

Facing Racism & White Privilege

Matthew 15:21-28 Psalm 13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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How does a white preacher, delivering a sermon to a predominately white congregation, begin to address the issues of racism and white privilege? Let's start by all taking a deep breath. If I were to follow the wisdom of the late Rev. Dr. Harold Hill, who played an integral role in the life of this congregation during and after his retirement as a professor in the Religion Department of the University of Tulsa, he'd say: Start with some definitions. In order to get a better handle of what we're addressing, we must at least start with a common definition. Despite its sometimes less than accurate reputation, I like best the explanation found on Wikipedia.com:

Racism is a product of the complex interaction in a given society of a race-based worldview with prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination...The ideology underlying racist practices often includes the idea that humans can be subdivided into distinct groups that are different in their social behavior and innate capacities and that can be ranked as inferior or superior.

This sermon, meant to coincide with our 6-week adult church school class with the same title, was planned well before this week's tragic event and aftermath of the killing of Terence Crutcher, an unarmed black man, by a white Tulsa Police officer.

This past week has been filled with activities and interactions on many levels, especially by faith leaders in this community to seek ways to maintain the peace while protesting what appears to be the continued irrational fear of people of color, especially directed toward black men. Just yesterday the *New York Times* printed an article connecting the dots that others of us had already expressed publically here in Tulsa. In fact, during our monthly pastor's lunch gathering on Thursday, hosted by retired Rabbi Charles Sherman at Temple Israel, he asked the question on everyone's mind: Why the two very different responses to police shootings here in Tulsa compared to Charlotte, NC? Perhaps, it is being considered, Tulsa's peaceful response involves factors such as: immediate police transparency, a call to prayer and unity by faith leaders, and a haunting remembrance of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. And yes, I stand with those who believe it was a massacre not a riot.

While it's critical that we thoughtfully reflect upon what implications racism may have contributed to this latest shooting, **my goal this morning is simply to speak aloud our need to address the ongoing issues of racism, and in particular, white privilege, a fairly new concept for many of us white folks.** As a commissioner from Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) this past June, we approved the adoption of a new antiracism policy for our denomination. Our previous policy was adopted in 1999. The new Churchwide Antiracism Polity Team introduced its 2016 policy report by lamenting that **the realities of racism in the United**

States have not improved significantly since 1999. So the team took a bold approach, reminding us that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has long held strong convictions regarding the sinfulness of racism and the need to struggle against it.

Our new Churchwide Antiracism Policy is entitled, Facing Racism: A Vision of the Intercultural Community. Along with the policy report, coming in at 21 pages of small single-lined print, the General Assembly also adopted a companion **Study Guide**, which I am using as a guide in for the adult church school class.

So what is it Presbyterians, at least officially, understand about racism. The very first sentence in the antiracism policy's opening Vision Statement declares: **"The Bible insistently reveals that God loves diversity and justice."** Yes, following the practice of our own John Calvin during the Protestant Reformation, good Presbyterians start with our understanding of what scripture has to contribute to the conversation. The Vision Statement continues: the fact that God loves diversity and justice "is seen in the wide variety of creation in which God delights. It is heard in the words of the prophets, who reject oppression and commend justice as true worship. It is embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who resists the power of empire and values all persons, regardless of status, as children of God. Jesus gathered a community of people around him that crossed over every social and cultural boundary. Those who had been set apart were brought together: poor and rich, male and female, gentile and Jew, centurion and tax collector, Canaanite, Galilean, and Syro-Phoenician. Jesus called this community together in anticipation of, and participation in, the coming of the new creation" – the realm of God in the here and now.

Also, **"in Jesus we see what God intends for all humanity. The compassion, hospitality, justice, and love of others that we see in Jesus indicate what God wills for us."** Our very discipleship, therefore, as those who claim to follow the ways and teaching of Jesus, "requires our efforts to act in accordance with God's love of justice and diversity."

After I collected a vast amount of information about racism and white privilege, I realized that could do no better than to share directly from our PC(USA) Antiracism Policy this morning.

Racism is the opposite of what God intends for humanity. It is the rejection of the other, which is entirely contrary to the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. It is a form of idolatry that **elevates human-made hierarchies of value over divinely-given free grace. Through colonization and slavery, the United States of America helped to create and embrace a system of valuing and devaluing people based on skin color and ethnic identity. The name for this system is white supremacy.** This system deliberately subjugated groups of people for the purpose of material, political, and social advantage. **Racism is the continuing legacy of white supremacy. Racism is a lie about our fellow human beings, for it says that some are less than others. It is also a lie about God, for it falsely claims that God favors parts of creation over the entirety of creation.**

Because of our biblical understanding of who God is and what God intends for humanity, the PC(USA) [as well as our congregation and ourselves as individuals] must stand against, speak against, and work against racism. **Antiracist effort is not optional for Christians. It is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship, without which we fail to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.**

Since the invasion of the Americas by Europeans, indigenous peoples have borne the brutal consequences of white supremacy. Racism against **Native Americans** has led to lower health, income, and education indicators, as well as higher rates of suicide and other forms of violence. Although they are the most legislated racial group in the U.S., Native Americans are often rendered invisible in national conversations about race, erasing their struggles, perseverance, and contributions.

Antiblack racism has been a structural component of the United States from the beginning. The Constitution defined an African American as three-fifths of a person, denying their full humanity. The economic foundations of the United States were built on slave labor. The legal system of the United States has consistently perpetuated the subjugation of African Americans throughout the history of the nation.

Hispanics/Latinos-as have been a vital part of the fabric of the United States, particularly since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, when a large part of Mexico became what is now the southwestern United States and with the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898. Yet Hispanics/Latinos-as are often presumed to be undocumented and difficult to assimilate.

Asian Pacific Americans experience racism as perpetual foreigners, whether they and their ancestors have been in the United States for seven generations or one generation. Vastly different Asian American populations, such as Chinese Americans and Cambodian Americans, are grouped together, erasing cultural differences and unique contributions. Immigrants from all over the world continue to experience oppression, exploitation, and inequality due to racism in America. Furthermore, a persistent focus on race as a black-white binary has been used as a tool of white supremacy to prevent coalition-building among different groups. For example, the representation of Asian Americans as model minorities has relegated them to a “wedge” position between white and black, in service of white supremacy...

As followers of Jesus Christ, we stand against racism in all its myriad forms. As Presbyterians, we have specific resources in our tradition that can be useful in turning away from racism and towards the diversity and justice that God desires. In particular, we have received wisdom regarding sin, confession and repentance...

[Let's talk briefly about sin.] **Bigoted beliefs, hate crimes, prejudice, and intentional discrimination are all actual sin. They stem from, and contribute to, the original sin of systemic racism that permeates our culture and society.** The actual sins of past generations—such as slavery, the Indian Removal Act, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the colonization of Hawaii and Guam, the Immigration Act of 1924, and so on—become the original sin in which we live. This is manifested in severe inequality in education, wealth, income, and opportunity...

[Our silence and inaction are enough to perpetuate the effects of this original sin of systemic racism in our culture and society.] This nuanced concept of sin can be particularly useful in understanding how people of goodwill [of which I would include you and me] who do not harbor prejudice or intend bigotry are still participants in original sin. White people in the United States of America continue collectively to reap the benefits of white supremacy, even when they individually believe in the equality of all people. [This is what is called white privilege.] Our theological heritage regarding sin makes it possible for Presbyterians to acknowledge the complex realities of racism instead of moving to defend an illusion of individual innocence.

The second valuable resource from our tradition is the importance of **confession and repentance. Acknowledging our sinfulness ought not produce self-hatred or paralyzing guilt.** Rather, the appropriate response is to confess our sin before God and one another, confident in the grace and love of God. The grace that enables us to confess also empowers us to repent, that is, to turn and walk the other way, towards the eschatological vision of God's new creation. By grace we are forgiven, and we respond to this grace with gratitude, humility, and renewed zeal for the Gospel.

Finally, as Presbyterians we know something about work. While aspects of the Protestant work ethic may be problematic, to the degree that it signifies our determination, persistence, and stubborn strength, we embrace it in this regard: **we commit ourselves to DO THE WORK of countering racism in our witness to the Gospel.**

- In our **affirmation** that God loves difference, we will honor diversity as a good in which God delights.
- In our **conviction** that God desires justice, we will learn from others to broaden our understanding of equality.
- In our **humility** as sinful people, we will listen openly to diverse voices regarding how racism functions in our society.
- In our **gratitude** for God's grace, we will turn again and again towards the vision of whole community found in the Word of God.
- In our **joyous** response to God's love, we will love one another.

We have work to do, as individuals and collectively. Let us educate ourselves, something we Presbyterians are good at doing. Let us face the realities and complexities of what's really going on in our culture and in our own lives. Let us be intentional, non-defensive, transparent, patient, forgiving and loving.

Amen.