

“Prepare Him Room”
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Rev. Kevin Weikel / First Church, Simsbury CT (UCC)
Sunday, December 14, 2014

PRAYER

Please pray with me. “Now, O God, take my lips and speak through them;
Take our minds and think through them; Take our hearts and set them on fire with your love. Amen.”

SERMON

For the past few weeks, my Facebook Newsfeed and Twitter Stream have been filled with comments and articles covering every angle imaginable concerning the tragic deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and Eric Garner.

At our high school youth group meeting last week I asked our teens for their opinions on these deaths and the circumstances that surrounded them. Hands went up all over the room, and the group kept talking until I had to end the conversation because we ran out of time.

Early this week, I learned the topic came up at our 8:30am Bible Study Group last week as well. The issue was important enough to the group that they decided to discuss it in depth over the next two weeks, which started this morning. I am grateful they have decided to do so.

All of these factors led to me feeling a tug on my shoulder and a pull on my heart, even a responsibility to speak to the issue this week. I believe the topic is important, and it would be an easy one for us to ignore, especially here in Simsbury. But ignoring important issues is not The Gospel, and it's not our church.

Before I begin this morning, I would like to make two things clear.

- First, I am aware we are approaching Christmas, and the topic of race, by all accounts, is not a topic that makes us think of snicker doodles and eggnog. But here's the thing, on that first Christmas, Jesus was born into a world that was pretty messy. King Herod was so insecure he would go on to kill babies, for goodness sake. Therefore, talking about a topic such as racial division in our country and asking how we as seekers of Christ's love in our lives and in our world might respond, is quite appropriate this time of year.
- Second. This is something I want to make especially clear. I am in no way an expert on race relations. This fact in itself is why no less than 50 times I considered bagging this topic, the last time being about a minute before I came up here. Honestly, I do not feel very qualified to discuss this, and that is why I will not be going into the specifics around the deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner. I know there are some who wish I would, and I certainly have my opinions, as we all do. At the same time, I have been a part of quite a few discussions involving the specifics around these deaths, and it has been my experience that it is all too easy to get bogged down in details while missing the larger point. We have a race issue in this

country, these deaths have only highlighted that fact. It's that larger issue I would like to talk about this morning.

My plan for this morning is to simply to get us reflecting, to get us thinking, to get us being intentional about our stereotypes and judgments when it comes to matters of race. Most of all, I hope this is only the beginning of the conversation. I'll begin with a story of my own.

When I was a boy, I used to watch the television show "The Dukes of Hazard." Raise your hand if you've ever seen or heard of it? I loved that show; I mean I REALLY loved that show. It was the ultimate car chasing show, and I was exactly the age for it to suck me right in. The main characters, Bo and Luke Duke, spent each episode driving like crazy a bright orange and red 1969 Dodge Charger, with an engine that purred like a tiger. They would jump things like ponds and barns with that car, and somehow land on the other side and keep going. I remember like yesterday how the show was on at 8pm on Friday nights. If we weren't home, or at least in front of a television set somewhere by 8pm, this guy was having a temper tantrum.

But there was something about that show I didn't realize at the time, or even think about until much later. Every good guy on the show was white, and the real bad guys...not the only moderate bad guys like Boss Hogg and Roscoe P. Coltrane...but the real bad guys who came in from out of town and made guests appearances, were always black. Even more, that Dodge Charger was called the General Lee and a giant confederate flag was painted on the top of it. As a white kid growing up in Pennsylvania around people who mostly looked just like me, this wasn't offensive to me at all. It was simply a really cool car, and I didn't think twice about the name of the car or the flag. I didn't see the confederate flag as offensive; I simply saw it as a symbol of the south. Yes, we studied the Civil War in school, but all my teachers and most everyone in my class were white. There was no reason to talk about the ways in which the confederate flag continued to be a hurtful symbol for African Americans.

A few years after I moved to Simsbury, we had the pleasure of bringing a young man from the Simsbury ABC House along on a Mission Trip to Tennessee. While we were working on a family's home, this young man spotted a confederate flag hanging on the back porch of the house. From his disbelief and fear, I for the first time in my life saw how much weight that flag still carries.

It wasn't just this young man, either. Every time a young person of color goes on a mission trip with us down south and sees a confederate flag, there is this same reaction. It has now become quite sensitive for me. In fact, last summer, while walking on the boardwalk in Ocean City New Jersey, as I do with my family each and every year, I spotted a t-shirt in a t-shirt store. On this particular shirt was a confederate flag with the words, "Established 1861" printed on it. Thinking what it would feel like to see that shirt as an African American, I decided to take it upon myself to go in the store and talk to the manager. When I went by the next day, the shirt was gone. It was one of my prouder moments. More importantly, this story, this transformation for me, testifies to the power of relationships with those different from us.

Each year, as part of our Confirmation process, I show our 8th graders different images of Jesus. I show them an image of a Swedish looking Jesus with blow-dried hair and blue eyes, like the images that hanged on the walls of all the Sunday school rooms in which most of us grew up. I also show them images of Jesus as an African American man, or a Middle Eastern man, as most historians and archeologists say he probably was. Every year when I do this exercise there are a number of students who just can't wrap their minds around the idea that Jesus wasn't white. They can't believe it. And there is good reason for this...

In her essay, "Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race," Psychologist Erin Winkler speaks to the situation with our Confirmation students when she writes, "Consciously or unconsciously, middle-class white culture is presented as a norm or a standard in the United States in terms of appearance, beauty, language, cultural practices, food, and so on.

J.B. Tatum in her book, "Why do all the black kids sit together in the Cafeteria?" writes, "...the message is so prevalent in our society that it is like 'smog in the air.' Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, it is being breathed in. For every young child, this smog comes in the form of picture books, children's movies, television, and children's songs, which all include subtle messages that whiteness is preferable."

Before continuing here I must take one moment for an aside. Our Church School Director Cindy Cole is to be commended for purchasing dolls of different races for the nursery, Kathy Wildman, Johann Hogan, Salvador Sanchez and Mark Mercier have also done work to make our puppets for our Christmas Eve puppet pageant a wider variety of colors this year, and television shows like Dora the Explorer are expanding the opportunities for children to experience different shades of people.

But back to this smog that Psychologist Erin Winkler is talking about. Another name for it is the sometimes difficult for you and I hear "White Privilege." In her essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack," Peggy McIntosh lists 25 conditions she count on as a white person most of the time that her African American acquaintances cannot count on most of the time. I'll list just 5...

- 1) If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
- 2) I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
- 3) Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- 4) I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- 5) I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.

I once took a weeklong course in what is called Family Systems Theory. This theory says that our family backgrounds, not just our parents, but generations of relationships and events with our ancestors, continue to make us who we are today. For example, if I had an alcoholic grandparent or a great, great,

great grandfather that committed suicide, God forbid, generations later my family would still be reacting to those events in unconscious ways. When it comes to race, it works in a similar way. The message that whiteness is preferable has been part of our culture for so many generations, it is so deeply rooted in our society, so much so that each one of us is unconsciously affected by it, and if we are white each one of us benefits from it, in ways we don't always see.

Now, some will call this absurdity. Some will say everyone has the same opportunity. Yes, it is true, everyone is free to succeed in this country. What I'm getting at however is that we cannot pretend that that everyone starts at the same place on the ladder. If you are a person of color you start a out a rung or two lower on the ladder than you do if you are white. And, after watching those around you experience this, and after experiencing this yourself, it becomes much easier to lose hope for a person of color than it does for a person who is white. Those are just the facts.

Understandably, this is a hard concept for many of us and there is good reason for it. Many of us come from generations of hope realized. Hopelessness is not a theme in Simsbury, reaching our goals and achievements are the norm, not the exception here. It is a long and established pattern, there is proof. Here in this town we are able to tell our kids that they can succeed and be anything they want to be because it is what has been happening here, of course with some exceptions, for generations and generations. It is so much easier to give up in a black community because the pattern of making it, of being successful, is not as well established.

In our scripture lesson this morning, the Israelites have returned back to Zion, another name for Jerusalem, after being in exile in Babylon for generations. While they were in exile, they had heard wonderful things about Zion, but when they returned, it was not as they had expected. Zion was in ruins, "ashes," our scripture says. They were disappointed and distraught, crushed. There was little in which to be hopeful about. That's when the prophet Isaiah said this,

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
 because the Lord has anointed me;
 he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
 to bind up the brokenhearted,
 to proclaim liberty to the captives,
 and release to the prisoners;
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,

The promise of the prophet was that instead of ashes, those in Zion would one day be given garland. Through Isaiah, the Lord promised that the ancient ruins would be built up, that Zion would rise up. And when Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth he used these same words from Isaiah saying,

The Spirit of the Lord is on *me*,
 because he has anointed *me*
 to preach good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

You see, when we celebrate Jesus being born in that stable on that night, we celebrate a traditional of hopefulness. Through Isaiah, the Lord gave the Israelites hope. Through Jesus, God gave the people hope, and gave us hope, too. You see, at Christmas, we don't celebrate the birth of One who simply told us to be friendly, he didn't simply teach us a "hold the door for the person behind you" kind of love. No, he preached a radical kind of love; a love that turns all that is so strong it makes everything in the world that is not right, right. It is a love that brings people from no hope, to hope.

On this Love Sunday in Advent 2014, we gather to "Prepare Him Room," as the Christmas Carol "Joy to the World" goes. This Christmas, we can do this by looking in the closets of our lives and clearing out the clutter, by being honest about what needs to stay and what needs to go. We can "Prepare Him Room" by giving heartfelt examination to our prejudices. We can "Prepare Him Room" by asking God to grant us eyes to see others more clearly for who they are. We can "Prepare Him Room" by considering how many friends we have of color, studies show white people hang out with other white people 91% of the time, and making an effort to befriend people who don't look like us. And we can "Prepare Him Room" by asking those friends, with care, "What is it really like to be black in this country?" And when they tell us, we can listen.

And as a church we can "Prepare Him Room" by continuing this conversation. By asking how we might become more diverse, not for the purposes of adding to our membership, but for the purposes of growing spiritually. We can ask ourselves how we might share in ministry with congregations in Hartford, not to help them, but to be in relationship with them, which will help all of us.

If we do this. If we do this with a full heart. Then, we will experience God more fully. Because, after all, it is through loving relationships with God and one another, relationships that sometimes challenge us, where God really gets to work opening and transforming our hearts our lives.

At Christmas we celebrate that anything is possible. If God can be born in a lowly manger, surely God will help us break down the barriers of racism. May it be so. Amen.