

## “Can We All Get Along?”

Date: July 6, 2014

Theme: Race Relations in USA

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: sermon series, social issues

Texts: Ephesians 2:14-22; John 4:1-10

The issue of race still looms large in American society. Not very long ago Donald Sterling, the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers professional basketball team, was banned for life for his racist remarks. His comments resulted in a public outcry. Some were outraged by his remarks and others felt sorry for him.

In 1991 a black man by the name of Rodney King was beaten unmercifully by white police officers of Los Angeles. Someone captured that crime on video-tape. The acquittal of the police set off a firestorm. On the other side of that tragedy, Rodney King asked wistfully, “Can’t we all just get along?”

That is America’s greatest challenge. Can the majority and minority races accept each other as full partners in the American family? It is not only appropriate but indeed necessary that we ask that question, even here in Erie, Pennsylvania.

When I was putting together the sermon schedule for this month, it never occurred to me the significance of preaching on *this* topic on *this* particular Sunday. Two dates in American history coincide with this week.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, just two days ago, we celebrated our country’s 238<sup>th</sup> birthday. July 4<sup>th</sup> marks the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the document that marks our break-away from Great Britain. In that historical document you will find this great and amazing sentence:

“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.” While we hold that belief as an ideal, it has not been a reality for many of our citizens, particularly for many persons of color.

Also this week, we celebrated another anniversary. Fifty years ago on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1964, Lyndon Baines Johnson signed into Law the American Civil Rights Act. That act gave to all citizens the same equal rights that, before the law, had been denied to many of our people.

Since the passing of that law, numerous people and groups have gone to court to ensure that the law was enforced. Now, it is against the law to deny a person of color the right to rent a room at any motel, or to get a drink of water at a public water fountain, or get a seat at any restaurant, or to vote, or to get a job.

We are a country that will not tolerate treating its citizens as separate and unequal. Still, there is much discrimination that takes place. New laws are being passed to make it more difficult for people of color to vote and voting district are being re-drawn to ensure that certain people will NOT be fairly represented.

We have certainly made great strides in the past 50 years since the passing of the Civil Rights Act. But we still have a long ways to go, to ensure equality in America.

Scripture makes it clear that equality under God is the right way to live. In the book of Genesis, God created man and woman in God’s own image and called them good. From the beginning, diversity was a part of God’s creation. No-where do we find in the Bible, either

explicit or implied, that having created people God then created a hierarchy of “better than and lower than” others. As children of God we are family – brothers and sisters – the family of God. Amen?!

In Galatians 3, that I read and preached upon last week, Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Equality, in the biblical sense, means that there are no class distinctions, there are no racial barriers and there is no gender separation. Christ has brought together the family of God, once broken, now restored.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul is talking about the body of Christ when he writes, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” He goes on to talk about the importance of each member of the body. We need all the members to be whole.

What’s the point? God values diversity. Diversity is needed. Without it, there is no wholeness. All the parts of the body, all the members of God’s family, have value and importance to the Creator.

Sadly, experience teaches us that we have not always lived into the ideal of what we say we believe. Racism has been a part of the history of our denomination, for hundreds of years.

One Sunday I would love to be able to take you back through Methodist history and show you the many ways we have sinned against our brothers and sisters from Africa. In short, several of the traditional black churches – The African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Christian Methodist Church were formed as a protest against the racism shown to black people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church divided over the issue of slavery, forming the ME Church, North and the ME Church, South. After the Civil War, those two bodies reunited to form the Methodist Church, but not until 1939. But, at the time of that merger, all of the black churches were kept separate – in their own, segregated annual conferences, in what was known as the Central Jurisdiction.

Black Methodists saw the creation of the Central Jurisdiction as a betrayal. Some whites were also upset, but change didn't come quickly. The Central Jurisdiction, and by extension, segregation, persisted in the Methodist Church until after the 1968 merger with the EUB Church, when our United Methodist Church was formed. In 1972 it was no more. Only 42 years ago did we ended segregation.

At the time of the merger, a set of Social Principles was created, to speak for the voice of the church on a number of social issues – racism being one of them. It decries the sin of racism and speaks to several ways of trying to address the problems of discrimination and racism

In our Book of Resolutions, our United Methodist Church has spoken loudly and forcefully condemning racism. But, for all the beautifully and wonderfully crafted statements calling for and affirming the civil rights for all, we still have a long ways to go.

Now, you may be bored listening to this. You may be angered by some of what you heard. You may be feeling proud that our church takes such a powerful stand. Feelings about race, once we begin to talk about it, are usually very strong.

But that is what we are called to do – talk about. Not to ignore it, or brush it under the rug, or deny that there is a problem, or pretend that the Civil Rights Act fixed everything. We need to talk.

Quickly, let me share some thoughts about the scriptures we read this morning. In the passage from John, Jesus meets a woman at a well, in the country of Samaria. Jesus intentionally went there to confront the racial tension that existed between Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus went out of his way to bring the good news of salvation and God’s love to the Samaritans. He went to their turf, to meet them on their soil. I see an invitation to us, to do likewise, to begin to break down the barriers between us and our African-American brothers and sisters, who are also Methodist.

Just as a beginning point, I’d like to suggest that we go visit our cousins on the east side, at St. James AME Church – to visit, to get to know them, and perhaps to begin to listen to their stories. Let the healing begin, as we break down some barriers. As long as we sit in our segregated suburbs, not much progress will be made.

Jesus was willing to cross cultural and racial boundaries. Would we be willing to be a part of inter-racial Bible study and sharing group, in an unfamiliar part of town? I think, any time we are willing to go to someone else’s turf in the name of Jesus, ripples of reconciliation begin to roll.

Which brings me to the passage from Ephesians, where Paul talks about the unity and the healing that Christ has brought into the world. “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.”

God, in Christ, is healing the nations. In 2 Corinthians 5: 19 we read: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sin against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

Our reconciliation with God, purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ, leads us to a ministry of being reconciled with all other people. Rodney King’s comment, “Can we all get along?” means more than simply not telling racist jokes.

It also means addressing the system of racism that continues to oppress. But a very good starting place, for people like you and me, is to begin to have more conversations with people of color, breaking down the walls that divide us.

Would you be willing to join with me, intentionally connecting with our existing ethnic churches, for the purpose of sharing stories, building trusting relationship, understanding cultural differences, partnering in ministry and dreaming dreams together?

Will you commit with me, to join toward a racism-free church and society? I hope that you will. Amen.