

“Solidarity through Faith”
May 17, 2026
Scripture: I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

I learned recently that today, May 17th, is an auspicious day in our country. Anyone know why? It was purely coincidental that in looking for a way to approach the readings this week I happened across a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. that he delivered on May 17th, 1957. It was titled “Give Us the Ballot—We Will Transform the South.” He was the keynote speaker at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. during the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom that year, celebrating the third anniversary of the Supreme Court decision ending public school segregation.

That decision, handed down on May 17th, 1954, began a movement toward broader equality for Black people in our country that led eventually to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. People like King knew that once the dam was cracked by outlawing school segregation, it was only a matter of time before people would begin to see that justice in our country required an end to discrimination of every kind, in every facet of public life. Their certainty was rooted in faith.

When the writer of First Peter encourages Christians to remain steadfast in the face of hostility and persecution, it’s the same faith they’re told to trust. The writer’s belief was, even though for the moment things seemed hopeless, in time God would prevail and their suffering would be redeemed. For that writer, and for all the New Testament writers, the expectation was that God would bring everything to an end and pass judgment on their enemies. In a world where followers of Jesus had no power and no hope of influencing their rulers, where it was understood that those in charge were put there by divine decree in spite of their sinful actions, the only stance early Christians could take was to hold firm to their hope and endure society’s mistreatment.

There aren’t many calls in the New Testament for advocacy. Paul never instructs the communities he writes to go to the authorities with their grievances and seek better treatment under the law. The writer of First Peter doesn’t recommend that. And in the gospels the only voice speaking out to the authorities is Jesus’. And even then he understands the cross is inevitable. He knows he’ll be executed for the things he’s teaching. Under the tyranny of Roman dictatorship, Christians longing for justice understood it was out of their hands. The most they could do was demonstrate a faith that their suffering was a reflection of Jesus’ own suffering, that it connected them to Christ and brought them closer to God. But as First Peter emphasizes over and over, they are to remain in communion with one another, to live in solidarity and not drift apart. The world’s hope lies in their capacity to remain unified.

We can hear that concern expressed in Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in John’s gospel. He’s spent several chapters preparing them for his absence. The long “farewell discourse” at their final meal is meant to pull together everything he’s taught them and done for them so they’ll be equipped to face the future without him. He prays to God that he’s done all he could to keep them safe and to teach them what they need to know to continue his ministry. But the most

important thing is they become one, just as Jesus and God are one. It's this solidarity established through their faith in his ministry and message that will carry them forward and allow them to persevere in the face of opposition and hostility.

Those words of encouragement and hope have allowed Christians throughout history caught in intolerable circumstances to keep their faith in spite of so many forces around them seeking their destruction. In our own country among enslaved people it was that faith that made it possible to endure the horrors of slavery and the effects of family separation as children were ripped from their parents to be sold to other parts of the country in a system of human trafficking the likes of which we cannot imagine today. And all of it legal, even encouraged. We don't like to think about it, but the sad truth is our country was built largely on a global human trafficking system that we spent over two centuries defending before finally ending through a war that cost nearly three quarters of a million lives, the deadliest war in our history.

After emancipation many of those formerly enslaved went looking for their children and siblings and spouses in an attempt to reconstruct their families. They did that because they had faith in better days ahead. They were fully committed to the belief that God intended more for them than to just lie down and cry. Their stories tell of struggle and perseverance, of the necessity of solidarity with one another in the face of a society that did all it could to keep them down.

For them, like the people First Peter writes, the world was a dangerous place where the devil prowled like a hungry lion to devour them in the form of poll taxes and literacy tests, chain gangs and lynchings. You would think under that kind of adversity they would give up on their faith. Yet if you read their stories you learn that faith kept them strong. In spite of everything being rigged against them they would not give up hope. That was the theme of Martin Luther King's ministry. He believed there was a future for Black Americans in a country that refused to live up to its own ideals, so he kept beating the drum of freedom and convicting us with our values. In his most famous speech, also delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, he referred to the "promissory note" signed by the Founders, as he put it, "that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." He said it was obvious that America had defaulted on that promissory note and he and those gathered were there to collect on it.

The genius of King's strategy was to use the actual words of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution to justify his movement. The leaders of the Civil Rights Movement weren't asking for anything new, they weren't asking for special treatment; they were seeking fair treatment, equal treatment. And they had faith in the promise of our country. By holding our society accountable to its own values Black Americans were able to make progress toward greater representation and fairer treatment.

That's why it's so disheartening to see what's happening in Tennessee and Louisiana and other southern states as their governments jump at the chance to redistrict Black voters out of power. It's vicious and vindictive and petty. And you may think all that has nothing to do with the gospel, but as I read it the gospel has a lot to say about how we treat our neighbors. Robbing them of political influence is not loving them as we love ourselves. And when white Christians

sit back passively and watch that kind of injustice go on without a word of protest as if it doesn't affect us, we are denying our faith. How is Christ glorified when the rights of our sisters and brothers of color are being trampled?

In the first century world followers of Jesus lived in hostile territory. The writer of First Peter refers to them as "aliens in a strange land." He considers them exiles who have to learn how to live with integrity by holding on to their newly adopted values, much like their ancestors in the faith who were exiled in Babylon. In fact, at the end of the letter he refers to Babylon as a code name for Rome. Living in the midst of that kind of pressure and hostility can have the effect of pulling people together; it encourages solidarity.

We modern Christians in the US anyway, don't face that kind of adversity. No one in the government or in our work or neighborhoods is pressuring us to give up our faith. But there are voices that want to twist and distort our beliefs. This very weekend a prayer rally is being held on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., promoting a form of white Christian Nationalism that wants to elevate Christianity above other faith groups in our country and establish it as supreme and all others as inferior. It's a movement that wants us to cut off ties with folks of other faiths, to see them as harmful to our way of life, a threat to good social order.

But what they're promoting isn't the faith Jesus taught. They want us to look on our neighbors from other cultures or faiths with suspicion and contempt. They want to create a society that divides people along racial and ethnic lines and betrays the foundational values of our country. We've seen it before and we've learned the only way to oppose it is through solidarity with our neighbors who are the targets of their hate. We're no longer a beleaguered, harassed minority surrounded by hostility like the people of First Peter's community or the small band of disciples in John's gospel. We have a voice now that can be heard and taken seriously if we're willing to stand with our neighbors and be one with them in solidarity.

We can't ignore these attempts to drag our country back to a time when inequality and mistreatment of minority groups was accepted. I think it's no accident this prayer rally is happening on the anniversary of the Brown vs. Board of Education decision. That decision was an attempt to correct generational injustice by establishing fair and equal treatment in our educational system. But those gathering in D.C. this weekend see it as an attack on their faith. As that sentiment grows, those of us who are committed to a multicultural, multi-religious society will be seen more and more as a threat. And more and more we'll be called on to stand in solidarity through our faith. By loving our neighbors and celebrating the rich diversity of our country rather than opposing it we can fulfill Jesus' hope that his ministry would be carried on by followers who live in solidarity with each other and reveal God's presence in the world. So, even though it's not the same world as the First Peter community, the same challenges remain. We continue to be called to stand firm in our faith like aliens in a strange land, to stand firm in solidarity with sisters and brothers of other faiths and backgrounds whose lives we cherish as our own. And, like that small community of exiles, we humble ourselves under God's power throwing all our anxiety on God and put our faith in Christ who restores, empowers, strengthens and establishes us to be united in this moment and reveal God's love for the world.

Amen