

“Shining the Light in Dark Corners”

Date: Jan. 18, 2015 Text: 1 John 1:5-10; Amos 5:1, 6-15
Place: Lakewood UMC Occasion: Human Relations Sunday
Themes: Justice, Racism, Martin Luther King, Jr.

I have really struggled this past week about what I want to say today. Or, I should say, I've really struggled with what *God* wants me to say today. I feel led to talk about the problem of race in America, on the eve of the holiday that honors Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Most talks about race are not pleasant. They're hard. I know that God is not satisfied with the status quo with race relations in America. And so I feel led to be prophetic and speak about the sin of racism. And yet, I know that as soon as I mention that word, *racism*, I have offended and lost part of my audience. They've already tuned me out. It seems people are tired of hearing about racism.

But the truth is we can't ignore the fact that we have racial tension in America. Listen to the news. Blacks distrust the police. Whites are angry at blacks for breaking the law. Blacks are angry that whites just don't get it.

Whites complain they never owned slaves, plus, blacks have made tremendous progress in the last fifty years. "What more do they want?" Statistics prove that blacks suffer disproportionately when it comes to education, jobs, health care, housing and in rates of incarceration in jail and prison.

Whites blame the blacks, that it's their own fault. Blacks can point to history and show how the system has created white privilege and black disadvantage. Whites feel proud they no longer use the "N" word in public. Blacks can point to ongoing discrimination, even if

there aren't lynch mobs in the streets anymore. Whites *and* blacks have condemned the riots after the verdicts were handed down, recently, not indicting the police officers in the recent deaths of a black man and a black boy.

And others have said that riots are the voice of the oppressed who can't be heard any other way. And before you know it, we're either angry, or confused, or feeling helpless. We can all tell stories of when we have personally experienced both prejudice, and also positive experiences with people of color.

And so the issue of race is confusing and upsetting, and we don't want to talk about it. But unless we talk about it, our problem will only get worse. In a recent commentary, Rev. Gil Caldwell, a United Methodist pastor who is African American had this to say:

"In the current worldwide community, black and white individuals have encountered very different experiences – in church, with law enforcement and across much of American life. Since the death of Michael Brown, you've seen protesters carry signs that say, "Black Lives Matter." The assassination of two New York police officers in December prompted signs that say, "Police Lives Matter."

"I contend, and believe you do as well, that "Black Lives Matter; Polices Lives Matter; All Lives Matter." He goes on to say, "Part of valuing all lives is recognizing the experiences that shape them. My hope in 2015 is that each of us in the UMC will dare to speak and share our truth, knowing that truth-telling by some people is viewed by others as divisive. Why? Because they do not take the time to understand what experiences and influences shaped the truths of people different from themselves."

I hope that we United Methodists can and will have those conversations. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us that we can transform evil into good. God enables us to do that. When Joseph, the one with the amazing colored coat in the Old Testament, was sold into slavery by his brothers, he later told them:

“You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it.” As with Joseph’s brothers, we first have to acknowledge the evil before we, through God, can transform it.

It’s time that we shined the light into the dark corners of America – not to make white people feel guilty and thus become paralyzed. But we shine the light into the dark corners, so that we can be transformed by God’s love and grace.

Amos was one of the Old Testament prophets, speaking to the people of Israel at a time when the rich were getting richer and the poor were being oppressed. The role of the prophet was to speak out on behalf of God’s values. The role of the prophet was not to tell the future, as some people imagine it to be, but to be the voice of conscience, shining light into the dark corners where sin likes to hide.

How many of you enjoyed being called down to the principals’ office where you were in school? How many of you liked being told, “Wait till your father comes home?” when you knew there was going to be a tongue-lashing, or worse. Not many people do.

But sometimes, for the good of the person, they need to take a look at themselves. It’s not always pleasant. It makes us feel uncomfortable. That’s what talking about race does to white people. We get defensive. We want to blame the other side, talk about black-on-black crime, even suggest that blacks bring these problems on

themselves. We want to wash our hands and say, “Well, I’ve never done any of those things.” These are hard conversations to have. We’d rather sweep it under the rug, ignore the problem and hope it goes away.

Prophets, like Amos, are good at sensing God’s dream of who we can be, when we’re at our best. And they hold that dream up for the rest of us to see it. Dr. King was able to do that. He cast a vision of a different day, a new day, a day that God dreamed of, and so a day that must someday be.

Dr. King called a people to action, to service and to sacrifice, in a long and difficult journey. We are still walking that journey. We have come a long ways since Martin laid out his dream for America.

Today, there are more black elected officials beyond what Martin could have imagined. We’ve elected a black man to the highest office in the nation. Regardless of whether you approve of Barack Obama’s politics, his election is a milestone.

The numerical gains in the areas of business, academia, and all the professions are staggering, when you consider where America was 50 years ago. The realities of friendship and cooperation among the races can be seen in every neighborhood, community and school.

We have come a long way, in following the dream that Martin espoused. But the dream, which began with God’s dream – because that’s what prophets do – tell us what God is dreaming for us - is not yet fulfilled. There is still a ways to go.

There are still entrenched patterns of segregation, Sunday morning being one of them. There is still widespread misunderstanding, mistrust and outright violence that erupt between

the races. The harsh economic numbers reveal appalling disparities between whites and blacks. Blacks and whites have widely different perspectives on law enforcement, and they tell different stories about economic opportunities available to them.

If we are to live into God's dream, we cannot hide, pretend, ignore or wish the problems to go away. I believe the answer is to allow the light of God's love to shine upon us.

Jesus is our leader, who, by going to visit the Samaritan woman at the well, has given us the example of meeting people on *their* turf, to have dialogues that will bring new life.

And so, I would like to invite you to join me in watching a current movie now playing in our movie theaters. The movie *Selma* depicts a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement when courage was key. Again, Rev. Gil Caldwell speaks to us.

"It is important to remember that the film is not a documentary. But every American ought to see this film and then discuss the film afterwards. It would be helpful (he says) if United Methodists and others view the film with open hearts, and without anger, guilt, disbelief, denial or a wish to revise our own history."

And so I invite you to join me up at Tinseltown this coming Friday night at 7:00pm. And then we'll come back to Lakewood to talk about what we saw. No blaming, no guilting, none of that. We'll try to live with Rev. Caldwell's suggestions. How can we realize the dream that the author of the Declaration of Independence had?

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." (Thomas Jefferson, 1776) May it be so. Amen!