



A Call to Abide, Listen and Fast

In the last 2 weeks, we have been confronted with the reality of our country's deep racial, social and economic inequalities and the ways these inequalities manifest in violence against our black and brown brothers and sisters. There is anger, frustration and rightful demands for justice. For some of us, there is also guilt and shame. There is also exhaustion from the many burdens of the global pandemic. In all of this, many of us are asking: "How can we respond to the cries for justice? Where do we find the strength and resolve to respond?" And as Christians in the family of Grace Pasadena, we are asking: "How do we care for those who are hurting in our midst and in our city? How do we stand against the sin of racism and live into our calling as salt and light and as peacemakers? How do we bear witness to the Gospel—the good news that Jesus makes reconciliation with God and with one another possible—in both word and deed?"

As the people of God, our actions must be rooted in the act of abiding and listening. As John 1 tells us, Jesus is the eternal, creative Word of life. He is the Word against sin and death. He is the Word that heals and restores. In John 15, Jesus tells us to abide in him by abiding in his words. It is through abiding and listening attentively to his words that we can discern what is required of us and bear the fruit of justice and peace. It is by listening to him that we know what justice and peace truly are. It is by listening to the voice of our Shepherd that we can know where to go and what to do. Only by giving ourselves to God can we love. We must abide and listen *before* we act and *as* we act. If we do not, Jesus says we can do nothing (John 15:5).

Abiding and listening go hand-in-hand with fasting. The practice of fasting is mentioned throughout Scripture. Generally speaking, fasting is the practice of abstaining from food in order to humble oneself before God. It is an embodied practice that teaches us to die to ourselves. In Scripture, we see God's people fasting when seeking wisdom (Acts 14:23). We also see God's people fasting before starting an important work or ministry (Esther 4:16), when repenting and seeking forgiveness (Lev. 23:27, Jonah 3:5-9), and as a sign of deep grief and lament (Gen. 37:34).

Though an ancient practice, fasting seems absolutely necessary in these times: we desperately need wisdom; we desperately need to confess the racism in the world and we need to repent of any indifference, prejudicial attitudes and racism that may be in our own heart; we desperately need to lament violence and death; we are urgently being called to be instruments of lasting peace, reconciliation and justice. For all of this, we need supernatural help from the One who has conquered sin and death.

Grace Pasadena, your desire to not only weep with those who weep but also to rally around them with action cannot be denied. Your desire to act both as individuals and as a church is loud and beautiful. But will you heed the call to abide in Jesus's words, to listen and to fast? Will you humble yourselves before God so that you can discern the will of God and die to your own agendas? Will you humble yourselves before God so that you can receive his definitions and vision for peace, justice and reconciliation? Will you humble yourselves before God so that you can also humble yourselves before and listen to the very people and communities you wish to advocate for and serve?

We invite you to abide, listen and fast for 5 days starting Monday, June 8. To help you abide and listen to Jesus's words, we recommend using the guide that follows along with the Ordinary Time Prayer Guide. The following guide invites you to contemplate scriptures specifically focused on the vision of God's justice, peace and reconciliation fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ. The guide also includes words from African-American Christians that encourage and challenge. The Ordinary Time Prayer Guide is structured to help you frame your day with Jesus' words of life. It also invites you to pray with different Christian voices from different traditions, cultures and countries. Avail yourself of both guides and use them as the Spirit leads. Use them in whole or in part.

As you abide and listen for the next 5 days, we invite you to fast as well. We recommend fasting as we do at Lent: abstain from a food, beverage or activity that you often turn to for comfort or security. Perhaps this means alcohol or streaming videos or spending time on social networks. As you consider what to abstain from, you may feel the need to abstain from more than one thing. Another way to fast is to give up one meal a day, perhaps the same meal on all 5 days. If you would like to practice abstaining from food for an entire day, we recommend doing so only once for one 24-hour period from sundown to sundown.

Please keep in mind that fasting is not about abstaining in just the right way to manipulate God into action. Nor is fasting about your willpower. Fasting is humbling ourselves before God and declaring that without his leading and strength, we are hopeless. Fasting is an emptying of our egos and distractions so that we can be filled with God's words and be better attentive to them. So, fast as you are able, and when you falter, take it as an opportunity to cling to God and his words more closely.

If you're not in the habit of journaling, have a pen and paper in easy reach this week. It's good to remember and remember well.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus and entrust ourselves and neighbors to him who loves us more than we can ever imagine or believe. Let us cling to his words and be full of hope: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."
(John 16:33)

With great love for you all,

The Pastors, Elders and staff of Grace Pasadena.

Monday, June 8

- Consider how you can frame the hours ahead with scripture. At what other times of the day can you stop and abide in Jesus's words of life, even for a few minutes? With intention, mark the times and even set alarms. Consider using or adapting the Ordinary Time Prayer Guide to help you abide.

- Prayerfully read through Matthew 25:31-46 (ESV):

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' 45 Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

- Dwell on the following:
 - What do you notice? What resonates with you?
 - How are you convicted by the passage? What must you confess?
 - How does the passage help you understand God's mercy, justice and reconciliation?
 - What invitation to action do you hear? How can you extend that invitation to your church family?

- Listen and sit with the following words from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*":

I have been disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue...

But despite these notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say that as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say it as a minister of the gospel who loves the church, who was nurtured in its bosom, who has been sustained by its Spiritual blessings, and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some few have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and with deep moral concern serve as the channel through which our just grievances could get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother. In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, 'Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with,' and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between bodies and souls, the sacred and the secular.

Tuesday, June 9

- Consider how you can frame the hours ahead with scripture. At what other times of the day can you stop and abide in Jesus's words of life, even for a few minutes? With intention, mark the times and even set alarms. Consider using or adapting the Ordinary Time Prayer Guide to help you abide.
- Prayerfully read through Isaiah 58 (ESV):

1 "Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. 3 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 10 if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. 11 And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. 12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.

13 "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly, 14 then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

- Dwell on the following:
 - What do you notice? What resonates with you?
 - How are you convicted by the passage? What must you confess?
 - How does the passage help you understand God's mercy, justice and reconciliation?
 - What invitation to action do you hear? How can you extend that invitation to your church family?
- Listen and sit with the following words from Jemar Tisby, author of *The Color of Compromise* and *The Witness: A Black Christian Collective*:

Acclaimed writer Anne Lamott keeps a 1-inch picture frame on the desk where she writes. Whenever she struggles getting started writing, she looks at that 1-inch picture frame. "And it reminds me that all I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame."

We can do the same with fighting for racial justice.

Whenever the massive problem of fighting white supremacy, racism or police violence freezes us in place, we don't need a grand vision for reform and revolution. All we have to do is think of an '1-inch' action to get us going. It can be increasing your awareness of an issue, building a relationship or committing to reforming a policy or practice. If we keep going, then the 1-inch actions we take to fight racism can paint a beautiful portrait of justice and equity.

--from an opinion piece posted on the Religion News Service

While black and white citizens in general exhibit vastly divergent views of American life and governance, these differences tend to be especially pronounced among American Christians. Speaking very broadly, black Christians tend to agree that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is necessary for a saving faith. However, they also recognize that structures influence individuals and that addressing America's racial issues will require systemic change. In accounting for the black-white wealth gap, for instance, black and white Christians have remarkably different understandings of the problem and the solution. Sixty-two percent of white evangelicals attribute poverty among black people to a lack of motivation, while 31 percent of black Christians said the same. And just 27 percent of white evangelicals attribute the wealth gap to racial discrimination, while 72 percent of blacks cite discrimination as a major cause of the discrepancy.

-- from "The Color of Compromise"

Wednesday, June 10

- Consider how you can frame the hours ahead with scripture. At what other times of the day can you stop and abide in Jesus's words of life, even for a few minutes? With intention, mark the times and even set alarms. Consider using or adapting the Ordinary Time Prayer Guide to help you abide.

- Prayerfully read through Ephesians 2:11-21 (NIV):

11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)— 12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups [Jews and Gentiles] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

- Dwell on the following:
 - What do you notice? What resonates with you?
 - How are you convicted by the passage? What must you confess?
 - How does the passage help you understand God's mercy, justice and reconciliation?
 - What invitation to action do you hear? How can you extend that invitation to your church family?

- Listen and sit with the following words from Christena Cleveland, author of *Disunity in Christ*:

The act of adopting a common identity that supersedes all other identities is a daunting, even painful, one. However, research shows that it is the key to true unity. It is consistent with Jesus' teachings that the household of God is to take precedence over all other households. Rodney Clapp writes, "Jesus creates a new family. It is the new first family, a family of his followers that now demands primary allegiance. In fact, it demands allegiance even over the old first family, the biological family."

To embrace our identities in this new, common family, we must engage in the difficult process of lessening our grip on the identities that we have idolized and clung to for far too long. In many ways, this process will jar our souls, wreaking havoc on the satisfyingly homogenous existence in which we are rooted. At first, it will feel painfully unnatural because we have lived outside of our true identities for so long that the truth seems wrong. I guarantee you that we will want to quit.

Gerd Theissen imagines the pain a fictional Hebrew mother might have experienced in reaction to Jesus' transforming call to join the family of God. She says, "He [Jesus] corrupts the young people. It all sounds fine: Blessed are you who weep for you will laugh. But what does he actually do? He makes parents weep over lost sons. He promises everything will change. But what actually changes? Families are destroyed because children run away from their parents." If we answer the call to adopt a common identity, our lives as we know them will be destroyed. However, once the transformation is complete, we will see its beautiful fruit and wonder how we ever lived within the confines of our homogenous groups.

Much like the apostle Peter who was shocked into a new reality when God asked him to loosen his powerful grip on his cultural values, travel a great distance to the house of "the other" and engage in unnatural fellowship with him (Acts 9–11), we too must embark on a similarly shocking journey if we are to fully experience the reality of the body of Christ.

Thursday, June 10

- Consider how you can frame the hours ahead with scripture. At what other times of the day can you stop and abide in Jesus's words of life, even for a few minutes? With intention, mark the times and even set alarms. Consider using or adapting the Ordinary Time Prayer Guide to help you abide.
- Prayerfully read through Luke 11:37-44 (ESV):

37 While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. 38 The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. 39 And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. 40 You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? 41 But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.

42 "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. 43 Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. 44 Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it."

- Dwell on the following:
 - What do you notice? What resonates with you?
 - How are you convicted by the passage? What must you confess?
 - How does the passage help you understand God's mercy, justice and reconciliation?
 - What invitation to action do you hear? How can you extend that invitation to your church family?
- Listen and sit with the following words from Pastor Russ Whitfield of Grace Mosaic in Washington DC:

According to God's story, every human being was designed for glory and dignity in connection with God and the people around him or her. Every human being surrendered his or her glory in walking away from God. But the hope that God gives is that his story is all about affirming these twin truths: You and I are simultaneously sinners, yet accepted in the Beloved by grace alone through faith alone. We are ruined but rescued, awful but adopted, devious but delivered. God's story tells us that brokenness is not the sole proprietorship of any one ethnic group, and by God's grace, glory is not the sole inheritance of any one ethnic group. This is God's commentary on our shared identity in Christ; and it's infinitely better than America's commentary.

This story alone sets the stage for fruitful, healthy, restorative dialogue and true progress. This story tells me that my identity rests, not on being right, but on being loved. I am free to be wrong, to learn, and to change as I live in community with the other. I am free to acknowledge that my mind needs to be renewed, and that this renewal is possible. If what the Bible says about me is anywhere near the truth, then humility, teachability, and grace must govern the way I move forward.

Don't politicize this issue, gospelize it. The Gospel is the only story big enough to swallow up the grief of a ruined humanity, overcoming that ruin with the glory of a renewed humanity. Build this into your local church through every means available—pulpit, programming, community groups, and neighborhood gatherings. Explore the implications of God's story for the current racial conflicts that we are facing. In what ways do you need to embrace difficult changes personally and corporately? How does God's story encourage me to drop my defenses? Who should I be inviting to my dinner table in light of God's

story? How should we rethink the power-dynamics of our church or organization in light of a glorious God who humbles himself in love in order to lift the other?

The story of God answers these questions and many more with life-giving and life-changing direction. But one thing is for sure, if you bury your head in the sand on important issues like these, your witness will be blunted and your missionary encounter with the world will ebb over time as America grows more diverse.

You have an opportunity to speak dignity over the disenfranchised—did not Christ do this for you (1 Pet. 2:9)? You have an opportunity to proclaim words that invite humility and gracious acceptance—did not Christ proclaim these words over you (1 Pet. 5:5)? You have an opportunity to participate in the formation of a cross-cultural community—is this not the community that God has already determined to bring to completion (Rev. 7:9)? In God's story, the poor are made rich because the rich One was made poor (2 Cor. 8–9).

In God's story, the weak are made strong because the Almighty was pleased to enter into our weakness (Rom. 5:6, Phil. 2:5ff). In God's story, there is hope for the hopeless, joy for the joyless, and power for the powerless. Christ, the King, will not suffer the status quo injustice and tragedy of this world to remain in place forever. But my question for you is this: Are you going to embrace your role as a participant in God's story of renewal?
-- from *"Moving Forward,"* as published in *Heal us Emmanuel*

Friday, June 11

- Consider how you can frame the hours ahead with scripture. At what other times of the day can you stop and abide in Jesus's words of life, even for a few minutes? With intention, mark the times and even set alarms. Consider using or adapting the Ordinary Time Prayer Guide to help you abide.
- Prayerfully read through Colossians 3:5-17; Isaiah 60:1-4; 10-11 (ESV):

11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. 12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate, hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

1 Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
3 And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.
4 Lift up your eyes all around, and see;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from afar,
and your daughters shall be carried on the hip.
10 Foreigners shall build up your walls,
and their kings shall minister to you;
for in my wrath I struck you,
but in my favor I have had mercy on you.
11 Your gates shall be open continually;
day and night they shall not be shut,
that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations,
with their kings led in procession.

- Dwell on the following:
 - What do you notice? What resonates with you?
 - How are you convicted by the passage? What must you confess?
 - How does the passage help you understand God's mercy, justice and reconciliation?
 - What invitation to action do you hear? How can you extend that invitation to your church family?

- Listen and sit with the following words from Dr. John M. Perkins, civil rights activist and founder of the Christian Community Development Association, and Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil, professor and director of Reconciliation Studies at Seattle Pacific University:

It's taken a long time for me to really understand how crucial it is for the Church to be united. I've worked at the issue of reconciliation from the outside and I've worked with black churches and white churches. And I'm just now seeing clearly that the black church can't fix this. And the white church can't fix this. It must be the reconciled Church, black and white Christians together imaging Christ to the world.

-- from *"One Blood"* by Dr. John M. Perkins

I felt that reconciliation had perhaps been overused and too often misunderstood. It seems like many people have developed a bias or preconceived notion about what they believe the term means. For example, some people believe racial reconciliation is an oxymoron because there has never been a time in American history where racial harmony has existed. One cannot reconcile those who have never enjoyed a conciliatory relationship in the first place. I agree with that, and I fully understand why this term has been disavowed by many, especially when looking at it from a historical and sociological perspective.

Others have a very negative reaction to the word reconciliation for a different reason. They feel fear, guilt or shame when they hear the word because of experiences they've had in the past. Meanwhile, some hold the term in a very positive light. For them it denotes a Christian concept, a biblical call for multiethnicity and cultural integration. They eagerly support the process and want people to be challenged to deal with their racism and prejudicial attitudes. However, their notion of the term rarely extends to confronting and changing unjust systems and structures. Moreover, there are those who shy away from the term because it carries the connotation of a "liberal agenda" or the complaints of a vocal minority with no real basis in fact. Whatever the reason, it's challenging to change our thinking and accept a new set of meanings, and I wondered if we might be better off with a new term altogether [...]

Since reconciliation is a biblical concept that is rooted in and modeled by the reconciling work of Jesus, I have chosen to reclaim the term instead of replacing it. I want to redeem it and recover its holistic, mysterious and profoundly biblical meaning. It invites us into the bigger story of God's redemptive work in the world. For the purpose of this book and all following conversation, I therefore offer this new definition of the term reconciliation: *Reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God's original intention for all creation to flourish.* This definition acknowledges the historical wounds that must be healed and transcends an individualistic view to include the need for systemic injustice to be addressed as well. However, it is also rooted in a biblical understanding of God, which is why we must take a close look at the theological principles that undergird it.

-- from *"Roadmap to Reconciliation"* by Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil