



***Things I wish Jesus would have
said...about anti-racism***

Luke 10.25-37

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Message from January 14, 2018

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SPLAGXNIZOMAI!

I have really been looking forward to this worship series. If we are going to take the Bible seriously, we have to deal with all of it, even the parts we don't like, or places we find it lacking. So we are going to take a closer look. In some cases we might find that Jesus had more to say about an issue than we originally thought. Perhaps in actions that have gone unnoticed, or maybe in scriptures that have gone understudied or ignored. Or maybe what we want to find just isn't there.

Last week we began a new sermon series, kind of a takeoff on a series we had done last spring...., "Things I wish Jesus would never have said." This time around, we pastors flipped that sentence on its head and asked ourselves, What are some things that we wish Jesus would have said, or at least said more about. Pastor Greg kicked-off the series last week as he explored what Jesus had to say, or not, about the role of women in general and more specifically in the church. We were reminded that although the society of that day was entrenched in patriarchy and Jesus didn't say enough for many of us, there are many places where Jesus' actions clearly rubbed up against that society and sent a more egalitarian and affirming message. While we women who are clergy look forward to Annual Conference this July, where we will celebrate 60 years of ordination for women in the CoB, we are painfully aware that many churches will interview only men for the pastorate. I am grateful for this congregation and my supportive colleague who articulated accurately and fully affirmed the role of women. And we were reminded that men need to say "that's not right" when there is inequality. It's a both/and...women need to speak out, to tell their stories and men must speak out in support. And so it is, not only with sexism, but with all of the other -isms that divide us...including racism, which we are looking at more closely today. It's a both/and—those who are being discriminated against have important stories to tell and truth to speak—and we need to make space and we need to listen. And those of us with privilege and power need to speak out loud and clear and say "that's not right."

This morning and the next two weeks we want to try something different with these sermons. We think that these themes lend themselves to further dialog. Actually, we hope all of our services foster further dialog. But what we'd like to do is, after the sermon, open up the conversation with some questions for your feedback and reflection. It's a time to share what this theme is stirring in you. So stay tuned....

Several years ago, I was reading some anti-racism materials produced by the church. There I learned that merely because of who I am, because of the color of my skin, and because of where I live, I am a racist. At first, I bristled—I had hoped that I was somewhat enlightened and definitely open-minded. But racist? Surely not? But then, in my exploration, I discovered that I am a person of white privilege. To be white in America is to benefit from a system of power and privilege—whether or not one has ever uttered a racist thought or committed a racist act. By accepting power as a birthright, white people enjoy the benefits and rewards of what their racist forefathers and foremothers left them. I, like many of us, have a presumed greater social status; I have been granted freedom to move, buy, work, play, and speak...freely. I did not have to teach my children that, for their own safety, they should never enter a store with their hands in their pockets. And it's OK for them to wear their hoodies...with the hoods up...but not everyone.

It might be tempting for us to say, "I don't see color when I look at other people." But racial "colorblindness"—does just the opposite: folks who enjoy racial privilege are closing their eyes to the experiences of others, overlooking the uniqueness of the other and the richness that diversity brings: their history, culture, pain, the injustices of racism endured.

And so this morning I come with far more questions than I have answers. I am not an expert on racism and this feels like a very heavy responsibility. Racism is so deeply rooted and complex that it's difficult to know how to even to begin to address it in one short sermon. But it's important that we continue to make space to talk about it together.

I have been horrified at the evil that drives racism, saddened by the pain that it causes and have felt great remorse when I have added to that pain in any way. I do, however, come with a deep conviction that God loves every child, woman and man, regardless of ethnicity or skin color. And how we live into our belovedness, and how we value that belovedness in the other, matters momentously. And therein, lies our hope.

We don't find the word "racism" or "racist" in Strong's Concordance of the Bible. The word didn't exist as such. It doesn't mean that Jesus was silent on what we now know as racism, but he didn't explicitly use the word. And that creates ambiguity for us as we try to understand. There are a few scriptures that, when plucked out of their context or read literally, might lead us to believe that Jesus didn't, at best, speak against racism. In

Matthew 22.36, Jesus quotes the Hebrew tenet “Love your neighbor as yourself” as recorded in Leviticus. The word used for neighbor is *rey-acha* and actually means “fellow Jew.” Some scholars would argue that Jesus was telling his followers to be kind to their own kind—their fellow Jews. Most likely however it was not a mandate to treat others poorly, as much as they treat each other better. Perhaps this was an effort to mold an identity for the Jewish people.

At another place in scripture, Jesus used the institution of slavery in his teaching, drawing a contrast between those in bondage and those free. Found in the gospel of John (8.35), Jesus, it seems, didn’t repudiate slavery, rather used it to illustrate another point. Again it might have left people thinking that he didn’t denounce slavery.

The bible can be very confusing and even misleading. When studying, it is so important to take into consideration that it was written in several ancient languages, many of which don’t translate easily into English, it took place in a very different land, and it took place a long, long time ago. Society has evolved in many ways over the millennia and we live in a very different world. So rather than pulling a few random texts for proof-texting, that could potentially give us an inaccurate and even dangerously wrong understanding of what was intended, I’d like to look again at what might be a very familiar story and what new it offers us about anti-racism.

FROM LUKE 10

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and

bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

This scripture came to mind specifically for two reasons. First, unlike proof-texting, this story offers congruency in what we know of Jesus’ teachings and his living. And secondly, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often referred to this parable of the Good Samaritan. He claimed the parable allows us to examine the obligations owed to one another, regardless of race or any other factor that might divide us.

It has often been thought that Samaritans and Jews were all-but enemies. But there is scholarly evidence that the animosity was not as strong as it is sometimes assumed. Jews were suspicious of Samaritans as a people, similar yet different. Perhaps something like we experience in our communities even today.

In this story, the Samaritan serves as a role model. His first two actions are identical to the priest and the Levite. He “came” and is described as “seeing.” Where they passed by on the other side, however, the Samaritan was “moved with compassion.” The word in Greek—*splagxizomai* (splangkhi-nid’-zo my). It’s a strong word—to feel compassion, to yearn in one’s spleen, or in the bowels! The bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity. Quite literally, it’s a gut-level compassion. That compassion, that *splagxizomai*, distinguishes this passerby—he could have maintained his strict sense of tribal boundaries and continued to walk right past. Instead he chose to do something...the Samaritan is neighbor because he came close to the “other” and was compelled to act mercifully. Scholars agree that the English translation “to show mercy” is inadequate. The Samaritan did something, did mercy, which was based in that deeply seated compassion of *splagxizomai*.

We Brethren have a heritage of doing mercy. We have a heritage of anti-racism. In coming to America, Brethren did not (or were not supposed to) own slaves and generally were thought to deal fairly with the Native Americans. Early on, Annual Meeting affirmed that no difference should be made because of skin color. Over 100 years ago, Brethren were involved with work among Chinese and Japanese immigrants.

During the Civil Rights movement, expressed both officially and unofficially, Brethren supported black rights and opposition to discrimination, which we heard in the children's story. And as we have moved to more cosmopolitan settings, there has been emphasis to work with racial and ethnic minorities.

The 2007 Annual Conference Statement *Separate No More* is a tool that was developed to work at issues of racism. But 11 years later, after its adoption, it seems that many are discouraged.

On Earth Peace, the peacemaking agency of the Church of the Brethren has an Anti-Racism Transformation Team, available to resource congregations. Sadly more than half of the congregations in our denomination have rejected the work of OEP and last summer at Annual Conference, the agency came very close to being cut-off from the church, through a vote of the delegate body. We are still a very white denomination.

There used to be a widely used expression, *We've come a long way, Baby*. But not doubt, we've got a long way to go....

This has not been a good year for our country. We were reminded of that just this week. There were hateful racist slurs against the people of Haiti, on the very day they were commemorating the 8th anniversary of the earthquake that struck that island and took hundreds of thousands of lives. And also against the people of Africa. To have someone in such power flippantly making racist comments gives others in our society the "OK" to ramp it up. There has certainly been an increase of and more active role of Neo-Nazi and other white hate groups.

I was grateful this week that when I called, a friend and esteemed colleague and a person-of-color was willing to sit and talk with me about racism—openly and caringly—it felt like holy ground. The time spent and honest conversation are gifts for which I am deeply grateful. As we sat together in my office, my friend kept looking over my shoulder, at the poster on the wall and said, "you know, I'm drawn to that prayer. The prayer on the poster is a lot like us as followers of Jesus—as people of all colors, together. It indicates a movement, a journey and a sense of God's leading." And we prayed the words aloud—

Lead me from death to life, from falsehood to truth.

Lead me from despair to hope, from fear to trust.

Lead me from hate to love, from war to peace.

Let peace fill our heart, our world, our universe.

My friend explained there is danger on that journey when, out of fear and mistrust, we say to the other essentially: “my well-being is worth more than your dignity.” When we fear or suspect the other, then we hold so tightly to what we perceive as our safety and our security, we perpetuate racism—robbing the other of dignity. When instead we could say “your dignity is worth more than my safety. I’m willing to risk myself and my well-being to bring dignity to you.”

My friend then asked me, if I were given a piece of paper and a crayon, how would I draw myself on that journey? What does it mean to me to be on that journey? What does it look like to “do mercy”—to be moved with gut-wrenching compassion?” In my imagination, I found myself on that paper, with that crayon, coming alongside...with an arm around...in affirmation of the dignity and worth of my co-sojourner, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of race. That is my hope. So who is my neighbor?

Like the Samaritans and Jews, there are people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds among us right here in Elizabethtown. I wonder, if at times, we have we been more neighborly to our sisters and brothers in Nigeria and other places around the world than we have been to people of color in our very midst? Is it easier to be neighbors to people who are far away? When have we been silent, allowing our insecurities, our suspicions, our fears to prevent us from relating to our neighbors right here? God continually invites us into personal and collective transformation and we can no longer be silent. It is only as we see the other and hear their stories, that we can know their belovedness. It is through honest, open, intentional dialog that we can be moved by gut-wrenching compassion to make a difference.

Dr. King had a dream. And we can dream, too. About the day when we put aside our safety for the dignity of the other. What if we look for ways to dialog, openly, lovingly with a neighbor of a different color. Perhaps around Lenten Home Gathering tables. Or over a cup of coffee on a Sunday after church. Or maybe in your office, with a poster on the wall behind you. What if we make space for the other to tell their story, and we respond, “that’s not right.” And together we find a way to act with compassion.

And so...now is an opportunity for you all to share what is stirring in your spirit? When have you experienced *splagxnizomai* (*splangkhnid’-zo my*)? What if you were given a blank piece of paper and a crayon, how would you draw yourself on this journey with your neighbor?

¹Brethren Encyclopedia L-Z, p. 849-851