

Sermon

Righteous Father, the World does not Know You

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Righteous Father, the world does not know you....this has become vividly apparent through the events that have come upon our community over the last week. I say events referring to the shooting at the Tops on Jefferson Avenue in Buffalo and the graffiti someone left on a man's fence right here in Niagara Falls. I'm not going to repeat what was written but quickly the Home Depot stepped in and replaced his fence and now the words are sitting in a garbage dump where they belong.

"I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one."...In this expression, Jesus draws his high-priestly prayer to a close by returning to the theme of unity among his followers. He is praying not only for His disciples that are present with him then but for those to come. It leads me to this question today for the church as a whole – where did we go so wrong? Why has this division between black churches and white churches, and asian churches – why have we felt the need over the last centuries to worship separately?

This excerpt is taken from the Equal Injustice Initiative Website

The Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery often were justified by religious leaders who argued that slave owners were performing a noble Christian duty by converting and enslaving Africans, who were inferior to whites in the eyes of the

church. After the Civil War, white churches supported racial hierarchy and segregation, forcing Black people to form their own churches.

The first independent Black denomination was formed in 1787, when Richard Allen and Absalom Jones founded the first African Methodist Episcopal church in Philadelphia after white congregants yanked them from their knees while they prayed in a whites-only section of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church. Black churches became an indispensable cultural and political hub of the African American community.

In 1959, nearly a century after slavery was abolished, less than two dozen of the South's 100,000 white churches were known to have any Black members. In 1957, Dr. John Buchanan, a prominent pastor and Man of the Year in Birmingham, Alabama, defended racial division and told the Birmingham News, "[T]he good Lord set up the customs and practices of segregation." Just as they opposed integrated schools, many white people feared that recognizing African Americans as equals in the intimate context of church would usher in total social equality, which they found unacceptable.

Today, 86 percent of American churches lack any meaningful racial diversity. It is still true that, as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. observed, "the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning."

So how do we move away from that history? What steps can we take to ensure that 100 years from now, the idea of a black church or a white church no longer exists but simply a church for all who believe?

I don't stand before you today promising answers or even to make suggestions...I can only bring you the truth – the truth from the scriptures, from the teachings of Jesus who tells quite clearly we are to be one – one with Him, one with God and one with each other.

Our scripture in Revelation talks of a cleansing of sorts for believers- to move away from star gazing toward the heavens for what will be and brings us back to the everyday work of the faithful – Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates...”

A significant aspect of the text in Revelation is the relational orientation of the speakers. This call and response – Jesus announces his return and provides instructions. The Spirit and the Bride reply – then others join in as well...

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come”

And let everyone who hears say, “Come”

Let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let **everyone** come...not just the Jews, not just the gentiles, not just the high priests, not just the wealthy, not just anyone....the text says everyone. Everyone.

No qualifications or prerequisites – no limitations are posted regarding who is allowed to enjoy the drink of salvation. And I'm left to wonder why is this so important – why is unity the last message Jesus leaves us with before his ascension to the Father...why not a clean spirit? Why not being a faithful disciple

– like your parents would leave to go out for the evening, they would say – now be a good boy or be a good girl...but Jesus says, be one.

Our scripture from Acts depicts Paul having a vision or a dream – where he’s called to come to Macedonia and help them. He immediately, we are told, he went directly there because he felt God was calling him to do so. Have you ever had a vision where felt God calling to do something? Or have done something because in your heart you feel it is God’s will? I have many times. I’ll even look back and be able to see clearly in retrospect how God was leading me to do something or be somewhere. Some call it destiny, I call it God. Visions are surprising things. When we talk about God’s vision in church we typically mean strategic planning...we take careful steps – we pray, we attempt to discern the will of God, we write a plan, develop a budget and use our human logical mind to ensure the plan doesn’t appear too lofty or out of reach. Well, in biblical terms, visions are not quite like that and actually they are very common. Beginning with Adam and Eve and moving throughout the scriptures to our scripture in Revelation, God is demonstratively engaged with human affairs to catch our attention and transform us. Yet transformation is often difficult and painful, especially if that transformation leads us into territory we deem new or risky. We tend to prefer God to be predictable and controllable. Yet when we are able to accept that God has something to offer us through these visions, our lives, and I dare say the church, is undeniable changed. Jesus’ visit with Paul on the road to Damascus radically changed Paul’s direction and changed all our lives for centuries to come.

In our scripture today, Paul's attention has been set on Philippi. He puts in motion his ministerial plan for the city. Once Paul and his unknown companions reach Philippi, they remain in this city for some days, waiting for the Sabbath so they can discover the devout Jews in the city. This is how Paul introduces the gospel to people...However instead of meeting a man, Paul sits down and speaks to the women gathered there – yet again God's mission takes a different course. The first convert in Macedonia is not a man but is indeed a woman named Lydia....a dealer in purple cloth. A woman being cast in a role beyond that of property during this time is exceptional. There are a few in our New Testament journey – Tabitha who we met a couple of weeks ago as well. In this case, Lydia is not associated with a man – she is a businesswoman, financially independent and stands as Paul's first convert in Europe. For Lydia, God uses a foreigner, a stranger to Philippi, as the one who brings the good news while she is in her religious ritual that she is comfortable in. Now she's not at the temple – so she must be a bit of an outcast – nothing new here. Jesus used the outcasts constantly to help spread his message of love. Well here Lydia within this encounter with Paul is transformed – This prominent dealer in purple cloth who has been in full command of her life, is now a humble servant of God. This change is evident in Lydia's gracious hospitality when she urges Paul and his companions to come and stay at her home. And Paul later visits Lydia again after leaving prison so she let's an ex convict into her home.

Visions from God are surprising things – they transform us, they alter our course, they change the way we see things, they change the way we think about things. This “foreigner” , this gunman who walked into that Tops last Saturday

came into our community and shattered us to our core. My vision for our community and for our church is to heal together by listening to those most affected by these acts so that we can truly understand what it means to be black in America today. And then, break down these walls that we inherited and begin to truly grow as a faithful people. Where “African Methodist” and “Black Presbyterian” churches will be a thing finally of the past just like colored restrooms and segregated drinking fountains.

So what is your “vision” for this church and this community? Are you able to share it with others? If we did share our visions from God, we might find ourselves with open hearts that readily receive the gospel that forever changes us, even to the point of providing hospitality to those who were once strangers or prisoners.

Righteous Father, the world does not know you...but we do and we want to share our vision of unity and love with the world. Please show us how to break down the walls of hate so we can become the people Jesus envisioned us to be...let us wash our robes of past wrongs and let everyone who hears say, Come...let everyone who is thirsty come. And those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.

Amen