

“The Ministry of Reconciliation”

Date: June 7, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Racial Violence in America Text: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Theme: Justice, Healing, Listening, Understanding

It has been quite a week. A week ago a black man, his name was George Floyd, was killed while in the custody of a white police officer in Minneapolis Minnesota. Since then, there has been a massive outcry against the injustice committed, an outcry of both whites and blacks, police officers and civilians, locally, nationally and around the world. The *world* has seen the video and rightly objects.

As we all should. Some have focused their attention on the peaceful protests that turned violent and caused significant property damage to local businesses. Even leaders in the black community have decried the riots. We all agree, rioting is not the best way to create change.

But how do we move on from here; how do we heal the wounds of our nation? I confess to you this was not an easy sermon to write. Books have been written on the subject. I feel the need to be profound and to be prophetic. I want to say the right thing and I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing. I'm afraid I won't be strong enough in my tone, and I'm afraid I might offend some of you by the things I say.

Racism is not an easy topic to talk about. But we must. For too long we have pushed this issue under the rug and tried to keep it out of sight. We have unhealed wounds from a civil war. We have unhealed wounds from a long history of prejudice and bigotry and hatred.

There's a lot of work to do, but most of us find it uncomfortable to talk about, so we sweep it under the rug and hope it goes away. Or, we hope that blacks will just forget the past and move on. But it's hard to move on when

the past keeps repeating itself. It's as though they are in an abusive relationship that never ends.

Martin Luther King Jr. was protesting the injustices of this country 40 years ago. People didn't like him stirring up the waters then. He was moving too fast, the white pastors of the time told him. Finally, he was killed for being too radical. Think about it, killed for wanting America to live up to its ideals of freedom and justice for all, for blacks to be treated as equal as whites. Whites have pushed the snooze button on the alarm clock of racism. But the clock has sounded its alarm once again.

Now that we have cell phones, bystanders have been capturing video images of rogue policeman killing black men and women. They've been telling us that this has been going on for decades. But we didn't want to believe it. Most of us are decent people and we trusted our officers. We believed *them* rather than the witness of our black brothers and sisters.

Folks are angry. Sometimes that anger turns violent. Everyone agrees that rioting is not the right way to get change. Black leaders are calling for peace. But decades ago, Martin Luther King Jr. said that riots are the language of the unheard. And we have not been listening.

However I see signs of hope all around the country and all around the world. I believe God is doing a new thing, in bringing about reconciliation between people who have for too long been at enmity. I love seeing the pictures of police officers kneeling with demonstrators, saying, "We agree with you. What happened to George Floyd was wrong. Those cops do not represent the best of who we are. They need to be held accountable."

And then, the crowds cheered the police officers. Why? Because at long last it feels like they are being heard. Someone is listening. I love the photos of white officers hugging black members of the demonstrating

crowds. I love the pictures of the black men who are offering bottles of water to police officers, saying, “We don’t hate you. We love you, man. We just want justice.” I love the pictures of blacks and whites together walking down the street demanding change. I believe America is at a turning point.

But it’s going to take more than simply hugging each other and talking nice to one another. It will involve unlearning the racism that has permeated this country for close to 400 years. Yes, that long.

The United States has had a race problem from the very beginning of its founding. Slavery was already a thing in this country when the Constitution was written. Slavery goes back to the 1600’s, so we have had a race issue for over 400 years.

Blacks have felt that knee upon their necks for hundreds of years. In the Declaration of Independence we read these words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” Lofty words, lofty ideas. They sound wonderful. But they are not the lived reality of many.

As Christians, we believe in the sacred worth of every human being. Sadly, not everyone agrees with that sentiment, including many white Christians who believe in the superiority of the white race, with all of its privileges and benefits.

Even if we don’t like the term White Supremacy, most of us benefit from its philosophy. Ask a white person if they would like to be black in this country, almost to a person they would say no. Why is that? Because we know that something is wrong. And yet we have accepted the status quo.

We have gone along with the way things are, well-knowing that there will be winners and losers, and if you’re white you’re still better off than being a black person. That’s white supremacy. Ouch. That hurts to hear. I don’t go around espousing hatred. But do I benefit from being white? Yes.

Well, I can't change the color of my skin. Exactly. Neither can a black person. I've been told that labels don't help further the conversation that labels put people on the defensive. I get that. I haven't figured out a way to tell people the truth I've discovered without it making people feel uncomfortable. I don't want to shame anyone. But I do want us to wake up to the reality of racism in America, and how we whites benefit unknowingly.

I shared with someone this past week how fearful blacks are to walk in certain neighborhoods, like Lakewood, either at night or even during the day. Not because of crime, but for the fear that someone would call the police, and even if they are innocent, they could lose their life in that interaction. It happens often enough to create real fear among blacks.

This white person told me they had never known that. It made her sad to learn that blacks feel that way. She had her eyes opened. I believe that the ministry of reconciliation among the race begins with whites being willing to learn about racism, and to have difficult conversations.

It's a matter of reading some books; reading some articles. One book that I've been reading lately is called "Waking Up White," by Debbie Irving, a white woman who describes her journey from not really understanding racism, to becoming aware, to becoming an advocate for change. I highly recommend it.

If you've not yet read this article, it is a classic in the literature, I commend it to you. It's called "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack," by Peggy McIntosh. Google it and you can find it online. It's a beginner's guide to understanding how racism has benefitted us white folks and has oppressed people of color.

Listen, we're not bad people. We live with a bad system. It's broken and we have to fix it. But before we can fix it we have to understand it. If a

married couple is having marital issues they go to see a counselor. They have to uncover the problems in their relationship. And they will have some very uncomfortable conversations before their relationship can be restored.

That, my friends, is the ministry of reconciliation in terms of race relations in America today. Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd cry out to us – Stop the Killing! Unlearn the assumptions that we are guilty of something, that we are less than you, and that our lives don't matter to you.

Our black friends are telling us – ‘Get up; get off; we can't breathe. Your knee has been on our necks for 400 years. Let us breathe.’ Hear the primal scream of George as he cries out for his Mama. A grown black man, pinned to the ground as the air flows from his nostrils once last time, as we watch from a distance, as three white officers gave their approval for what was taking place. Does his life matter?

How did we get here? It's a long story. But we need to unpack it. Because America is a great nation. Our goals and our ideals have been admired and emulated throughout the world. “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.”

Now is the time to heal the wounds of the past. Now is the time to listen to one another. Now is the time for the races to be reconciled. O that we might be one human race, not divided by skin color. But today we are.

May God give us the courage to face this problem and not turn away. Because if we do, we essentially say, *that* life doesn't matter. But that life is sacred to God. And it should be sacred to us as well. Each person we meet should be regarded as a sacred child of God. Amen? Amen!