

# “I Am With You”

Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Another Sermon for Four Voices

Written by Matt Matthews

**.Matt.** Friends, the racial protests in our country have required our attention in the last days, weeks, months, and years. You would expect (and demand) that your pastor would offer some observations.

I'd rather not.

I'd rather play it safe.

I'd rather tell you about my latest trip to the Custard Cup where I enjoyed a refreshing strawberry freeze and lovely saunter with my son and wife through Hessel Park. These Illinois evenings really are a wonder.

But we need to hear from each other. We need, particularly, to listen to those whose voices have been historically been silenced or marginalized.

Paul uses the word “beloved” a lot in his letters to the church. I think I know why. So, *beloved*, pray with me as I try to preach.

Holy God, you bring our days to an end like a  
story that is told. Help us to remember that  
beyond our brief day is the eternity of your love.

*(Reinhold Niebuhr, adapt.)*

**.Judi.** Many are clamoring to share their opinion about the conversation our country is having about race. We all have personal stories. Let's share our stories and listen to the stories of others. Particularly, let's listen.

**.Mindy.** This is a time when we each will learn something new and important if we do three things. Number one: Prayerfully listen,

**.Judi.** Number two: Prayerfully ask questions,

**.Rachel.** And, number three: Prayerfully listen.

**.Judi.** I'm compelled by this vision. Imagine it with me:

**.Picture/Christ the Redeemer  
Rio de Janeiro**



**.Rachel.** Jesus is standing with outstretched arms attempting to gather his flock together. Rubber bullets, chairs through windows, canisters of tear gas, cocktails of fire, mace, malice, fear, and looters tear at Jesus' flesh, pull at his clothing, try again to steady his arm upon a cross for well-aimed nails.

**.Picture/Chagall (full pix)**



**.Judi.** But not even crucifixion will keep Jesus down. Jesus does not stand down, arms open. Jesus cannot be ultimately held down. The risen Christ stands painfully in our midst . . .

## .Picture/Dali



**.Mindy.** . . . And at the same time the risen Christ is rises transcendent above, holding heaven near to the earth that tries desperately to wring itself away from her God. Jesus shepherds us. Jesus feeds us. *This Jesus will not be denied.*

**.Judi.** What image do you have of Jesus at a time like this?

## .Picture/Christ the Redeemer Rio de Janeiro

Mario Roberto Durán Ortiz



**.Rachel.** I'm thinking of the concrete Christ standing serenely above Rio De Janeiro.

**.Picture/Chagall (clipped pix)**



**.Judi.** I'm thinking of Marc Chagall's White Crucifixion—Jesus is present as well as transcendent, and surrounded by weeping, heavenly saints.

**.Picture/Dali**



**.Mindy.** I'm thinking of Jesus in the style of Salvador Dali in *The Last Supper*, among other pictures.

**.Judi.** Another set of images come to mind:



"Ousmane & Matt" by Stretch Ledford

... images of people of faith trying faithfully to stand with each other, side by side.



“Nativity” by Stretch Ledford.

... images of faith Christians standing with the Jesus who is standing with us.

These images give me comfort.

Allow us share some stories of people who are trying stand with Jesus and to walk attentively, closely, prayerfully with him.

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**.Rachel.** 1.) JOHN MARK MATTHEWS: Matt and I have been thinking through these protests on TV through the pounding heart of our twenty-year-old son. John Mark looks to us for guidance. He is a child of the church. He looks to the church for a word. He is figuring out his vocation. He wants to make the world a better place. I admire and love him.

**.Judi.** Young people have asked us: “Why does it appear that so many people seem primarily concerned that property is being destroyed when a black human being has been murdered in police custody?”

**.Mindy.** And this question: “How can I believe in the rule of law when people with brown skin and accents have not been able fully to enjoy the protection of this rule?”

**.Rachel.** Our conversations have been painful, rich, thoughtful, and slow.

**.Judi.** 2. ) BRIAN BLOUNT is the president of Union Presbyterian Seminary. Besides being a brilliant New Testament scholar, he is a black man in a predominately white denomination. He writes that we cannot know what the future looks like, but by looking backwards towards Jesus, we see a way forward. And it is clear. He writes these words:

**.Mindy.** *"[Jesus] spilled his blood in an effort to inaugurate [the Reign of God]. He did his part. Our Christian part is to witness to that Reign in the way we speak our words and live our lives. That is our formula for reckoning with systemic evil that possesses institutions and drives individuals mad. The Blood of the Lamb. The Witness of the Lamb's Followers. Us black and you white Christians . . .*

**.Rachel.** *"No, this evil of enduring American racism is not just a Christian problem. But for a people who claim to follow a Jesus who died on a cross for all people, and whom we claim reigns in heaven interceding with God for all people, it is an evil we must especially engage. We cannot claim to witness to this risen Christ and simultaneously allow our country's descent into this racial abyss.*

**.Mindy.** *"We Christian people can make a difference. We must help defeat this draconian, systemic evil.*

**.Rachel.** *"By our witness.*

**.Judi.** *"Before it is too late."*

\* \* \*

**.Mindy.** 3. ) BRET GODFREY lives in Woodmont, MN, and teaches with his wife in St. Paul public schools. He and Deb telephoned teachers this weekend

whose husbands or wives are cops or firefighters. “Are your people okay? You are in our prayers.”

**.Rachel.** Bret is Native American. His adopted son is Korean. His family knows about prejudice. His father and mother’s people were force-marched from historic tribal lands in the east to the Dakotas. He has spent his professional life in the public schools building a bridge, being a bridge.

**.Mindy.** Bret and Deb are calling their neighbors in Minneapolis-St. Paul, checking in, praying for their town, standing strong, standing humbly.

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**.Judi.** 4 . ) Springfield area priest **Fr. Kevin Laughery’s** sister, Kathy Yates, is assistant principal of Risen Christ Catholic School in Minneapolis, which is co-sponsored by five Minneapolis Catholic parishes, and serves mainly the children of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. She is safe. Many of her young students are not. The school is located just three blocks from the corner where the George Floyd incident took place. Many school families live in the area where rioting has taken place.

The President of her school wrote these words to his community at ground zero (his full statement is below):

**.Rachel.** *“The toxic stress that many members of our community already experience is now made worse by the destruction taking place along Lake Street where many of them live. We know of one family who is now homeless after their apartment building was burned to the ground on Wednesday evening. Other families have evacuated their homes in search of safety. I suspect there are other traumas we will gradually become aware of in the coming days . . .*

**.Judi.** *“The Archbishop would like you to know that he is praying for the Risen Christ community. Let us join him in raising one another, our students and our families up in prayer.*

**.Mindy.** *“Faith, human dignity, justice and peace are at the core of Catholic social teaching. It is these universal values that will see us through.”*

*La fe, la dignidad humana, la justicia y la paz son el centro de la enseñanza social de la iglesia católica. Son estos valores universales los que nos ayudarán.*

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**.Judi.** 5.) **The Illinois Conference of Churches** Leadership Team Zoomed last week speaking about the need to make a statement about race. Three days of writing yielded an imperfect, almost lukewarm, statement that attempts to shine light in darkness. They write these words:

**.Mindy.** *“We do not condone all the ways in which the outrage of citizens in cities around the nation has been expressed.*

**.Rachel.** *“We do, however, recognize that feelings of outrage and lament are fitting and Biblical witnesses to injustice.”*

**.Judi.** Remember the Palm Sunday scripture when the religious leaders of Jesus’s day tell him to order his disciples to stop that loud, hosanna parade into Jerusalem? Remember what Jesus said?

“If these people are quiet, the very stones would cry out.”

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**.Matt.** Beloved, when Jesus tells his disciples that he is with us, even to the close of the age, he means it. Disciples then and now have built their faith upon this promise.

Jesus our shepherd guides our steps even now. Jesus is with us, even now. We are not alone. Much is required of us now. But we are in good hands. God has made yet another promise to the world through Jesus Christ, a holy promise. and blessed assurance that can be leaned upon and trusted.

I am with you always, Jesus said. Even to the close of the age.

On another day we would sing words like these:

The Lord has promis'd good to me,  
His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be  
As long as life endures.

AMEN.

**Matthew 28:16-20** <sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

-----The statements I quote above come from these full statements below:

Dear Teachers/Staff,

Like many of you, my heart is breaking for our community. As if a global pandemic, mass unemployment and other stressors were not enough, we've now witnessed the horrific death of George Floyd in our own neighborhood, just three blocks from Risen Christ Catholic School.

The resulting protests and destruction along Lake Street in Minneapolis as people express their anger has been difficult to watch and some members of our community are experiencing this in a very personal way.

I live just a few blocks north of University Ave in the Midway neighborhood of St. Paul, near where it intersects with Hamline. Last night I saw smoke from burning buildings rising above my neighborhood. Helicopters and sirens were constant, along with occasional booming sounds and possible gunshots.

And yet several blocks insulate my family from the destruction and we wear a coat of white privilege. As a white male I see the police as people who will protect me. But many in our community live in fear of those who are in uniform - whether it be ICE, police, or others.

I will never forget, several years ago, hearing about a Risen Christ student who burst into tears when a police officer visited to speak with his class. He was afraid that the officer would take him and his family away.

Try as I might, I will never fully understand how that feels.

The toxic stress that many members of our community already experience is now made worse by the destruction taking place along Lake Street where many of them live. We know of one family who is now homeless after their apartment building was burned to the ground on Wednesday evening. Other families have evacuated their homes in search of safety. I suspect there are other traumas we will gradually become aware of in the coming days.

**If you personally need anything, or are aware of students/families who need support, please let me (or any member of the school Leadership team) know as soon as possible.** Risen Christ is blessed to have resources from generous supporters to assist those who are in crisis.

The Archbishop would like you to know that he is praying for the Risen Christ community. Let us join him in raising one another, our students and our families up in prayer.

Faith, human dignity, justice and peace are at the core of Catholic social teaching. It is these universal values that will see us through.

God bless you and stay safe,  
Mike

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Estimados Maestros/Personal,

Como muchos de ustedes, mi corazón se quiebra por nuestra comunidad. Como si una pandemia global, el desempleo masivo y otras tensiones no fueran suficientes, ahora hemos sido testigos de la horrible muerte de George Floyd en nuestro propio vecindario, a solo tres cuadras de la Escuela Católica Risen Christ.

Las protestas y la destrucción resultantes a lo largo de la Calle Lake en Minneapolis mientras las personas expresan su enojo han sido difíciles de ver y algunos miembros de nuestra comunidad lo están experimentando de manera muy personal.

Yo vivo solo algunas cuadras al norte de la Avenida University en el vecindario Midway de San Pablo cerca de la intersección con Hamline. Anoche vi el humo de los edificios en llamas que se elevaban sobre mi vecindario. Los helicópteros y las sirenas eran constantes, junto con ruidos ocasionales y posibles disparos.

Y, sin embargo, varias cuadras aíslan a mi familia de la destrucción y usamos una capa de privilegio blanco. Como hombre blanco, veo a la policía como personas que me protegerán. Pero muchos en nuestra comunidad viven con miedo de aquellos que están uniformados, ya sea ICE, la policía u otros.

Nunca olvidaré, hace varios años, escuchar acerca de un estudiante de Risen Christ que se echó a llorar cuando un oficial de policía lo visitó para hablar con su clase. Temía que el oficial se lo llevara a él y a su familia.

Por más que lo intente, nunca entenderé completamente cómo se siente eso.

El estrés tóxico que muchos miembros de nuestra comunidad ya experimentan ahora se agrava por la destrucción que ocurre a lo largo de la Calle Lake, donde viven muchos de ellos. Sabemos de una familia que ahora no tiene hogar después de que su edificio de apartamentos fue incendiado el miércoles por la noche. Otras familias han evacuadas de sus hogares en busca de seguridad. Sospecho que hay otros traumas de los que gradualmente nos daremos cuenta en los próximos días.

**Si usted personalmente necesita algo, o está al tanto de estudiantes / familias que necesitan apoyo, avíseme (o a cualquier miembro del equipo de Liderazgo de la escuela) lo antes posible.** Risen Christ ha sido bendecido en contar con recursos por parte de generosos partidarios para ayudar a quienes estén en crisis.

Al Arzobispo le gustaría que supieran que está orando por la comunidad de Risen Christ. Unámonos a él en levantarnos unos a otros, a nuestros estudiantes y a nuestras familias en oración.

La fe, la dignidad humana, la justicia y la paz son el centro de la enseñanza social de la iglesia católica. Son estos valores universales los que nos ayudarán.

Dios los bendiga y manténganse a salvo,

Mike.

**Michael Rogers, President**

Risen Christ Catholic School  
1120 East 37th St | Minneapolis, MN 55407

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RICHMOND, VA (May 31, 2020) — The following statement was made by Union Presbyterian Seminary President Brian K. Blount on the death of George Floyd, a black man who died Monday after a white Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee on his neck until he stopped breathing and nationwide protests over police mistreatment of African Americans.

“And they conquered [evil] by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their witness.” The Apocalypse. 12:11.

If white Christians were to ask me, a black Christian, what they should do in response to the spiral of racially sparked violence into which we are rapidly and inevitably descending, I have pondered the response I would give. Strange, since no one has asked, that I nonetheless feel compelled to answer.

I feel compelled because I am afraid. I am afraid because I fear that my voice is too insignificant to matter. I am afraid because I fear that while what I say bears insufficient weight to make a difference, it carries just enough potency to get me in trouble. I am afraid because I fear bringing trouble on myself when my people are writhing in a perpetual abyss of systemic injustice. I am afraid because I fear that one day, long after I have died, my son and daughter will still weep at news about a black individual murdered while sitting in her home, running in his community, walking home from his corner store, driving in her car, standing in his front yard, exploring in his park, worshiping in her church, lying helpless on an American street, the full weight of a cavalier, almost casual, curiously disinterested, white anger crushing his throat beneath its self-righteous, imperious knee. I am afraid because I fear a reckoning on the streets if we cannot find justice in the courts, redress in our politics, realignment of our institutional policies, and reconsideration of our racial values. I am afraid because I fear that when I am called to my own final reckoning the record will show that I didn't do my part. I didn't witness. Not enough.

White Christians are not witnessing. Not enough.

In the Apocalypse, the world is possessed by systemic evil. That evil manifested itself in an imperial reign that demanded a fealty the Apocalypse's author claimed belonged solely to Christ. Rome wanted to be worshiped. Christ believers could respond in one of two ways. They could patriotically idolize Rome or they could witness to the Lordship of Christ. Either. Or.

Rome promised to punish anyone who refused to render the reverence it believed it was due. Writing to seven churches located in the belly of this imperial, bestial declaration of religious and political supremacy, John of Patmos pleaded for a witness to an alternative truth. The only leader who deserved fidelity and worship was this Jesus who died on a Roman cross. It was not Rome's empire but his resurrected Reign that should be revered and realized. He spilled his blood in an effort to inaugurate that Reign. He did his part. Our Christian part is to witness to that Reign in the way we speak our words and live our lives. That is our formula for reckoning with systemic evil that possesses institutions and drives individuals mad. The Blood of the Lamb. The Witness of the Lamb's Followers. Us black and you white Christians.

What does a Reign under the Lordship of Christ look like? Before we can witness for it we must know what it is. If we could see into God's future the way John saw through his open door into transcendence, perhaps we would know. We are not that farsighted. But our hindsight ought to be 20/20. Because it is written in a record for us. If Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of the Apocalypse, then we have a glimpse of what a Reign under his rule would look like? We have something for which to witness. In the Gospel vision. There, lepers are touched. There are no Eric Garners who cannot breathe. There, the sick are unilaterally healed. There are no Ahmaud Arberys demonically hunted to death. There, codes and laws too legalistically and unjustly applied are broken. There are no Breonna Taylors, shot eight times, when their homes are broken into by law enforcement. There, men once incapacitated by paralysis walk. There are no George Floyds paralyzed beneath the weight of ruthless state agents.

There, systems of ethnic segregation are broken open by the vision of a house of prayer for all the nations. There is no aspiration of a rule where one people structure society so that it perpetually privileges them and those like them.

We know from hindsight the promise of Jesus' vision. We know what it intends. Our calling is to witness to it. No matter the cross.

I am afraid because I know I am not witnessing. Not enough.

I am afraid because I know that white Christians are not witnessing. Not enough.

Why does our country need white Christians to witness more than they are? More now even than black Christians and black people of every faith and of no faith?

Whether it's individual acts of brutality or systemic oppression, it is hard to maneuver successfully for change when your hands are shackled, your legs are taken out from beneath you, and someone is kneeling on your neck. You need the people who wield economic, political, police, and military power to reign in the agents they have authorized to act on their behalf, to rain down change upon the systems their forebears have spent centuries erecting. To privilege themselves.

You need them to witness.

Not just spiritually. Tangibly. Not just with well-intentioned prayer. With concrete action. Not just from the pulpit and in the sanctuary. Out in the world, on the streets of their cities, in the corridors of their power.

No, this evil of enduring American racism is not just a Christian problem. But for a people who claim to follow a Jesus who died on a cross for all people, and whom we claim reigns in heaven interceding with God for all people, it is an evil we must especially engage. We cannot claim to witness to this risen Christ and simultaneously allow our country's descent into this racial abyss.

We Christian people can make a difference. We must help defeat this draconian, systemic evil.

By our witness.

Before it is too late.

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A statement on racism and the death of George Floyd  
May 30, 2020

The Illinois Conference of Churches decided, many years ago, to be an intentionally anti-racist organization. This concern of ours springs from our understanding of the Christian faith which we together profess. Jesus, the Son of God become human, bonded himself to all human beings, without exception. We are to recognize his image in every human being.

We know well that racism has a threatening grip upon all in American society, including Christians. We enjoy no immunity from "America's original sin." Our anti-racism is an ongoing struggle with the ways in which our own perceptions of human beings have been formed and deformed. We repent of our racism even as we shine a light on the manifestations of this sin, which can easily be found throughout our history and right up to the present day.

The death of a black man, Mr. George Floyd, handcuffed and apparently cooperative, at the hands of four police officers who held Mr. Floyd on the ground with a knee to his neck for over eight minutes while Mr. Floyd can be heard saying, "I can't breathe," has sparked a conversation on race our churches and culture often prefer to avoid. We await and work for the day—with what we believe is holy impatience—when all human beings are afforded equal justice under the law of this nation and the law written on the human heart by our God.

We do not condone all the ways in which the outrage of citizens in cities around the nation has been expressed. We do, however, recognize that feelings of outrage and lament are fitting and Biblical witnesses to injustice.

We, the Leadership Team of the Illinois Conference of Churches, speak out against all racism and racist actions. We ask all persons of faith to join us in prayer and self-examination, asking God to help us see God's image in the faces of our neighbor and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

The Leadership Team of the Illinois Conference of Churches

E. Garnet Fay  
Gregory Krohm  
The Reverend Kevin Laughery  
The Reverend Matt Matthews  
The Reverend Catiana McCay  
The Reverend Gary McCants  
The Reverend Galda McCants  
The Reverend Walter Carlson