

Sermon

“In whom we live and move and have our being”

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

May 14, 2023

I dedicate these words to all victims of racial violence. May they be acceptable to you Lord and bring praise and glory to your name. Amen

Last year on this very date, I was preparing for a joyous, wonderful celebration of marriage. The wedding was scheduled for 4:00 pm at the Seneca Casino Hotel. I arrived a bit early to review the room set up and prepare for the movement of the ceremony with others involved as I usually do. With that done, I walked around the hotel a bit as I had never been there. I sat to relax and contemplate at the lounge in the lobby where there were multiple TVs. I couldn't hear it but I noticed there was a special news report of yet another mass shooting. I hate to say I was saddened but as they have become such a normal part of our lives, I didn't seek to understand the specifics...until I picked up my phone. I had multiple messages from my husband...are you ok? Where are you? Call me! So of course I did and he just wanted to be sure I was no where near that Tops where the tragedy of May 14, 2022 unfolded just moments prior to our conversation. My heart sank as I imagined there were texts going out to others saying those same words that, unlike mine, sadly would never be answered.

I had always been disgusted, frustrated and deeply grieved by any shooting prior but this one changed things for me...this one was in our city – this time, they disrupted our routines, our sense of safety- I would comfort myself by thinking our stricter gun laws might keep this kind of violence out of New York, but that monologue I told myself no longer was valid...probably never was. And a question pops up in my head then and does still today, though I think I have a better answer now than I did then...how did we get here? How did things get this

bad in our lifetime? I am dumbfounded when I think back to my childhood in the 70's when flower power and hippies donned peace signs and called for love and an end to war and segregation. How did we get so far off track?

I felt a deeper need to understand...to appreciate what it means to be black in America. What truths they live with everyday. I recall during a management meeting at ECMC on that Monday after the shooting, one of my colleagues acknowledged the shooting and of course this event had a profound effect on the organization since the victims were brought there for care and one of those murdered was the mother of another one of my colleagues – on this morning, during the meeting another colleague of color said – well, this is what it's like to be black in America. And I thought, Oh my word, you are so right.

I was born with a shield of armor – one I didn't earn, I just happen to be born white. And I have lived with that privilege ever since. I don't fear the police, I don't worry that I'll be followed by a security guard in a store, I assume if I apply for a job, I will be considered on my merit alone and never worry if the employer considers my skin color. I was never called names simply because of my skin color – I wasn't excluded and I wasn't profiled. Privilege. For most of my life, I took it for granted and honestly didn't even know or acknowledge that I had this privilege.

I am certain everyone here feels tremendous empathy and compassion for the families of those who were murdered in this tragedy and many many others like it. But that isn't enough anymore. We were denied critical information about actual events that occurred not so long ago here in our communities and in our country – atrocities against our citizens. And the church has played a part in perpetuating segregation and prejudice.

Slavery was an abomination against humanity- men, women and children were tortured and killed – beaten, starved, raped and used – for the sake of money,

to grow wealth in this country. Truth. Some might say – well I didn't cause slavery – of course you didn't – you did not cause it or condone it – most of us had nothing to do with it...but it is our problem. The long term effects still live with all of us today.

There is only one way to move away from this type of thinking and that is to really own the truth – most of which we don't even know because we were never taught in school or college.

I have been on a journey of self-discovery for about two years now. I was raised by two loving, generous, wonderful, caring and prejudice people. I had to acknowledge that I had unconscious bias and to move away from it, I had to understand and listen.

Our scripture from Paul is so clear but can be misinterpreted and has been used to perpetuate racism but if you listen carefully, it was a clear misinterpretation...

“From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him— though indeed he is not far from each one of us.”

Truth...from one ancestor. Doesn't that shine a heavy light on equality?

“Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”

Our second reading is from the book of John, chapter 14:15-21...listen.

John 14:15-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

5”If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. 18”I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

The “Spirit” of truth...what does that really mean? Truth is something that gives us insight, knowledge and wisdom...but the spirit is the intention of understanding. Not interpreting, not making it palatable for ourselves. I know that this is a difficult topic to discuss but it was very important to the WNY Presbytery that we bring you this collective message today. And it does not come without hope for a better future for ourselves, for our families, for our children and grandchildren and for our nation.

It is powerful to me that this date lands on Mother’s Day. Mother’s are critically important and they come in all shapes and sizes – sometimes they are family, sometimes not...sometimes they’re just really incredible nurturers – and isn’t that so needed today. So I’d like to lift up a prayer and while we generally

call God father – today, I want to think of God as our mother – ready to heal our wounds, cheer us on and smile as she watches us gently as we go to heal a broken world. This is a prayer you will find in the book, Be the Bridge by Rev. Latasha Morrison. The Presbytery is doing a weekly study of the book on Thursdays at Noon by Zoom. If you are not part of it, you should be! You can email Cheryl for info on how to join this Thursday. The book provides guidance on how to navigate through this tender topic and build a bridge to racial reconciliation.

Let us pray this prayer by Corregan Brown...

God our mother, we have been blind to the plight of our fellow image bearers. We have been deaf to their cries for justice and mercy. We have been mute when there was no one to speak for them. Lord God, unbind my mouth. Place your healing over our eyes that we might see and unblock our ears that we might hear. We lay our sins at your feet that you might cleanse us, heal us, and send us to do your holy work of reconciliation with our brothers and sisters. Amen