

October 1, 2017 – Journey Worship, Anti-Racism Sunday

TEXT: Galatians 3

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

I remember the first time I was confused about race. I was in pre-school, and I was surprised to learn that my aunt was white. We had close family friends in which the parents were an interracial couple, and so I saw my whole life that families could include persons of all colors. And my aunt had skin that would darken to the color of milk chocolate—especially when she tanned poolside in the summer. So I was surprised to learn that my aunt would in fact be considered white, even though her skin was darker than that of many who would be seen as black. I started to see that this idea of race—at least the notion of being black or white—was more involved than I had originally understood.

I confess that while I know a whole lot more about this social construct of race, I still find it confusing. Perhaps I have never been more confused than I was when, as a new parent, I was asked to put a check in a box to delineate my son's race. I could identify his ethnicity—I could name his ties to several countries and/or people groups of his ancestry. But race...who is to say? And is there really just *one* box to check? Who was I to put this label on my son? And what did it really mean, anyway?

Today is the start of Mission Month at ELPC. The Mission Board has identified a theme for each Sunday of the month and we will be lifting up different justice concerns during each of the 11 AM worship services, with special programming to follow. Today has been earmarked as an anti-racism Sunday. Pittsburgh Seminary's President the Rev. Dr. David Esterline will lead a combined Adult Ed class after this service and he will preach at the 11 AM service. And it struck me odd for a minute that the two preachers on anti-racism Sunday were, in fact, white.

But then I stopped to think about it and realized that, frankly, white people *should* be preaching against racism. The hard truth of it is, is that white people who got us into this mess in the first place. White people are responsible for creating the problem of racism in our nation from the moment a white foot stepped upon this nation's shore.

See, racism by its very definition only ever benefits those who are in the racial position of privilege. It is a system that was created by a people in power, and the only reason that it continues to impact us today is because we let it stick around.

We need to tell the truth that white people still unfairly benefit from racism—in the job market the educational system and the judicial system- and we have to name the harsh truth that white people haven't always been quite ready to let go of the benefits. We need to talk about this fact, affirming the truth that our African American brothers and sisters have been telling for centuries about the continued inequalities. And we need to confess our complicity—intentionally and unintentionally—in perpetuating this devastating sin.

See, white people need to go on the record more as standing up and standing against racism. We need to call it out, to name it as reprehensible, to invite others to reject racism in any form and to work toward a day when no one will be profiled, marginalized, oppressed or treated in any way as a second-tier citizen because of their race. In fact, the more that I thought about it, I realized that it has been a mark of my privilege that I even have had the option to speak or to remain silent on this topic in the first place. Further, it is a mark of privilege that we have asked our African American brothers and sisters bear the load in the fight against personal and systemic injustice as a result of white supremacy and race bias.

But now more than almost ever are white people needed to stand up and say that, in fact, racism is an evil. We need to say that in fact there are not “many sides” to this issue. We need to go on the record saying that it is morally wrong for white men to wield torches and carry the Nazi flag even if the constitution protects their right to free speech; and we need to assert that it is an indefensible double standard when our president says that many of the white folks’ involved in this racist march in Charlottesville were “very fine people” but that black athletes who take a knee protesting racism during the national anthem are S.O.B’s.

And the sad truth is that white people need to speak up because some people will still only listen to white voices. Those who often need to hear this most are those who have already dismissed the words of anyone with brown skin. They are likely to offer excuses when an African American person tells a story of a scary traffic stop or of being passed over for a promotion or of being profiled at the department store. They are likely to accuse that person of being defensive, of misreading the cues, of jumping to conclusions. But the words of a white voice might at least get them to pause. And maybe someday they’ll be ready to hear more, and the truth of injustice will penetrate hardened hearts and minds—and the truth of Christ’s redemption will come alive.

But even as I encourage white folks to speak against racism, I wish to extend a caution. We are not, in any way, to speak FOR our black brothers and sisters. We are not to silence their voices or speak as if we know what they want unless we have been authorized and instructed to do so. We still need to listen more than we speak. We still need to make space for Black voices to be heard. We need to step back so that they can step up. We still need to learn.

This month in Journey our theme is tolerance. Frankly, when I think about race and an invitation to tolerance, I think that we’ve set a very low bar. We need to do more than tolerate our brother or sister whose skin or nation of origin is different from our own. We need to accept. We need to welcome. We need to embrace. We need to love. We need to acknowledge the inherent worth of all of God’s children and honor the equal standing that is ours through Christ.

We heard a familiar passage from Paul’s letter to the Galatians reminding us that in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no woman nor man. All are one, rather, and all are equal. No one is greater than another; no one earns higher marks or

is of greater worth in the kingdom of God. Rather, God in Christ once more points us toward an authentically level playing field to which all are invited, all are redeemed, all are loved. There is no distinction based on social, cultural or even biological differences. All bear the name child; all receive an equal share in the inheritance.

Our passage offers us two things. First, it offers us a kingdom vision for this world, and a call to embrace it. But it also offers us the reminder that people have been dividing up and labeling people for a really long time. It is an impulse that has been engrained and yet one that God has been calling us to overcome for millennia.

Paul extends our new standard. Paul extends our call! Unity in diversity; acceptance; unmerited love. Friends, this is one more reason why we should speak out against racism: it gives voice to God's vision for humanity, in which the beautiful diversity of God's creation lives in harmony. The divides fall away and all are one in Christ.

It is this truth that we celebrate as we approach the Communion Table—especially on this World Communion Sunday. We acknowledge that we, along with the saints of all time, step forward to eat the bread and drink the cup because of God's gracious love poured out for each one of us. We all eat the same simple meal, and as we partake of the elements we are reminded that WE are the body of Christ. Now we are his hands and feet and heart, strengthened and sent to proclaim freedom to captives, healing for the brokenhearted, and the day of the LORD's favor.

May every day be anti-racism Sunday, and may we all—regardless of the color of our skin—speak up and speak out against injustice, bigotry, hate in any form. May the scales soon tip—not in favor of some but toward justice and equality for all. May Christ's kingdom come today. Amen.