

“Our Original Sin”

July 8, 2018

Hot Topics series

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I want you to know that I don't come to this series lightly. As I've thought and prayed and as we've planned and worked together as a worship team, I fully realize that examining "hot topics" can be uncomfortable and can bring uneasiness and fear. I feel the pressure of that, but I also feel compelled to preach and invite us to discuss topics that we'd rather avoid. I trust in Jesus' promise that knowing the truth and speaking the truth will set us free.

I'm trusting in God's grace to lead and guide us. That doesn't mean you have to agree with everything I say, but I pray that we can engage these issues in healthy ways. I firmly believe that's what we're called to do as the Body of Christ. Avoiding tough issues doesn't help us to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ - who is "God with us." Engaging these issues means that we become more vulnerable to understanding who we are and who God is. It's not easy, but living the Gospel isn't easy. We're promised that we'll never be alone in our faith journey. God is with us.

I confess that I come to this hot topic with a particular worldview (and so do you, though it might be different than mine). I am a white woman born in this country. I do not and cannot pretend to understand the experiences of persons of skin colors that are different than mine. Experiencing racism isn't something I can tell you about personally. I can only share with you the truth of racism that I've heard from others - my childhood friend who was called names by our classmates because her skin was darker and her mom spoke a different language, stories of seminary classmates who spoke of racial profiling, and encounters with friends who have talked about the pain of being treated differently because of the color of their skin.

And I have to be honest with myself and with you. There are moments when I realize my own prejudice. I make assumptions based purely on someone's appearance - even skin color - and treat them with a bias because of it. Friends, for as much as it happens, we can't say that's just normal or the way things are. We are called to examine our hearts and be honest about our actions or inactions that separate us from God and each other. That's what sin is. Racism is sin, and we must be honest about it.

Racism, as we understand it, didn't exist in Jesus' time, but sexism and nationalism did. I wonder if that's what's happening in this encounter between Jesus and the woman from Syrian Phoenicia. I'll confess that we preachers really don't want to talk about this conversation because it's hard. I'd like to skip it, but I can't. It's there, and it's important to engage it.

I'm not sure if Jesus is just tired and cranky, trying to get away from the crowds for a little rest or what, but his initial response to this woman doesn't sound loving or kind. He comes off sounding insulting like he's calling her a name - a dog. The interesting part is that she doesn't give up. She calls Jesus out, and he responds to her in the way that we expect - her daughter is healed.

Now it's important to know the social dynamics here. Jesus is a Jewish man. She is a Gentile woman from another region - and already has things working against her that are out of her control. There's also some speculation that the economic disparity between Jews and Gentiles in this region of Tyre are a reason for Jesus' response. It doesn't matter - whatever the reason, it's hard to hear.

But, this woman calls Jesus "Lord" and reminds him that the spiritual food he's offering isn't limited to only certain people. Some have called this a "conversion" moment for Jesus where he's reminded of his wider mission. God's grace isn't limited. God's care and concern isn't limited by the boundaries we create. He comes that all might have abundant life.

So again it may be difficult to consider that Jesus has a moment of prejudice. It may be strange to think that Jesus may have struggled with engaging people who were different. But perhaps it's a part of seeing Jesus as fully divine **and** fully human. He faced what we face. There were times when he needed to listen to the voices of others and hear God's call through them.

I wonder if there are voices of people - particularly voices of those who are oppressed and are victims of racism - that we need to listen more closely to and remember that God's love, grace, and care aren't limited by our sin. This story made me think of Therese Patricia Okoumou - maybe you saw her on the news this week. She climbed the Statue of Liberty in protest to and solidarity with those who are separated from their families. What would she say to you and me? What might we hear?

Racism is sin. Racism says that the amount of pigment in one's skin determines status and worth. That is not from God; that is a human construction. Racism dehumanizes. It destroys. It separates us. And it's not what God intends for us. It's not who we're supposed to be or how we're supposed to be. It's not what Jesus calls us to. It's not who he is. Frederick Buechner says, "Sin is whatever I do, or fail to do, that pushes [God] away, that widens the gap between me and [God] and also the gaps within myself."

When we celebrated baptism last week, we heard the call again - that God's grace is for all and that the church is open to all people regardless of age, race, nation, or any other barrier we create. The baptismal waters bind us together and call us to remember who we are and whose we are. We are water-washed and Spirit-born children of God!

Will Willimon says, “Christians are determined by the conviction that a brown-skinned Jew - whose body was publically tortured to death on a cross by a consortium of government and religious officials, and whose crucified body was resurrected from the dead, opening up the realm of God to people of every color...is the truth about God.”

It’s easy to stop there, but we can’t. Acknowledging our need for grace and redemption is what we’re about as the Body of Christ. Believing that God’s grace is at work is what we’re about. We’re invited to accept the freedom and power God offers us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. That’s what we say every time we celebrate baptism. It’s about God’s grace, and it’s also about who we’re called to be together. Racism is an evil we must reject.

So I stand before you as a sinner saved by grace. I have work to do to confess my sin, repent, turn around, and seek to walk with God. That doesn’t mean it’s a one-time confession, and then I’m done. For as much as we claim personal prejudice and bias, our society is also profoundly affected by it. There is prejudice, and there is privilege.

I invite us to watch a short video that shows the reality of privilege. The premise of this race is that everyone lines up together, but then there are particular situations offered that affect each person’s place in the race. This isn’t a perfect video, but it’s a powerful word to us.

SHOW MEDIA: Race for \$100

As I mentioned, it’s not perfect, and even at the end, the speaker’s words show some prejudice. Even so, that video made me uncomfortable because it offers truth that we sometimes avoid. Privilege is invisible when we’re privileged.

We don’t want to admit that privilege is a part of our fabric, but it is. We want people to be treated equally, but they aren’t. We want everyone to have opportunity, but they don’t. We all make choices, that’s true, but there are some things that are out of our control. One of the most important things the speaker said was about knowing the stories of other people. Friends, that matters, and our willingness to listen is a vital part of moving forward and making changes.

Even as we celebrated Independence Day and lifted up the founding documents of our nation that proclaim equality for all, we have to be honest about the structures and systems that contribute to continued discrimination especially against persons of color. Racism is personal and institutional. It’s easy to point to extreme examples of racism - white supremacists holding rallies and growing their following on the Internet - and say that we’re not a part of that.

That may be true, and we’re sickened by the hate and vitriol that we witness, but this is still about us and how we understand who we’re called to be in this world.

It's not about pitying others, but developing a sense of empathy for experiences that are different from our own.

This video doesn't answer every question about inequality or lift up every factor that determines success in life, but it does remind us that privilege is a reality. Many of us benefit from it every day. Christian writer Jim Wallis calls racism our "original sin" in the United States.

We're not the only country to struggle with it, but racism is a part of our foundation whether we want to admit it or not. One psychologist says that racism is like "smog in the air." We breathe it in every day from the very beginning.

As we engage these hot topics, I'm sharing our United Methodist Social Principles with you. Remember the Social Principles are a tool that helps us to engage both personal faith in Jesus Christ and social action – what we do with the faith we claim. They are not church law, but our best effort to engage and think theologically about important issues.

We know that Scripture is our foundation, but we're influenced by the tradition of the Christian church over the centuries, our ability to think and reason, and our own experiences. Faith and politics aren't separated, and part of our reasoning for this series is for us to recognize how our faith influences social or political issues that we discuss. I hope that you're registered to vote and will exercise that right.

Hear what the Social Principles say about racism:

SHOW SLIDE

Therefore, we recognize racism as sin and affirm the ultimate and temporal worth of all persons. We rejoice in the gifts that particular ethnic histories and cultures bring to our total life. We commit as the Church to move beyond symbolic expressions and representative models that do not challenge unjust systems of power and access.

This isn't a call to ignore racism as if it'll go away. It's a call to engage it in ways that seek to make real changes. It's a call to be intentional.

Trudy Smith challenged me: "When we encounter those who have been oppressed by a system that has always worked just fine for us, we have a conscious choice about whether we will make space in ourselves to receive the truth of their experience. Will we have the courage to listen with an open mind and to recognize ourselves in the other? Will we have the humility to admit that we have been living with harmful misconceptions and to change our course?" Will we talk to one another and move toward community and hope?

I'm very aware that one sermon as a part of a series on hot topics won't end the reality of racism in our lives or our community. But it's a call for us to repent and believe in the power of God to destroy the power of sin in our lives. We can be a

part of making things better. We can listen more closely to others and be in intentional conversations. We can engage in closer relationships with people of different experiences. We can educate ourselves by reading more and seeking to understand more deeply.

I'm grateful for opportunities like Muskegon Methodist Men's Breakfast gatherings, Unity worship with our larger community, and the Unity March in Muskegon Heights coming up on July 21. I'm thankful for the voices in our community that call us to dismantle unjust systems and remember God's heart for all people. I'm thankful for my daughter who reminded me that if we don't talk about racism, if we don't name it and confront it, we can't change it. I pray that we'll be a part of making changes here and now.

Dear God, Heavenly Father of us all, you brought us to life by your Word of truth. We are made in your image, sons and daughters of all colors, and yet the sin of racism has caused your children to suffer.

Prejudice, discrimination, and hatred have led to brokenness, violence, and even death. We confess that we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have allowed the sin of racism to divide us in what we have done and what we have not done; what we have said and what we have not said. Purify our hearts and tame our tongues. Give us courage to repent, to fight for righteousness, and to love and embrace one another. In the name of Jesus, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE