage to pursue the truth and to read the data, it doesn't lie. May we all remember that nonviolent protest is the only way that we open closed hearts and minds. The adage that fighting fire with fire, that's not Jesus Christ. He never said it. He never said it in any way. Everyone gets burned, of course. The way of Christ is a way of open hands, open arms, and of invitation, of listening and speaking up.

Just last week, and I close with this, I preached on the Feast of the Ascension, where Jesus rose and left his disciples so that the church may begin and noted that the Feast of the Ascension is a feast that marks God's trust in us, God's trust that we, the people of God, will do the work of God. We have been entrusted, and we have been empowered, my brothers and sisters. On this day where we mark the death of George Floyd, and pray for his family and friends, where we mark the death of over a hundred thousand persons in the United States alone from this disease, may we also mark our resilience in the face of the most difficult challenges to remember that Jesus Christ is the God of love, and our faith, our faith in Christ will not leave us abandoned.

Amen.