

Fulfillment Today

The most obvious root of what I have to say this morning comes from just under ten years ago, shortly after I became your pastor. Unbeknownst to any of us, in April of 2006, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and the then-new president of Mercer University, Bill Underwood, called together a group of 18 Baptist leaders. Together, these individuals represented nearly 20 million Baptists across the United States. The purpose of the meeting was to search for ways to heal the divisions that have split Baptists since 1845 – divisions of theology and divisions of race. What came out of that initial meeting became known as the New Baptist Covenant. Focused on living out the words of Isaiah which Jesus used to announce his ministry in the passage from Luke which I've just read, the New Baptist Covenant has consistently sounded the challenge for Baptists to come together over issues of justice in our time.

A week and a half ago, leaders of the New Baptist Covenant issued a new call, asking like-minded churches to join in with the National African American Clergy Network and the African Methodist Episcopal Church in declaring July 5th as "Freedom from Racism Sunday." Since that call was issued, our own American Baptist Home Mission Societies have joined the effort to promote this day as "an intentional day of reflection, repentance, confession and healing around the topic of race." I know that Seattle First Baptist Church is observing "Freedom from Racism Sunday" today and I suspect that other Evergreen Baptist churches are as well. And at the closing worship service at the ABC-USA Biennial Mission Summit, our denomination's president, the Rev. Dr. Don Ng, read the following statement: "In light of the sin of racism that has infected each and every part of our nation we, the gathered delegates and participants of the 2015 Mission Summit of American Baptist Churches USA, the most diverse Protestant body in our nation, grieve racism's effects on our people. Therefore, we collectively speak against and repent of our participation in the sin of racism wherever it is found. The presence of white supremacy for too long has gone unacknowledged and prevented us from living as the body of Christ. Between now and the 2017 Mission Summit we urge each ABCUSA congregation to covenant in order to seek justice & reconciliation, hold one another accountable in this endeavor, and pursue local incarnated manifestations of the Beloved Community."

If I had been patient enough to wait until mid-week to begin planning our service and my sermon, a good deal of the work would have been done for me. The New Baptist Covenant has provided some wonderful materials for today based on the Scriptures found in the Revised Common Lectionary. But, of course, you all know that I am often impatient and do things my own way. And so, in addition to the passage from Luke which has inspired the work of the New Baptist Covenant as well as the title of this sermon, I began digging for passages which addressed the issue of injustice and from which I'd not yet had the opportunity to preach.

What I found is what we have spoken together this morning as our Call to Worship and what you heard me read before the Gospel passage; respectively, Psalm 10 and Zechariah 7:8-14. They are a lament from God's people experiencing injustice and a warning from God to God's people who have perpetrated injustice. Combined with the vision of Isaiah and of Jesus, these Scriptures remind us of the all-too-human failings to which God's people are prone and lift us up toward true freedom.

We'll begin with Psalm 10, part of which we read together in its new translation by poet and Hebrew scholar Pamela Greenberg. It is not the sort of Psalm that we generally use as a Call to

Fulfillment Today

Worship. It is a lament, a crying out of the people to God, the combined voice of a group at the bottom. As the blues song goes, they've been down so gosh darn long that it looks like up to them, or words to that effect. A more recent troubadour, Bono of U2, sang a similar lament a few years ago, his aimed at the Son rather than the Father: "Jesus, Jesus help me! I'm alone in this world and (an F'ed) up world it is, too." Bono, being Irish and a rock-and-roller, didn't censor himself as I just did. And rightly so. The cries of the oppressed, the tone of the true laments, aren't polite or G-rated. This is a scream for help, torn from the very innards of one who is in deep, deep trouble.

And if we have ears to hear, those are the songs and the sounds and the wails that are coming from our sisters and brothers, here in our country, in our community, because they do not have the dubious benefit of European parentage. Our attention has been called in the past fortnight to the continued racism against African-Americans and it is appropriate, it is important, it is vital that we pay attention. But let us not forget that the racism of our dominant culture also works against the Hispanic community, that Latinos and Latinas are also subject to name-calling, violence, dubious arrests and higher conviction rates and longer sentences. In their situation, they also have to deal with the more subtle and officially sanctioned terror of a visit from the ICE man, the agent of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. We scarcely hear the laments of the First Nations of this land any more – we have done too good a job of eliminating them entirely – but just yesterday the front page of the Seattle Times carried the story of yet another defeat for the Duwamish people as our federal government declared that they were so insignificant they weren't even recognizable as a tribe. Racism continues against Asian-Americans as well. The internment camps of World War II seem like a long time ago and apologies have been offered and accepted but what might bubble to the top if the United States continues to lose economic ground to China? Are we really so much advanced that another armed conflict wouldn't label scores of our neighbors as "enemy sympathizers?"

While the Psalm is a record of God's people under oppression, the passage from Zechariah reminds us that even God's people can be oppressors. Zechariah was a post-Exilic prophet, that is to say that he spoke to the Jewish people returned from Babylon. The precipitating event of this particular utterance from the prophet is recorded in the first seven verses of chapter seven. A group of laypeople in Bethel have sent representatives to ask the priests in Jerusalem if they should continue the fast which they have been observing every year in mourning for the fall of Jerusalem. The subtext seems to be, "Everything here's OK now, right?"

Zechariah reminds them that they had been fasting not simply because a city had been destroyed but in repentance for the actions which had caused God to leave the city to its fate. For Zechariah as for all his contemporaries, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people had been the direct result of their failure to keep the directives of God. Specifically, they had refused to render true judgments and to show kindness and mercy to each other. Ignoring God, they had oppressed the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the poor; they had devised evil in their hearts against one another. So what Zechariah was asking them, in effect, was whether they thought it was appropriate to begin to forget what they had learned about the results of such behavior. Were they that sure it wouldn't happen again?

Fulfillment Today

Zechariah might well give such a memory lesson to the United States today. It is fashionable in some quarters, especially after having twice elected a Black man as President, to declare the United States a “post-racial society.” But have we really stopped oppressing the descendants of those who were brought here in chains? Can we say that when the flag of armies formed to defend the “peculiar institution” of slavery still flies over cars and homes and stores and even state capitols? Can we say it when there are more Black men in prison now than were enslaved in 1850? Can we say it when some of our citizens are willing to seriously consider the presidential candidacy of a man whose racist, anti-immigrant ravings can’t even be covered up by his millions of dollars? Can we say it when churches are burning and church leaders are shot down while studying the Bible?

No, my sisters and my brothers, we do not live in a “post-racial society.” This nation, touted by so many as “exceptional” because of God’s great blessings to us, is just as guilty of injustice as the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Those who have begun to call racism the “Original Sin” of our nation are exactly right. And while I don’t expect the God of Hosts to send the Assyrians sweeping down upon us “like the wolf on the fold,” I am here to tell you today that I do see the judgment of God upon God’s people here in the United States.

I see it in the steadily increasing trend of the “Nones” to be joined by the “Dones.” If you are not up on current sociological and ecclesiological jargon, I’m referring to the much discussed statistics showing that the number of people who claim no religious affiliation at all on census forms and other surveys is the fastest growing group in the United States among religious categories. Further research is showing that this group is made up less and less of people who have had no religious involvement ever in their lives and more and more of people who were once regular attendees of religious services but are no longer. These are the “Dones,” so named because they are “done with church.” The numbers also reveal that this trend becomes more prevalent as age is factored in – the Church in the United States is losing its young people the fastest.

And why is this? I know I’ve talked about this before but it’s worth repeating. Our young people are leaving the Church behind because they don’t see us practicing what we preach. The Millennial Generation and those coming along behind read about (or, God forbid, experience) the unending sex scandals of the Church and hear abstinence and homophobia being preached and call us hypocrites. They look back at the Civil Rights Movement and hear about the New Jim Crow and wonder where their church leaders are in that fight. They look around them on Sunday morning and for all our talk of brotherhood they see that Dr. King’s words about 11 o’clock on Sunday morning being the most segregated hour in America still being true and they turn away in disgust. My friends, we are being called to account by God for the sins of our society, whether we feel personally responsible or not.

So, what is the solution? How do we shed the label of being out of touch, of being uncaring, of not practicing what we preach? To begin with, as is right and proper for disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, we must start with love. We must never forget to *love* our neighbor – not just tolerate, not just put up with, not even just respect but love. And the key to showing that love is also found in the teachings of Jesus: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Fulfillment Today

More specifically, here are a few ideas. First, pay attention. Yes, I know it can be depressing to read the newspaper or listen to the news on TV or radio. I still read the paper every morning and I start with the sports page to ease me into the day. *Then* I read the national and local news. And I follow that by reading the funnies to cheer me back up. But I do read the newspaper and I listen to news on the radio and I click on news-based links on Facebook and I read magazines that put the news into perspective for people of faith. This is how I know, in part, where my neighbors are hurting; this is how I hear their laments. I'm grateful for the people of color who write columns and features in these organs – they broaden the perspective of this privileged, middle-class, White boy.

Second, show up. When you hear or read about a significant event being held by neighbors from a culture not your own, go and see. Learn what other people think is important. Let them see you there so they will begin to feel less isolated from the majority culture. Let them know that you care about their lives and what is important. On Tuesday, I'm planning to give up part of my day off to go and march with our Black sisters and brothers in solidarity with the Charleston 9. The march starts at 5:00 p.m. at the First African Methodist Episcopal Church and ends with a rally at Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Park. I know that some of our friends from Living Interfaith Church are going and I hope as many of you as can will attend also. If you don't want to do the walk in the heat, just show up at the rally.

Third, go visiting. What I'm about to say may seem radical for a Baptist preacher but I seriously want all of you to consider NOT coming to Good Shepherd Baptist Church some Sunday very soon. Instead, I encourage you to go and visit a church that is predominantly made up of people from a minority population. There are lots of Black churches in our Evergreen Association where the people would recognize you as being sisters and brothers from Evergreen and would welcome you with open arms. Worried about being in the minority? Good – it's an excellent way to learn what that feels like. On the bulletin insert are names and addresses of just a few of those churches plus some non-Evergreen churches where I have strong relationships with the pastor. Pick a Sunday sometime soon (so you don't forget) and GO! Be willing to be vulnerable as you seek to build relationships.

And when you pay attention or show up or go visiting, remember to listen. It's hard to learn with your mouth open. Remember that when you hear those in the minority talk about the way they experience racism, they don't mean it as indictment against you personally. The very fact that you've shown up or gone visiting indicates that your heart is in the right place. Most people give other people the benefit of the doubt. So listen and don't be quick to defend or excuse or speak in any way. Just listen. Listen to your neighbors, too, who are majority culture. What are they saying that alerts you to unthinking racism? And listen to yourself – what presumptions do you hold or make without even realizing it?

But then, get ready to speak and to write. Not to those who are suffering racism, although expressions of solidarity may well be welcome. But be ready to speak and to write to those who are perpetuating racism. Do it lovingly – remember where we started? – but do it. Don't let racist words and actions go unchallenged. A good deal of the time you will find that those words were spoken or written without thought and without overt malice. You'll be helping someone else overcome their own blind spots, *if* you challenge with love. And write to those in authority

Fulfillment Today

who allow institutional racism to continue. Let them know that you stand with our sisters and brothers who are suffering. Remind them that you vote or buy their products. Be ready to stand up and be counted.

The problem of racism is deeply rooted and incredibly complex. I cannot possibly do much more than scratch the surface in twenty minutes. But it is important that we start. It is important that we do what we can do. It is in the little actions by ordinary people that great movements begin and swell and carry the day. That is, after all, how the Church began. And it is so important, as we celebrate our spiritual communion with God and with Christians of all races and places and times, that we make this effort, that we bring good news to the poor, that we proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, that we help to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Today this scripture has begun to be fulfilled in your hearing. Thanks be to God!