**“For the Common Good”** Rev. Phillip J. Romine
Second Sunday after Epiphany The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
John 2:1-11; Corinthians 12:1-11 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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During an interview in 1988, actor and activist Harry Belafonte shared: “The last thing Dr. King ever said to me, five days as a matter of fact before he was murdered, when he was at my home; we had just finished a strategy meeting on the poor people’s campaign, and he seemed quite agitated after what we thought was a very successful gathering and discussion…I said, what’s the matter Martin? You seem very agitated. He said, ‘well I am…’ I said, well what is it? He said, ‘we fought long for integration. It looks like we’re going to get it. I think we get the laws,’ he says, ‘but I’m afraid I’ve come upon something I don’t know quite what to do with.

“‘I’m afraid that we’re integrating into a burning house.’ And when we asked for further clarification…he said, ‘America’s lost whatever little moral vision it had. Its moral sense has run away from the nation, and a nation that is not governed by morality and moral principles is a nation that is headed for an abyss. And I think Black people have been struggling to get into this system…getting into a system that…will not work because its selfish goals, its need for profit, its need for supremacy, its need to be the best, has clouded its moral vision. And with no moral vision, no nation can be healthy enough to lead its people anywhere except to destruction.’”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Whether or not Dr. King was not aware of it, there was and is still a religiously-motivated doctrine-turned-law that has kept not only the United States, but many colonized lands and governments around the world, perpetually aflame: the Doctrine of Discovery. As religious researcher and scholar Robert P. Jones summarizes it, “Established in a series of fifteenth-century papal bulls…, the Doctrine claims that European civilization and western Christianity are superior to all other cultures, races, and religions. From this premise, it follows that domination and colonial conquest were merely the meanings of improving, if not the temporal, then the eternal lot of Indigenous peoples. So conceived, no atrocities could possibly tilt the scales of justice against these immeasurable goods.”[[2]](#footnote-2) By way of examples from Mississippi, Minnesota, and Oklahoma, Jones shows how “[t]he abduction and enslavement of millions of Africans was, like the killing and deportation of Indigenous people, rooted in the vision of European and Christian superiority captured in the Doctrine of Discovery. The brutal treatment of the two groups supported the same ends: the securing of land and the exploitation of its resources exclusively for people of European descent. Genocide and exile of Indigenous people were key to the former, and enslavement of Africans secured the latter.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

And lest we think the past isn’t present, Jones reminds us that as recently as 2005, the Doctrine of Discovery was invoked in an 8-1 decision by the US Supreme Court, the majority opinion for which was authored by the late justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who noted that “under the ‘doctrine of discovery’…fee title to the lands occupied by Indians when the colonists arrived became vested in the sovereign—first the discovering European nation and later the original States and the United States.’”[[4]](#footnote-4)

It wasn’t until 2016 that our Presbyterian denomination formally repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery.[[5]](#footnote-5) And, as is the case with much in our history, our actions are slow to catch up to our words. Only the tiniest fraction of our relatively tiny denomination has begun the work of restoration and repair.

Perhaps, like Jesus, we feel our time has not yet come for such bold ministry as our moment demands. Perhaps, like Jesus, we feel that the dysfunction, disorder, and cruelty currently being peddled as politics it is not our concern. And yet we—not only the hosts but our friends, you and me, all of us: our house is on fire, and we have run out of wine. What are we to do?

Imperfect a guide as he may be, Paul, in his multiple letters to those Corinthians who just couldn’t seem to figure out how to get along without demonizing each other, offers some rhetorical wisdom: that no matter our gifts, no matter our station or situation of life, the same Spirit works through us to serve not idols of our own making, nor idols we’ve inherited by accident of birth or choice of conviction. No, we are called to serve the God who made us, the God of all. God who made us to gather with one another, to share divine Spirit abundantly with one another. God who gave to each the manifestation of the Spirit…

Not for the purpose of an entry ticket to a post-mortem heaven;

Not so that we might lord the Spirit over others;

Not so that we might maintain beautiful buildings or run excellent programs or attract charismatic staff;

But for the common good.

None of our political or religious or national affiliations matter much when the world is aflame. Whether we can smell the smoke or not, our house, our planet, burns.

If we say we serve the common good, then we are called to assist in the outer work of putting out the literal and proverbial flames, and to literally and proverbially rebuild new homes: for ourselves, and for others.

But no matter whether we feel paralyzed or energized by the challenge of our moment, the outer work cannot happen apart from the inner work of spiritual healing and nourishment.

If, in this moment, you are paralyzed by a sense of doom and gloom, or by a defensiveness born of guilt, shame, and fear—we must not be led astray by the idol of comfort. Some of us are called to unlearn ways of being together, ways of doing church, ways of seeing others, ways of seeing ourselves that have hindered the common good. Some of us are called to let go of patterns that have kept us stuck: stuck in trying to recreate the past in the present; stuck in yelling from instead of listening to our deepest hurts; stuck in relationships that keep us angry and confused instead of empowered and hopeful.

Is this the inner work to which the one Spirit of God is calling you?

If, in this moment, you are energized by all the possibilities of how we might rebuild a new house, heal a hurting planet—we must not be led astray by the idol of perfection. Some of us are called to let go of the illusion of the perfect, the right, the best, the most excellent, the best-looking ways: to do church, to be engaged in social concerns, to make sure that everyone understands things just like I do. Some of us are called to see our enemies for who they truly are: our neighbors. Some of us are called to stop trying to fix people, and instead get comfortable sitting with what can’t be fixed.

Is this the inner work to which the one Spirit of God is calling you?

To some of us has been given the gift of material resources: are we using them to forgive our material debtors? Are we investing them in enterprises focused on the common good rather than the bottom line? Are we simply giving them away: as a practice of reducing the clinging behavior that the idol of capitalism demands: or in recognition that they were inherited from generations of violence: or in genuine curiosity about what it might feel like to be free of an attachment that has functioned like an addiction? Are we using it as a means to a common end, so that our means of acquiring and investing it serve an end beyond ourselves?

Is this the outer work to which the one Spirit of God is calling you?

To some of us has been given the gift of time: are we using it to forgive our relational debtors: family, friends, community who did not support ours, or others’, wellbeing? Are we investing it in relationships that heal, rather than hurt? Are we giving it away so that we and others may know a more abundant life: one with more rest and less stress? Are we inviting others into it so that all manner of things—not just our social circles—may be well?

Is this the outer work to which the one Spirit of God is calling you?

In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Dr. King wondered: “Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?...I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians shows that his first attempt to convince the Corinthian church to rally together around his vision of religious community was, at least in part, a failure.[[7]](#footnote-7) And Jesus was thrust into a ministry that ultimately got him killed. But if the imperfect example of Paul can speak toward a greater common good than even he could have imagined; and if Jesus’ divine work of the best wine in abundance for all followed from the prompting of his earthly mother;[[8]](#footnote-8) perhaps there is yet hope for our attempts to extinguish our burning house, and to rebuild one for all creation. Perhaps that very same Spirit can animate our humble gifts…if we follow the promptings of those wise ones in our midst.

Perhaps our inner and outer work will move us toward the common good for all creation as it has done time and again in overlooked places. Places like eastern Wisconsin in the late 19th century. Following the Peshtigo fire of 1871 that destroyed over a million acres in one night, the Indigenous people of the Menominee Nation, over the coming generations, used their more than 10,000 years of forest wisdom to transform the land into what is today one of the most sustainable forests in the United States, producing twice the timber as regularly managed forests, with both Harvard and Stanford starting to study their restoration techniques.[[9]](#footnote-9)

What would it be like for Christians to work together—to bring our collective wisdom to bear—to repair and restore our nations and our religion after the destruction wrought by the Doctrine of Discovery?

What projects will we invest our time and treasure in, for the common good?

What projects prioritize the best wine being served to all the guests?

Are we listening to the voices that, no matter what inner work we are called to do, have always been prompting us to do better, especially now that we know better?[[10]](#footnote-10)

I, too, hope this church, and the church as a whole, will meet the challenge of our decisive hour. I hope we say yes to the invitations all around us: to join the work of commemoration and repair;[[11]](#footnote-11) the kind of work that allows every voice to lift in song. Because if we aren’t willing to do the outer and the inner work in such a time as this, we won’t have earned the right to sing that particular song.

We have gifts in abundance: to cultivate and to offer. We need only listen, as Mary reminds us, to what Jesus says. And then to follow wherever the one Spirit of God leads when she takes our hand. And for that I say thanks be to God, Amen.

1. <https://www.facebook.com/jamaldepina/videos/bringing-gods-name-yhwy-back-to-folk-will-bring-usa-back-even-if-we-know-the-bib/975943704215844/?mibextid=wwXIfr&rdid=mWkvYeukelA8mZyW>, accessed 1/15/25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Robert P. Jones, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy: And the Path to a Shared American Future* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2024), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jones, *Hidden Roots*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jones, *Hidden Roots,* 295; see p. 294-296 for a helpful timeline of legal rulings citing the Doctrine of Discovery, beginning in 1810. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 2018 General Assembly report here: <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/assets/pdfs/Doctrine-of-Discovery-Report-to-the-223rd-GA-2018.pdf>; helpful “Everyday God-Talk” conversations among Indigenous folks in the PC(USA) documented here: <https://www.pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/pcusa-leaders-continue-their-work-dismantling-doctrine-discovery>, both accessed 1/15/25. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (United Kingdom: Penguin Classics, 2018), 25; 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Anna C. Miller, Introduction to The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, *Westminster Study Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024), 1956. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Karoline M. Lewis, *John: Fortress Press Preaching Commentaries* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DExVybGplyR/?igsh=MXUxN3Z4enNreGhsag%3D%3D>, accessed 1/15/25. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jones, *Hidden Roots*, 179, quoting Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs after he and his fellow leader, Dr. Kelly Sherman-Conroy, are asked what they hoped white Christians would take away from the experience of the Sacred Sites tour: “I don’t need white Christians to be smarter. I need them to be better.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is at the heart of Robert P. Jones’ argument of the path to a shared American future; it is noteworthy that one of the examples of commemoration and invitations to repair in Jones’ book is the local Sacred Sites tour—led by Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs (p. 177-179) and sponsored by the Minnesota Council of Churches—a tour recently attended by several members of House of Hope. It is also noteworthy that House of Hope hosted a panel conversation on the state of repair and reparations work in October 2024, see the program here: <https://www.hohchurch.org/worship-music/live-streaming-house-hope-church/>, then scroll to Panel Discussion on the State of Repair and Reparations Work, 10/5/24. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)