

A Dream Still Deferred
Micah 6:8
First Presbyterian Church
June 7, 2020

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Sermon

I don't know what you are feeling when you see those images, but they just break my heart. I feel sad... I feel angry... I feel helpless... and at times, I feel absolutely hopeless. And when I look at this I say: "There is something terribly wrong. There is something wrong in the human condition... wrong in our nation... wrong in each of these scenes... there is something terribly wrong.

Though we may disagree (and do disagree) on precisely WHAT is wrong, I hope we can all agree that it is not OK for Gregory and Travis McMichael and William Bryan - three, armed, white men in Glynn County, Georgia to chase down and kill a 25-year- old, unarmed, black man, Ahmaud Arbury, who was simply jogging through the neighborhood. It is not OK for Amy Cooper to threaten to call the police and to invoke the old story of a white woman fearing attack by a predatory black man... when all Christian Cooper asked her to do is to obey the law... to leash her dog... so he could continue birdwatching. It is not OK for four Minneapolis police officers to pin a handcuffed man to the ground for almost nine minutes – one with his knee on his neck. George Floyd tells them repeatedly that he can't breathe, bystanders plead for his life he addresses them as "Sir," he cries out for his mother who has been dead for two years.

It is ALSO not OK for peaceful protests to turn into riots... it is not OK to burn police cars and loot businesses... it is not OK for radical fringe groups or foreign governments to spread disinformation and fan the flames of chaos and anger and violence that are already hot enough. Though we will disagree on precisely what is wrong and who is responsible and what we need to do about it... I hope we can all agree that that the God we know in the Scriptures and in our hearts... the God who loves this world so much he sent his own child to prove it... the God who in Christ has already broken down the dividing walls of hostility between us... this God is not pleased with us now.

I don't read a lot of poetry, but I was reminded this week of Langston Hughes' well-known poem "Harlem." It speaks of a "dream deferred," and in broad terms, the 'dream' in the poem refers to the dream of Black Americans for the "right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" - for equality... for dignity... for opportunity.

I asked my friend, Pastor David Roberts of Morning Star First Baptist Church, to read it for us this morning... and I thank him in advance, both for his friendship and for being with us this morning.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*¹

As you surely know, the “dream deferred” HAS exploded over the past two weeks in cities all across our nation. As generations of anger and rage, born of systemic injustice and racism have boiled over. Protests devolve into riots... leading to violence and destruction, often in the very communities that have borne the brunt of historical racial injustice.² And though the violence against life and the destruction of property is wrong; it is also understandable. Bishop Claude Alexander, Senior Pastor of The Park Church in Charlotte put it this way, “People all across the country are expressing their anger in legitimate and illegitimate ways. Unfortunately, when people have expressed it legitimately and don’t see change... or they feel they do not have access to be legitimately heard, then they do what they know will be heard.” Years ago, Dr. King said it this way: “Riots are the language of the unheard.” And though there are outside elements trying to use the protests to advance their own cause... we must not resist hearing the legitimate message just because some people use illegitimate tactics.

So, what is the message we need to hear? And when we hear it, what are we to do? That’s what many white people ask... it’s what I ask: What does this mean and what can I do? The answer... or at least AN answer... is that we can educate white people in the realities of race and the racism that still permeates our nation. I have been pulled over by the police several times in my life (not proud of that) but I have never feared for my life when it happened.

I’ve never pulled into a parking spot at the mall and had people sitting in the next car see me and immediately lock their doors. I’ve never been followed through a Home Depot on a Saturday afternoon. I’ve never not gotten a job because of the color of my skin.

I’ve never been the subject of a neighborhood watch social media post that warned residents I was walking down the street. And I’ve never, ever had to teach my kids how to avoid getting hurt because of their skin color... I’ve never had to have “the talk” with my kids. I didn’t just make these things up...

¹ Langston Hughes, first appeared in 1951.

² From a sermon by Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, Myers Park Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC., May 31, 2020.

No, all these racist micro-aggressions... all these things happened personally (and continue to happen) to friends of mine who are African American pastors. You and I need to listen... we need to hear and understand that though there have been many advances over the years... though there has definitely been progress... we still have so very far to go. And that the journey forward will require white people to truly understand both the history and the present reality of the racism that still manifests itself in so many ugly ways.

To that end, I want to encourage you to join me in a "21 Day Racial Equity Challenge." Starting next Sunday, I invite you to read something, watch something, listen to something, or talk to someone with the intent of educating yourself... or better yet, of being educated by those who live it every day. We will provide you a library of resources - articles, documentaries, TED Talks, podcasts, interviews, short videos. We will plan a couple of Zoom gatherings to process what we are learning... so I hope you will join me in this because I know I still have a lot to learn.

But, my sisters and brothers, this cannot only be an intellectual exercise. Though that's what we Presbyterians tend to do best, our response cannot stop with education and discussion. Again, last weekend Bishop Alexander offered his own call to white churches to break white silence about race. He said, "America must be recreated into a nation that is ANTI-racist, and this calls for conscience, conviction, and courage. More specifically it calls for whites to assume leadership and responsibility that has never been assumed before." He went on to quote an article entitled, "How Do I Make Sure I'm Raising the Next Amy Cooper" ... she was the white woman who threatened to call police and claim she feared being assaulted by an African-American man, Christian Cooper, who was birdwatching. The article was by religion professor Jennifer Harvey, she writes: "White silence is a statement about race. When we don't break white silence with ongoing and explicit teaching about race and racism... and active and persistent modeling of anti-racism, we end up raising the Amy Coopers of the next generation. We white parents have two choices – we can either go along with the racism-enabling flow of white silence or we can stand up against it. We must teach those lessons to our kids."

Now, this is not comfortable for many of us. It is hard to talk about the realities of race in America... it's especially hard to talk about race in this divisive and hyper-partisan time in which we live. This is not comfortable for me to preach on – on this Trinity Sunday. I would much rather wax eloquent on one of the church's most mysterious doctrines. It's hard to face our history... it's hard to know how to think and what to do over 400 years after the first enslaved people were brought to this country from the African continent. It's hard to hold a mirror up to ourselves... to face our own biases and stereotypes – it makes us defensive. We aren't racists, are we? We don't use the "N" word. We don't hold hatred in our hearts for people of color!

It's hard to unlearn things we were taught as children... it's hard to hold a mirror up to ourselves... it's hard to acknowledge that though we have studied hard and worked hard and struggled hard, that we have benefitted from a system that has favored us over others... that has given us a head start because our skin happens to have less melanin than others.

COVID-19 was already revealing the breadth and depth of inequality in our land... yet, because of the sheer number of tragic events recently... and because the graphic reality of the videos... we can't hide... we just can't shut our eyes... even though some of us may be really seeing this for the first time. It's not comfortable, I know, and it's a whole lot easier just to turn our heads... to just stay silent. But as Bryan Stevenson has said: "We can't create justice if we insist on only doing the things that are comfortable and convenient. It just doesn't work that way." Yet, too often we ARE complacent. Too often I am complacent. But I want to do better. As a person I want to do better... and I want to do what I can as your pastor to help you and our congregation do better.

I don't know what that means exactly... though I have some ideas. The "21 Day Racial Equity Challenge" is a starting place, but only a starting place. I CAN tell you that the Hickory Area Ministers met by Zoom on Thursday and the attendance was up at least three-fold... pastors who had never been to a meeting before showed up and it wonderful. As a result, we may have other congregations join us in the 21 Day Challenge... we may organize cross-congregational opportunities for black and brown and white people to know each other well enough to begin to have the hard, honest conversations that must take place for authentic relationships to blossom and flourish. And we may do other things, but we just ran out of time.

As I said earlier, this is not comfortable for me... and I offer this sermon to God and to you with a more than healthy dose of fear and trepidation. I especially fear two things. First, that you and I are at such different places when it comes to race in America... that you have read such different authors and listened to such different people and have had such different life experiences, that we see the issues and challenges of race in America in very different ways. Well, if that describes you – one, I want to thank you for sticking with this sermon to the end – and two, I would really like to have a conversation with you if that is something you would be willing to do.

And the second thing I fear is that you think I'm trying to make you feel guilty... with all that's going on to lay a big guilt trip on you. Well, the fact is that guilt is the Holy Spirit's job, not mine. Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin... and as a former Baptist, I know something about sin... and when the Spirit is at work, there really is something we might call "good guilt." And good guilt... again, when it comes from the Spirit... good guilt always expresses itself in growth... change... and transformation into the likeness of Christ.

I mentioned earlier that in the church year, this is Trinity Sunday... which as you know, follows right after Pentecost Sunday. Now, I won't for a minute pretend that I understand the Trinity... and frankly, I don't trust people who say they do. But I do sense that after Pentecost the earliest followers of Jesus had to deal with the fact that their preconceived ideas about God no longer worked. I mean, how do you wrap your head around the God of Israel who comes in human form in Jesus of Nazareth and who is now experienced as Holy Spirit. Again, I can't explain the Trinity, but I do think I understand this: that God's very essence is oneness in diversity... one God... in three persons... is what we sang this morning. And if God's very essence is oneness in diversity, then this must be God's desire for us.

(continued)

And here's why I think this is not just mental gymnastics and really matters: when I look (with my limited vision) at the state of our union... when I contemplate the challenges we face as a nation... and I see no path forward for us as Americans if we don't create space for intentional and genuine relationships with people who are different from us.³ People who believe differently... people who think differently... and especially people who are from different social and ethnic groups than our own. There is surely a need for protests and statements and calls to reform the very structures of our society. There is need for study and deep reflection, honest confession and genuine repentance for how we are complicit in and benefit from structures that support racism and other forms of inequality. And there is need for fervent prayer to the God who can make a way when there seems to be no way. Absolutely! And we each have a role to play in that. But in the end, we are still human beings... and nothing will ever change if we do not have genuine, mutual, and even risky relationships with persons who are beyond our own experience or comfort. Because just as we have come to name God by our actual experience of God as Father, Son, and Spirit – so also, we can only know and appreciate and love others in and through actual relationships... person-to-person. This is not a quick fix... it is the long road. But I believe it is the way to finally arrive at what Dr. King envisioned - the Beloved Community – a community that more closely matches God's own existence... a community that embodies God's dreams for us.

³ David Lose, *In the Meantime*, "Trinitarian Matters, June 4, 2020