

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Moving Onward Towards Perfection

Sermon: Revival and Growth/Expansion Overseas (1844-1859)

I Peter 2:13-25

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

18 Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. 19 For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. 20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. 21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

22

“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” 25 For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Sermon

I was reminded this week by a colleague that prophetic preachers approach sermon writing with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper, or in my case, the smartphone, in the other. I mean, otherwise, we are too tempted to preach feel-good messages in a vacuum, sermons that have no ability to prepare you think theologically about the world's problems, sermons that leave you ill equipped to see God in the midst of pain or to be encouraged by the deep truth that love does eventually conquer all. Sermons aren't meant to make us feel good about ourselves. They are supposed to fuel us up and fire us up and send us out into the world, ready to do the hard and painful work of kingdom building as children of God and followers of Christ. The truth is, we as children of God and followers of Christ should be seeking always in every situation to find God in our midst. We should be looking into both the light and the darkness and asking, where is God now? Who is God in light of this? To ask these questions is to think theologically. Sometimes in order to do this we have to dive into situations that have become deeply politicized. We must understand that though issues seem political, they are first at heart theological issues, no matter what our elected officials or governmental leaders would have us think. It is difficult to look through the eyes of faith first, especially when the rhetoric of politics screams at us to pay attention. So with Bible and newspaper in hand, I have wrestled with those theological questions myself this week. Where is God now? Who is God and who are we supposed to be in light of who God is? But first, a little confession: I'm a little bit racist. Hi, my name is Mike, and I'm a racist. That's hard to say. Now, I don't go off making racist jokes, or march in parades, or secretly despise other races or ethnicities. Matter of fact, I often try to do the opposite, and be kinder and nicer to those of other races, just to prove to myself and others that I'm not racist - although in doing that, I'm showing different actions based on race. No, my racism is based in preconceived judgements and stereotypes. Even before someone says a word, my mind has an idea of this

person's character or capabilities or intelligence, or whatever - good or bad. And this is something that I believe most of us carry. Or do. And racism is alive and well in 2019.

It has been woven into the fabric of our cultural identity since the very beginning, when the European settlers washed up on these beautiful shores to find people who looked different and spoke a different language, which sadly led the white people to assume the natives couldn't possibly be worth as much as them and their own families. Folk who left the old world because of oppression and lack of freedoms were happy to continue the practice. We have always wrestled with issues of equality and justice. People have stood for freedom and paid for it with their lives. Every advancement along the way for people whose skin was a different color has been incremental, up-hill and hard won. But those of us who by the accident of our birth have white skin have had the privilege of turning a blind eye to racism, because it doesn't impact our lives. It has been easy for us to pretend that we live in a nation where justice and equality are already realized for all people. The fact is that we absolutely do live in a culture permeated with racial bias, but we do NOT have to accept it. If God's kingdom is to come, and God's will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven, things need to change, and we must be agents of that change. For far too long we have been content simply to not be overtly racist. We don't tell racist jokes. We say we believe that everyone is equal in God's eyes. We even hold the door open to our neighbors of all skin colors and smile in a gesture of peace. But it's not enough. The only way we can overcome the loud voices of racism, white supremacy, and prejudice is to speak with the voices of peace, equality and justice even more loudly. Friends, it really is up to us. And NOT being racist is not the same as being ANTI-racism. Anytime we have stayed silent when a friend told a racist joke. Anytime we have failed to help someone whose skin color is darker than our own because we were afraid of what might happen. Anytime we have excused the racist comments or actions of people we know with statements like—well, they come from a different time and place, or it's just the way they were raised. Anytime we have taken advantage of our whiteness at the expense of someone's blackness, or brownness or whatever color we demean. Anytime we have failed to actively resist racism, we have contributed to racism, giving the face of racism in our country the right-of-way, and we, each of us, bears responsibility. The vows we take at baptism calls for us to resist injustice and evil in whatever forms they present themselves. One of those evils, one of those deep cultural injustices, is racism, and God demands that we oppose it, that we speak against it, that we fight until it has been overcome and eradicated once and for all. I hope we agree on this issue, because it's an important one. There is no room for racism in the church, and there is no room for it in our country. There is no way we can interpret scripture that justifies hate, especially hate based on the color of someone's skin. Were you surprised by the language of today's scripture? Slaves, submit to your masters. The good ones and the bad ones. If you suffer for doing good, it's commendable. For too many times, scriptures like this were used to justify slavery. Even today, where there's 30-70 million slaves still around. Even in Oregon, we have hundreds of folk in human trafficking, and hundreds of more workers under the threat of deportation, slavery is alive and well here. I'd like to think that Peter is more referring to our servanthood of Jesus Christ. We are bound to the shepherd and overseer of our souls.

Racism, we've done this before, as a church. John Wesley was totally against slavery, and the first stances of the Methodists in America was to oppose a human being owning another human being. Clergy were not supposed to own slaves. Period. But the laws of the land were becoming more confuddled. It got to be where you weren't supposed to free the slaves you had. Or you couldn't help slaves escape. Several General Conferences struggled with the issue, first pressing traveling elders to emancipate their slaves, then suspending those rules in states where the laws did not permit manumission. By 1808, General Conference threw up its hands, finding the subject unmanageable, and gave each Annual Conference the right to enact its own rules relative to slaveholding. The Congress couldn't do much better. In 1820, we had the Missouri Compromise, which let Missouri in as a slave state, and Maine got to come into the union as a free state - but also made the line between free and slave states. Ever wonder why Oklahoma has a panhandle? Texas wanted to be a slave state, but couldn't go above a certain line. They had to forfeit some property, thus giving Oklahoma free land.

The denomination remained divided on the subject of slavery, with some northern Methodists becoming more

convinced of slavery's evil and some southern Methodists more convinced that it was a positive good. They were caught, in effect, between church rules and state laws. The spark that caused the division came when Bishop Andrew, married a woman who had inherited slaves from her late husband. Many northern Methodists were appalled that a bishop. This was the main topic of debate at the next General Conference in 1844. Usually, General Conference's last about a week or so. This one lasted six weeks. Bishop Andrew was set to resign as bishop, but was asked to stay on by the church in Georgia. "I have neither bought nor sold a slave," he told the General Conference, "and in the state where I am legally a slaveholder, emancipation is impracticable." The effect of all of this was that the church was split. A plan of separation happened, whereby we had two Methodist Churches. The Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Guess which one favored slavery. I've been through towns that had the South version. In some of these towns, they had both. I used to drive through a town that had both, and they were on opposite sides of the street. Funny thing was, the South church was on the north part of the street, and the north church sat on the south side. We had South churches here in Oregon too. Albany, Corvallis, among others. The South church also helped a little college south of here, eventually called Oregon State University. It's first president and Board of Trustees were the Methodist Episcopal South folk. To their credit, they recently renamed several buildings that were named after proponents of slavery - which is more than what U of O has done. Oregon recently kept the name of a hall named for an advocate of slavery. In 1939, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church merged together, and formed the Methodist Church - trying to put old wounds behind them. The nation had moved on, slavery was wrong. Racism, though persistent, is also wrong.

But the question I've wrestled with is how to fight racism? How can I put my white privilege to use in speaking out, standing up, and changing things? An article published by United Methodist Communications a while ago was challenging and gave some tangible places to start.

The first is to acknowledge the part we have played in perpetuation a racist system. If we insist on saying, it's not me and I'm not at fault, then we cannot become a part of a radical movement to topple the giant of racism. The second is to pray. Changing our beliefs as well as our systems begins with prayer. It is the way we learn the heart of our creator and the way we sustain our own hearts in the battle. The third is to seek out new relationships. There is no substitute for sharing consistent, ongoing, authentic relationships with people of color. Developing those relationships may mean moving out of your comfort zone. In fact, it's probably the hardest of all the suggestions to put into practice. But it's vitally important. We will never understand racism or internalize how horrifically wrong it really is until we walk a mile with someone who lives under the shadow of this giant every day.

Most of us here have not experienced racial slurs, been the butt of someone's prejudiced jokes, or experienced discrimination at work or school or greater society because of the color of our skin. If we are going to change the world, then we have to live fully in it, and building relationships with people who don't look like us is a wonderful place to start. Beyond that, we can advocate through protests and letter writing. We can vote with our dollars by refusing to support corporations or businesses that discriminate or that make money for racist people in power. We can educate ourselves to better understand racist practices and systems. Above all, we must be willing to take big risks. Facing giants like racism can put our reputations, our financial security, even our lives at risk. But imagine how much worse we would be if our world war II heroes had never stood up to the Nazis or our Civil Rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had never stood up to southern bigotry and segregation. Change involves risk, and unless we are willing to risk, then we haven't truly committed to radical discipleship, or to making the world a better place for all people. Scripture is clear that the gospel is intended to be a message of hope to all people, gentile and Jew, man and woman, all people, all tribes, all over the world. Skin color, race, ethnicity... none of those are meant to be segregating qualities. Jesus came to offer healing, hope, and salvation to all people, not just some.

And while we're talking about Jesus, by the way, let me just remind all of us that Jesus was not a white guy. He was Middle Eastern. He had olive skin, dark hair, dark eyes. He did not speak English. He did not hail from a pure, European bloodline. For one to claim white supremacy is Biblically justified is pure madness, and very, very wrong. Racism is a sin, a blot on society and on our own hearts. Period. Seven decades ago, thousands of people died on the CORRECT side of history defending justice and equality and giving their lives to proclaim that fascism, Nazism, and white supremacy have no place in our world. People in my family. People in yours. Some of you in this room have fought against tyranny and oppression under a flag that is supposed to mean liberty, justice, equality, and opportunity for all people, regardless of skin color. The question is, are we willing to take a similar stand today? Evil is real. Hate is real. Racism is real. But so is hope, grace, and, above all else, love is real. We are the instruments of love in a broken world. Though the legacy of brokenness goes all the way back to Adam, so does the promise of peace and the assurance that love will, indeed, have the final say. And the family of God said, AMEN.