

The Road to Racial Reconciliation

A Sermon by Rev. Elizabeth E. Coleman
Pastor, Northwest Presbyterian Church
St. Petersburg, Florida
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Old Testament: Ezekiel 33:7-11

Epistle: Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

Old Testament:

So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life. Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" Say to them, As I live says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:7-11)

Epistle

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:8-14)

Gospel

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:15-20)

Sermon:

Northwest Presbyterian Church, as a whole, has excelled in several important areas of our calling as followers of Christ. We see Christ in our neighbor, and seek to meet the needs of those who lack essentials such as food, clothing, shelter, consolation of the bereaved, and support for those struggling

with addiction, in addition to proclaiming the gospel. It is right to acknowledge those areas where we excel and fulfill the calling that Jesus Christ has made clear to us.

It is also right to acknowledge those areas where we can improve, and to provide a way forward by which we can more faithfully live out our calling. One of those areas is also a challenge to our entire denomination, and the PC-USA is currently seeking to discern a more authentic and faithful response to this open sore in our nation that is being exposed for all the world to see: a history of sustained, systemic racism in our way of life, in our institutions, and even in our churches. If in reading this paragraph, you feel the urge to stop reading this sermon, then this is an indication that it is important for you to read it. Perhaps I was called to this congregation for such a time as this, so that we can work through this messy job (joy) of reconciliation by first facing the difficult truth of what is, now. Then, the way forward will become clearer to us.

Beginning with the foundation of our faith — that we are the Body of Christ — we can all agree with Paul that what happens to one part of the body happens to all, and that we cannot truthfully say to any part of the body that we have no need for it. (1 Cor. 12-26) If, as Christians, we are one living organism in whom Jesus Christ is the head who directs and guides our actions, our standard for living is the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. To contradict his message of love, healing, deliverance, unity, and self-sacrifice is to no longer participate in who he is.

When we are discerning the will of God concerning occurrences within our nation, our first question should be, “Is this an action that shows unconditional love for all of God’s creation?” If a system, organization, institution or church perpetuates actions, attitudes or policies that denigrate, harm or otherwise disrespect any part of God’s creation, that entity is no longer following Christ. When this is done systematically over time, with no remorse or repentance, this anti-Christlike behavior becomes an enemy to mission of Christ to make us all one Body.

Make no mistake about it: Telling lies is not the work of God. Deception is not Christ-like. Abuse, murder, and hatred — regardless of who does it — breaks the commandment of God and brings God’s wrath.

The most important work of our lives begins with learning how to love others unconditionally. Everything begins with learning to love all people. If we separate people by race or nationality or any other superimposed division, we are inviting bias, based upon the designations that we have imposed.

More specifically, if we label a race of people as different from ourselves by our perception of their physical traits, rather than perceiving the unity of the human spirit in each of us, we have fallen into a trap of superficial vision. We are then judging a book by its cover, and disregarding its contents.

You, as an individual are not responsible for the existence of systemic racism in our nation. This system was put in place from the origin of our nation espousing the subjugation of Africans as slaves and legalizing their use as property and abuse as being less than fully human. In spite of efforts to abolish slavery, the brief period of Reconstruction after African Americans were technically freed from enslavement was followed by the enactment of Jim Crow laws designed to prevent the advancement of African Americans to any form of equality with European Americans. Anyone with dark skin — or even “one drop of African blood” was considered unworthy to partake in an equal pursuit of happiness as whites had claimed for Americans as an unalienable right in the United States Declaration of Independence.

Although you are not responsible for the inception of the pattern of discrimination against black Americans that infests our institutions (schools, judicial system, economy, housing, employment, etc.) and way of life, you become responsible when you perpetuate it or refrain from calling it what it is and seeking to eliminate it. To do nothing about an ongoing problem is to sustain it. Only an active anti-racism that works toward raising an awareness of how ingrained racial bias is in our nation, and seeks to promote racial reconciliation through honest dialogue and efforts to bring about concrete changes in policy that overhaul operations in our institutions, can move one from being a racist (a sustainer of systemic racism through inaction) to becoming anti-racist.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” With those words, our nation was born on July 4, 1776. Yet even the one who wrote those words had enslaved African Americans, one of whom he used repeatedly as a sexual partner (Sally Hemings) outside of marriage, and fathered children who have come forward with matching DNA results to prove that Thomas Jefferson was their ancestor. So ingrained in the common life of white Americans, even in 1776, was the lie that black Americans were not equal human beings to white Americans, that the sexual misuse of black women was considered by some to be acceptable and legal use of one’s “property.”

On the one hand, our nation’s leaders had high ideals of freedom for themselves and their white descendants, but on the other hand, they treated people of color with disregard, and reckoned us to be less than human (“two-thirds of a man”). The United States of America claimed to be a watchdog for human rights, condemning injustices committed by other nations, while continuing to discriminate against black Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color. Our nation claimed to honor God as Creator and sovereign, but its Jim Crow laws enacted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States) reflected its refusal to love other people as themselves when those people were people of color.

The truth is that God sees all of that. God knows our heart. God is not deceived by our rhetoric. We are responsible for what we do, and we will be held accountable for every word that we say. (Matthew 12:36) It is not enough to do nothing, but we must not tolerate racism in our institutions, in our churches or among family members and friends. When we speak up for those who are being denigrated in our hearing because of their color, and remind others that God created us all in God’s image, we become anti-racists (actively dismantling the racism that exists around us). Those who have the power to make policy changes that reflect the equality of all human beings have a greater responsibility: that of working to change how things work within their institution, so that the outcomes within their power result in justice for all people.

This means that police would not profile people of color to stop them on the street — much less, to physically harm or kill them. This means that judges would not give longer sentences to people of color than for white Americans for the same crimes. This means that realtors would not discourage home buyers who are people of color from purchasing a home in a predominantly white neighborhood. This means that employers would not discriminate against qualified people of color in order to hire a white person simply because of color. This also means that churches would not ignore people of color or exclude them from active participation in the theological formation of church policy.

There is much to be done before we can call ourselves “reconciled.” An honest assessment of the issues at hand puts us on the right road, but education about our history and dialogue about how to change

ingrained policies of inequality in our institutions, churches and organizations will lead to a realistic plan for true reconciliation.

We are one church among many who struggle with the burdens of a less than honest account of our past as a nation and as a denomination. The contributions of people of color are slowly coming to the light of our national consciousness. Only recently has my own family made public our connection to my great-great grandfather, Alexander Hamilton Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy who fathered a son (Allen) with his 12-year-old enslaved girl, Eliza, my great-great grandmother. My family is now in contact with white relatives of Alexander, and we are working at getting to know each other as kin.

Reconciliation takes commitment and action. As we grow in understanding of each other's history and culture, we will see how God created us to fit perfectly together in one body with each member of the body functioning according to the gifts, abilities and strengths that God has given us. It is a long journey that began long ago, but if we do our part in our generation, the future of our nation and of our church can be a much brighter and more faithful one. Amen.