

“The Issues that Divide Us: Seeking the Common Good: RACE”

Sunday, January 19, 2020

Genesis 1: 26-31

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, WI

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline

Then God said, “Let us make humankind^[e] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth,^[d] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humankind^[e] in his image, in the image of God he created them;^[f] male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” ²⁹ God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Working for the common good by addressing the issues that divide us. That’s what we are doing in our sermons and in our church through January and February. Last week Charlie preached a sermon about abortion that dealt with an

incredibly thorny topic with grace and subtlety while also having something important to say about the topic. Next week we have a guest preacher coming all the way from Texas to preach about gun violence, which is appropriate because she is ordained in the Presbyterian church as our official “gun violence prevention pastor”. Today we have the opportunity to talk about race.

Issues of racism and white supremacy are an inextricable part of American history. Jim Wallis, of Sojourners magazine, describes racism as “America’s Original Sin”, using it as the title of his 2016 book. He uses that phrase very intentionally, describing it by saying “the historical racism against America’s Indigenous people and enslaved Africans was indeed a *sin*, and one upon which this country was founded”. History is not a single stream of information wrapped up in a neat little bow, and American history is no exception. We speak of our country being founded on the principle of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, and we are enthralled with the idea that “all men [people] are created equal”. This is the same country in which the economy was sustained by back-breaking labor and heinous treatment of human beings that were treated as property. This is the same country that came to a new world, only to commit genocide against the indigenous population. Like I said, history is complicated, and the existence of one story does not negate the other, but rather creates a complicated tapestry in which we live and breathe today. A country of slavery and of abolition, a country of Jim Crow and Civil Rights.

Similar to the story of our country, our church has a complicated history of race in America. Francis Makemie organized the first presbytery in the American colonies in 1706. He’s often thought of as the father of American Presbyterianism. He was also a slave-owner. In his will he distributed 33 slaves, human lives distributed as property.

In an 1818 the Synod of New York and Philadelphia issued a pronouncement encouraging abolition of slavery while in the same pronouncement saying of slaves “their ignorance, and their vicious habits generally, render an immediate and universal emancipation inconsistent alike with the safety of master and slave”

A schism occurred at the start of the Civil War between the northern and southern churches over the issue of slavery. The very first stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the southern branch of the church) was a man named Joseph Wilson. He preached a sermon in 1861 which includes this: *“So far from Scripture appearing as the destroyer [of slavery], it appears as the upholder, of an institution, which, under proper management, by Christian people, is represented as an element in domestic completeness, whose presence is a benefit and a blessing”*. Not only was this man influential in the Presbyterian Church, he had a major influence on the entire country through his son, President Woodrow Wilson.

Presbyterian support of segregation was, while less popular than a Presbyterian defense of slavery, still quite prevalent, especially among southern Presbyterian Churches. The matter of segregation was one of the major catalysts that created the Presbyterian Church in America, yet another Presbyterian denomination founded in defense of racism.

But despite these stumbling blocks, there are also moments of brightness and beauty in our Presbyterian history.

The Reverend Jacob Green, who drafted New Jersey’s first constitution found himself an outspoken abolitionist saying, “What a shocking consideration, that people who are so strenuously contending for liberty, should at the same time encourage and promote slavery!” A remarkable man who lived out his beliefs.

Samuel Cornish organized the first congregation of black Presbyterians in New York City and founded "Freedom's Journal" which was the first black newspaper in the country and an advocate for abolition of slavery. He helped found the American Missionary Association, an organization founded to fight the evil of slavery.

The Rankin house stands on top of Liberty Hill. This house belonged to the Presbyterian minister John Rankin who lit a lantern and raised it up a flagpole to indicate to fleeing slaves that it was safe for them to cross the Ohio river. The Rankin House was a well-known stop along the underground railroad.

The state clerk of the northern Presbyterian Church, Eugene Carson Blake, was arrested in Maryland protesting a segregated amusement park on July 4, 1963. He was one of many Presbyterians arrested during the Civil Rights movement, breaking laws to agitate for justice.

You see, this is a complicated story. The pendulum swings both ways, justice and sin, righteousness and evil. Human beings are complicated and the story of race in America and in the American Presbyterianism Church is long and complicated. Our history shows that our scripture and theology have the power to both tear down or build up justice in our society. But the history of our church, both positive and negative, shows one incontrovertible truth: as Christians we have wrestled with the reality of the sin of racism since the founding of our denomination. And this history did not just stop at the civil rights act, or the inauguration of our first black president. This history continues to this day, the fact of the matter is, racism is still a huge problem in our lives, in our society and our churches.

According to *The Sentencing Project* racial disparities are a scourge of our justice system – with only one in 17 white men likely to go to prison as opposed to one in three black men and one in six Latino men.

As written about in Forbes magazine the racial wealth gap shows a terrifying reality, with the median household wealth among white families over \$100,000, while the median income for black and Latino households to be no more than \$10,000.

According to the U.S. News and World Report in 2013 49% of black respondents have a high school degree or less, compared with only 37% of whites.

And in Wisconsin we are dealing with some of the worst racial disparities in the country. According to a 2019 report, Wisconsin is the 4th worst for infant mortality for black babies, has the second worst racial disparity in incarceration rates, the worst disparity in unemployment, and the third worst racial income disparity.

The only logical conclusion of all of this information is that there are systems and structures in place that make it more difficult for people of color to thrive and succeed in this country.

This entire sermon series revolves around thorny issues and big topics. Our hope for this time is that we can be challenged and made uncomfortable - to be stirred into understanding and cooperation. Part of being made uncomfortable is recognizing hard truths, and the truth is this: our faith tells us that all human beings are made in the image of God. Yet our society tells us that if you are born with darker skin that the image of God is not as present. This is sin. This is evil. This is untenable as Christians to live in a society that treats people this way.

If we can accept that our society privileges some over others, then that gives us all sorts of latitude to work together towards solutions. This should be especially

important to us as Christians. The story of Scripture shows a God who expresses special care to those under the burden of oppression. In the beginning of our holy text we are told that all humans are made in the image of God. To abuse any human being is to abuse the image of God that dwells in them. God demonstrates power as a liberator, freeing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and delivering them to safety. God forms a covenant with those people, abused and conquered from all sides. And God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ, who spent his ministry preaching release to the oppressed and loving outcasts. The arc of our story as God's people is again and again one of liberation. Again, and again God shows that the oppressor will not prosper and that justice will be the last word. There is this sense in modern Christianity of God's impartiality, as if the fact that God loves everybody equally means that God won't stand at the side of the oppressed. Scripture tells us that God has chosen a side. James Cone, the father of black liberation theology, in his landmark book "Liberation" says "God is active in human history, taking sides with the oppressed of the land. If God is not involved in human history, then all theology is useless, and Christianity itself is a mockery, a hollow, meaningless diversion". As Christians, we should cheer this truth. As people who benefit from the oppression of other people, that fact should awaken us to what God wants from us.

If we start from a place of acknowledging the reality of racism and the need for us to fight against it, then we can then move to a place of collaboration. Because here's the truth, we really have no one idea on how to eliminate racism from our society. What we need is people of good faith working in cooperation to address one of the fundamental evils in our society. This is a messy process, one that requires untangling centuries of misunderstanding and ill will. The only way that we'll be able to work through this is with open minds to hear what God is saying to the people. You can do this by watching movies like Selma, Thirteenth or Just

Mercy; reading books like *The New Jim Crow*, *Between the World and Me* or *Just Mercy*; listening to podcasts like “Black Like Me”, by local Madison pastor Alex Gee. This can be a very daunting process, because it requires us to be willing to hear criticism of things that we may be doing wrong. This risk requires us to be humble in the face of a massive task and to hear that our best efforts are not enough.

It’s easy to think of Martin Luther King as the great kumbaya; as a man of great conviction and wisdom who brought people to peace and harmony. And that is true, but that doesn’t mean that he didn’t also hold a place in his heart to speak hard truths. In his letter from a Birmingham City Jail he said this “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate”. Fighting racism means that sometimes we will hear things that are hard to hear, things that offend us, things that even can wound us. But this is the path to justice, to listening humbly to voices that have been silenced by the violence of racism. It requires an openness and a vulnerability that needs to be continuously practiced. But that vulnerability, that risk comes with a promise. A promise from our God for the kingdom.

Once again, Dr. King’s words prove prophetic in this realm. Because while he challenged us with strong words, he also said “this belief, and this feeling that God is on the side of truth and justice and love and that they will eventually reign supreme in this universe, this comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith”. This Christian faith that declares that all humans are created in the image of God. This Christian faith that declares God as the liberator of the oppressed. This Christian faith that is centered on a savior who turned the world upside down. This Christian faith that says there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free. This is the faith that inspires us to break the chains of racism, to take

risks, to listen humbly and to be transformed. This is the faith that inspired Dr. King to say, “we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man and to the bright and glittering daybreak of justice and freedom and brotherhood for all people.” Let it be so.