As part of my sermon writing process, I sometimes like to go back and look at my sermons on the same texts from previous years. This week, out of curiosity, I opened my sermon from June 18, 2017 to see what I wrote about last time these readings came around. You know what I found? I found a sermon about the recent death of Philando Castile, another black man murdered by police in Minneapolis.

There is a narrative out there that what happened to George Floyd and Philando Castile was a fluke, the actions of a few bad cops in an otherwise good system. That narrative is false. If it were true, what happened to those men would not be happening with such regularity that I could randomly find two weeks, exactly three years apart where it was in the news. If it were true, there would not be a list of names of black and brown people to whom this same thing had happened. If it were true, we would not know the names of Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Freddy Gray, Janet Wilson, or Manuel Ellis.

It makes one start to feel helpless. No one, regardless of our political stripes, believes this should have happened. We are all united in our disappointment, our grief, our anger over these deaths. If we haven’t been able to solve this problem in the last 3 years, in the last 3 decades, in the last 3 centuries, how can we expect to solve it now? What can possibly change? What can we do? Rallies, protests—peaceful and otherwise, calls to national leaders, elections… nothing seems to work. The question now on everybody’s lips is: where do we go from here? What do we do next? The seeds of equality have been sown, and the harvest of justice is ripe and plentiful, but the laborers seem so few.

We all would like a simple answer to our question about what to do, a simple change to make or an action to take. And while there is certainly much for us to do, in order to truly find healing, we must look deeper.

Racism is not a fluke, not the problem of a few bad actors, a few dirty cops. That narrative is false; at best it is naive, but at worst it is fatally deceitful. Racism is the original sin of our country, the stain in the very fabric of our collective being. From the very first, our economy, our infrastructure and our social structure have been built on the exploitation of people of color. The only one who can cleanse us of this sin is God. And so, we hear Jesus say to us as well as the disciples today, “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.” And even as we pray, we begin to see that the answer to our prayers—the laborers God is sending—is us.

Now, if we were able to save ourselves, we would have done it long ago. It might sound like God is turning us around, saying to us, “You got yourselves into this mess, you get yourselves out;” but that’s not what is happening here. Racism isn’t a bad habit we’ve picked up, it’s a part of our identity, part of how we have been formed as a nation. The only solution to this problem of identity is for God our Creator to give us a new identity, to form us anew, to give us a new birth into new life. And that is what God does.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, sharing with us his life, making us children of his Father. In the waters of baptism, we have received a new identity formed not by sin, but by grace, justice, mercy and forgiveness. Christ has chosen us out of the world to be remade in God’s image, then sent us back into the world to be the laborers bringing in God’s harvest. The labor may be ours, but the work is God’s, and God’s alone.

If you’re like me, you want to be helpful in this moment, but you may not know how. You want to do something, but may be afraid that it will be wrong. Thankfully for us, God doesn’t call only people who are already equipped to do what needs doing; instead, God equips those of us whom God has already called. Jesus didn’t send out the disciples because they were accomplished healers and exorcists. They were fishermen and farmers, tradesmen and tax collectors; yet because Jesus sent them out, they were able to cure the sick, cast out demons, even raise the dead.

We can accomplish God’s will not because we are able, but because God is. God’s ability is what matters, not our own. In chemistry, a reaction between two ingredients sometimes requires a catalyst, a substance that is part of a chemical reaction but not consumed by it. A small amount of this substance can catalyze a practically infinite amount of reactants. In order for a reaction to work, the chemist must choose the correct catalyst for the situation. The catalyst works simply because of what it already is, it doesn’t “do” anything; it is the chemist who uses the catalyst to achieve the desired result. In the same way, it is up to God to achieve the desired result, or to bring in the harvest, using Jesus’ metaphor. Our “job” is not so much to “do” as to be who God has formed us in the waters of baptism to be. We are God’s catalysts.

That doesn’t mean that we don’t have to do anything, that we can sit back on our hands and wait for God to work, because that is not how it works. It does mean that just as important as what we do is who we are; because what we do is defined by who we are.

What this means for us is that when you hear this story, you should hear that who you are is enough. That hunger for justice, that thirst for what is right, that is your God-given gift for this moment. It exists because God has called you in your baptism to love and serve all people following the example of Jesus and to strive for peace and justice in all the earth. You have been formed by the love of the God who gives God’s very life for yours.

Even now, God is honing that gift with word and sacrament, and with the community of saints. In that community, the stories, experiences, courage and wisdom of our siblings of color are changing us into people who can work for justice. Within that community, we may lift our voices alongside theirs to demand justice. God is saving us by bringing us and our varied gifts together, making us one with those who suffer, for all who suffer oppression and injustice are one in Christ who suffered among us.

How do you answer Jesus’ call to go out, to heal and exorcise, to cast out demons and proclaim the kingdom of God? The answer is simple—the simplest thing one can do, and yet also the most difficult: we answer Jesus’ call by being who we are, who God is making us to be; by being fully ourselves in this moment and in this place where God has placed us. Live into your identity as a child of God, and you will bring good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed.

Child of God, by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you have been freed from the power of sin and death, freed from the fear and the scarcity that keep us suckling at the teats and worshiping at the altars of a system built on the backs of our black and brown siblings. You have been made free to be the hands of freedom for your family, to be the catalyst of God’s change in this world.

Go, therefore, fearlessly into the world, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. Don’t let that fear of failure hold you back, but boldly proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom. God is giving us everything we need in the stories and experiences of our siblings of color to demand the change this world needs. Listen to their stories and let them form you, for that is God’s work. Let those stories light a fire in you, a fire burns for justice. Amplify those voices, and we will see that the Lord of the harvest is indeed sending out laborers to reap justice and peace. Together with our black and brown siblings, we are the holy people that God has created for just such a time as this.