

“God and Racial Justice: How Were You ‘Raced’”

Esther 3:1-6; Luke 10:29-37

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, drawing on material from UMW on Racial Justice

OPENING PRAYER: Gracious God of love and of light, help us to hear a word from you today. Illuminate your word for us that we may see your glory. Speak your word to us that we may learn of your ways that lead to life. Create in us a new spirit, open to your truth that transforms us. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you this day. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

This morning’s message is on a topic that has seized our nation and our world. The topic is racism and the search for racial justice. We witnessed the impact of racism on our national life earlier this year with the killing of George Floyd, an African American man, by a White Minneapolis police officer. Floyd’s death was not a singular event—too many other African Americans have lost their lives during encounters with the police over the years. What was different this time was the outpouring of grief and the demand for justice in mass street protests—the vast majority of which were peaceful—following his murder.

Racism is not a new phenomenon in our national, or global, life. In fact, it has been part and parcel of the American story since the European discovery of the Americas in the 15th century, which led to the subsequent decimation and exploitation of native populations and later, the importation of African peoples who were enslaved by Whites. The impact of this system of race-based slavery is still with us 155 years after slavery was abolished by Civil War and the 13th Amendment to our Constitution.

Racism didn’t go away; it morphed into other forms of discrimination like:

- “Jim-Crow” laws in the south that, keeping African Americans as second-class citizens.
- “Redlining” practices in real estate, north and south, backed up by government policy. These created segregated neighborhoods where jobs were few, educational resources less than in White neighborhoods, and African Americans experienced higher poverty rates than other racial groups.¹
- After civil rights laws went into effect in the 1960s, new get tough on crime laws led to the mass incarceration of African Americans. Today, people of color account for 60% of those imprisoned but make up about 30% of the overall population of the country.²

Clearly, there is something wrong with this picture, and the biggest part of it is racism.

I’m not going to pretend this is an easy subject to discuss.

- It is uncomfortable to talk about because it reminds us of the pain caused by racism not just in the past, but in the present as well.
- It is uncomfortable, even for the church, because most denominations in the United States, including the Methodists, tolerated slavery and, at times, even promoted slavery as ordained by God.
- It is uncomfortable because it forces us to look inside ourselves and ask whether and how we are carrying negative attitudes toward people just because skin color is different from ours.

What I hope to offer here is a biblical perspective on racism that will provide not just information about the problem, but will start us on a journey of transformation toward becoming anti-racist. I believe this is important because:

- When dealing with racism, it is not enough to be race neutral or non-racist.
- We need to become anti-racist, ready to denounce racist language, attitudes, and actions when we hear or see them, and active in promoting equality for all people, no matter the color of their skin.

That’s not just the right thing to do, it is part of a biblical way to live. Remember:

- Jesus broke down the barriers we humans erect between ourselves.
- The Gospel knows no boundaries of race, gender, economic or social status. “There is no longer Greek or Jew, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female;” wrote the Apostle Paul, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

¹ John Creamer, “Inequalities Persist Despite Decline in Poverty For All Major Race and Hispanic Origin Groups,” *The United States Census Bureau*, September 15, 2020, article on internet, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/09/poverty-rates-for-blacks-and-hispanics-reached-historic-lows-in-2019.html>, accessed 11 November 2020. For 2019 the figures were: overall poverty rate, 10.5%; African Americans, 18.8%; Hispanics, 15.7%; Whites and Asians, 7.3%

² “White Privilege in the United States,” United Methodist Church, Book of Resolutions, 2016, Resolution #3376.

- And, “Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

Now, I cannot possibly speak to all the dimensions of racial justice in a single sermon. What I want to accomplish today is to look at the ways our attitudes on race are formed. To do that, I will draw on a Bible study prepared for the United Methodist Women that asks the question: “How Were You ‘Raced?’”³

If you were asked, “How were you raised?” you’d probably give an answer that describes your upbringing. Where were you raised? Who raised you? What was your family like? What kind of values did they instill in you? Did you learn to be responsible, polite, helpful, respectful, and a host of other positive values.

“How were you ‘raced?’” is a similar question, one that focuses on our attitudes about race. It recognizes we do not come by our attitudes on race by ourselves. Family, friends, schools, groups we belong to, the larger culture around us, all play a role in shaping our views on race. Our outlook on race and racism is formed from an early age.

I can remember growing up in the suburbs of New York in the 1960s and 70s. My town was somewhat diverse, but the vast majority of African Americans lived in another part of town—that was the legacy of race-based housing and real estate policies from the early 20th century. I did not know many people of color, but I heard things about them from friends and family. Not all of it was positive. In fact, most of it was the opposite of positive. It gave me some negative feelings about people of other races and ethnicities. It wasn’t until years later, and through experiences in college, the Army, government, and the church, that I could undo those negative attitudes.

Racism happens when we come to hold negative feelings, biases, and prejudices toward people of color. It “involves having the power to carry out systemic discriminatory practices through the institutions of our society.”⁴ Jim-Crow Laws and redlining, which I mentioned earlier, are examples of how Whites created advantages over other racial and ethnic groups.

As I said, racism is not new. We can find examples of it when we turn to the Bible to see how people who lived thousands of years ago were “raced” to hold negative views of people who were different from them. From our first scripture lesson, the Book of Esther, we find the Jewish people coming under threat from an official of the Persian Empire by the name of Haman. In the story:

- The King of Persia, Ahasuerus, appoints Haman to oversee all the other officials in the kingdom. Everyone in the kingdom was supposed to bow to Haman because he was an important man.
- Haman is called the Agagite. Hundreds of years before, King Agag of the Amalekites fought against the kingdom of Israel led by Saul. Saul was charged by God to utterly destroy the Amalekites, to kill every person and all their animals. When Saul won the battle, he killed all the people (except King Agag), and he kept the best of the cattle, sheep and goats. When Samuel discovered this, he told Saul God would end his rule over Israel, and then Samuel killed King Agag.
- Mordecai did not bow down to Haman. Mordecai was a member of the Jewish community living in Persia. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe as King Saul, who had failed to destroy the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15).
- Mordecai’s refusal to bow down made Haman determined to wipe out not just Mordecai, but all the Jewish people living in the kingdom. Today, we would call that genocide.

What we see in the story of Esther is a grudge match with ethnic conflict as its background. Here, Mordechai (a Jew) is pitted against Haman (a descendant of the Amalekites). We can see that they were “raced” to hate one another.

Racism is also a evident in one of the best-loved stories Jesus told, the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

- Jesus was asked by a young lawyer, who is my neighbor? He answered by telling a story about a man who was attacked by robbers and left for dead.
- A priest and a Levite, devout men, walk past the man and do not stop to help him.
- “But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity” (Luke 10:33).

³ “Tools for leaders: Resources for Racial Justice,” *United Methodist Women, Office of Racial Justice*, 2018.

⁴ “Resources,” 17.

- The Samaritan took care of his wounds and brought the man to an inn where he could recover.
- Jesus concludes the story by asking which man was a neighbor, to which the young lawyer replied, “the one who showed him mercy.”

How does racism show up in this story? At the time of Jesus, the people living in Samaria were not liked...at...all.

- The Jewish people despised them because the Samaritans descended from a people who were transplanted into Israel by the Babylonian Empire hundreds of years before.
- Those people mixed with the remaining Jewish population and practiced a variant of the Jewish faith.
- Samaritans had their own version of the Torah, the Law, but Mount Sinai was not at the center of that faith as it was for the Jews.
- Samaritans worshiped God at Mt. Gerizim, not Jerusalem.

Again, we can say that Jews and Samaritans were “raced” to hate one another. The shock value of the story comes from the fact that the Samaritan—the hated one—proved to be the good neighbor.

What can we learn about racism from these two stories?

- We can see clearly that racism is not new. In the story from Esther, Haman’s hatred of Mordecai was amplified when he learned Mordecai was a Jew. His hatred was rooted deep in the past history between his people and Mordecai’s. It also proved to be his undoing—in the end, Haman’s scheme to kill the Jewish people backfires and he himself is executed by the king he served.
- Likewise, racial hatred between Jews and Samaritans was based on their ethnic and religious differences. This is why the story was shocking for Jewish listeners—the hated Samaritan was the hero, not a Jew.
- In both cases, the characters in the stories held negative attitudes about others. They had been “raced” to dislike the other because of their racial differences.

The good news from these lessons is given by Jesus, who provided the answer to the question “who is my neighbor?” In the story of the Samaritan, we see there is more to the stranger, the other, than ethnic and racial stereotypes. Although we may be different, we are (all of us) capable of mercy toward another.

That mercy doesn’t come from nowhere;

- It comes from human beings who recognized their connectedness with other human beings;
- who understand we are all made in the image of God;
- who realize that in encountering the stranger, we are encountering Christ. Jesus reminded us we are all God’s children; “Just as you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it me” (Matthew 25:40)

We can take hope from this, but we cannot rest in it. It is clear that racism is a sin. To counter it, to become anti-racist, we must:

- Do the hard work of listening to the stories of those who have been oppressed.
- Examine ourselves to understand our attitudes about race, how we have been “raced” over the years.
- Repent of past negative attitudes toward people who are different from us.
- Oppose racist speech, behavior, and actions, wherever we encounter them.
- And, seek justice for those who suffered from the sin of racism.

God calls us to be one humanity, one people, united in love. Let us turn to God in prayer as we renew our commitment to be a people of Love toward all.

CLOSING PRAYER: Holy and everlasting God, you have called us into a relationship of mutual love with you and with your Creation. People...other people...different people...all people... are part of this network of mutual love. You call us to love our neighbor as ourselves; yet, we are more ready to see, and to believe, the differences between us rather than the common humanity among us. Forgive us, we pray. Help us to open our hearts and minds to your truth about difference...about race...so that we may turn and be healed from our biases, our prejudices, our negative attitudes toward others. Help us to see each other as you see us: not as people divided by the color of our skin, but united through your sacrificial love for every person. Help us to break down the barriers and biases we carry within us, that we may be transformed by your love. For you made us all in your image...you love all ...your Son, Jesus, died for all...and He rose again that all may have eternal life...together with you and the Holy Spirit. May we be one as you are One. Amen, and Amen.