

Tom Coop
Acts 10:24-35
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I AM A RACIST ☹

I am a racist. And so are you. Yikes! Now, that is something I never thought I would say. But, as I did my research for this week's sermon, that is the cold hard truth.

This Sunday is "Race Relations Sunday." And the actual birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. which is celebrated tomorrow.

So it is only natural that I talk about race. But starting out by declaring myself (and also you) racist seems kind of harsh, right?

Now, I know that not all of us are white here this morning, but all of us are racists to one degree or another.

We all see each other as black, white, brown, and make judgments around that, sometimes explicitly and more often implicitly.

Does that bother you? It should.

The Rev. Denise Anderson, one of the newly elected co-moderators of our denomination, who also just happens to be a black Presbyterian pastor in Temple Hills, Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C., put it on the line a few months ago. She said the following:

Okay, white family (and I would add, maybe the rest of you). Let me talk to you right quick...

White people, you have heard it said that you must talk to other white people about racism, and you must. But don't talk to them about their racism. Talk to them about YOUR racism.

Talk to them about how you were socialized to view, talk to, and engage with people of color.

Talk to them about the ways you've acted on that socialization.

Talk to them about the lies you bought into.

Talk about the struggles you continue to have in shedding the scales from your eyes.

Don't make it "their" problem. Understand it as your own problem, because it is. To not do this would put you in danger of being yet another well-intentioned racist, convinced of their own goodness and living a life wholly unexamined and unaccountable to anyone.

We don't need any more of those. It's confession time.

The truth is, racism is so pervasive in our country, and so insidious that it slips in where we don't expect it, where we don't recognize it, where we don't want to believe it exists.

And like it or not, the responsibility to end it, lies with each one of us.

The responsibility for stopping inequality and injustice, lies with each one of us.

The responsibility for healing this nation, lies with each of us.

Now, I know what many of you are thinking and feeling.

Better, to take Rev. Anderson's advice, let me not imagine your thoughts and feelings, let me just tell you how I felt when I didn't see myself as racist.

"I'm not racist," I used to say, probably in my head more than out loud.

Although, I have to admit I occasionally talk out loud when I think, I am just in my head. Which has gotten me in trouble on more than one occasion.

I'm not racist ... am I?

I've never used the "n" word for another person. I've never lobbed insults at a person because of the color of their skin. I've never hurt a black person.

I wasn't a slave owner. I didn't participate in lynchings. I've never refused to hire someone who is black, because they were black.

I've never refused to pray with someone who is black. I've never changed my seat because it was located near someone who is black.

So ... I'm not racist ... am I?

But all those defensive thoughts really did, was reveal how completely I misunderstood racism.

I thought racism only meant terrible, violent, physical, or verbal attacks.

I thought it was limited to blatant “I hate” statements, unfair hiring or admission practices. I thought it was deliberate action or inaction based on the color of someone’s skin.

And while racism is definitely those things, it is not “only” those things.

Unfortunately, although we are certainly not nearly as *explicitly* racist as we were, say 50 years ago, during the Civil Rights era of Martin Luther King, Jr., we are just as implicitly racist as we have ever been.

Implicit racism is alive and well, for most of us are still unconsciously guided by perceptions and beliefs that do not view all people as equal.

Implicit racism is what happens when, despite our best intentions, and often without our awareness, racial stereotypes, and assumptions creep into our minds and affect our actions.

In other words, in today’s world:

The battle is no longer between people who say African Americans should have equal rights and those who don’t.

It’s between those who believe that we already have a colorblind society.

A society where, if you just listen to what police officers say and don’t behave like a thug, you’ll be fine.

And if you have a hard time believing that most of us are affected by a bias of which we’re not even aware, then perhaps you’ll be swayed by the thirty years of psychological research underpinning this claim.

In a study by the University of Chicago, thousands of résumés were mailed to employers with job openings and measured which ones were selected for callbacks for interviews.

But before sending them, they randomly used stereotypically African-American names (such as “Jamal”) on some and stereotypically white names (like “Brendan”) on others.

The same résumé was roughly 50 percent more likely to result in callback for an interview if it had a so called “white” name.

In another study, researchers sent actual people to apply for low-wage jobs. They were given identical résumés and similar interview training.

Their sobering finding was that African-American applicants with no criminal record were offered jobs at a rate as low as white applicants who had criminal records.

When whites and blacks were sent to bargain for a used car, blacks were offered initial prices roughly \$700 higher, and they received far smaller concessions.

Several studies found that sending emails with stereotypically black names in response to apartment-rental ads on Craigslist elicited fewer responses than sending ones with white names.

White state legislators were found to be less likely to respond to constituents with African-American names. And this was true of legislators in both political parties.

Even eBay auctions were not immune. When iPods were auctioned on eBay, researchers randomly varied the skin color on the hand holding the iPod.

A white hand holding the iPod received 21 percent more offers than a black hand.

In doing my research this week on the subject of racism, I also learned that for me, as a white person, I carry something known as *Internalized Racial Superiority*, or IRS.

I'm white, and that brings with it advantage (privilege), even at the most basic levels.

As I reflected on that, I remember being in Cameroon. And in most of the events I attended, I was the only white person present.

And I thought, that was all right, I had no problem with it at all. It didn't bother me that I was the only white person. I had no fear for my safety. (Ok, except when I was riding in a car – that was scary!)

That only convicted me of the fact that as a white person I can go anywhere, be accepted anywhere ... and I don't have to think twice about it.

That's not true of people of color, not at all.

But, shouldn't all children grow up feeling safe, feeling protected, feeling secure?

That police are here to help, and that their schools will help them excel, and that they won't be followed while shopping in a store, or be profiled learning to drive ... to be free from racism?

I have to share with you an experience Gertie told me about a couple of days ago.

She shared that her husband, Dave, who is black, was in an Apple store and saw that he was being followed by store security.

Dave turned to confront the man and at the same time showed him his badge ... that identified him as an Apple manager.

Do you think that would have happened if Dave was white???

I understand that when I write and speak, people are never amazed that someone who looks like me could be so articulate (okay, somewhat articulate!). They actually just listen and consider my words.

I understand that tragedies that impact my culture—such as Pearl Harbor and September 11th—are remembered with “never forget” solemnization.

While slavery and Jim Crow are suppressed with “it's time to move on” patronization.

I understand that white westerners get to know the history and traditions of other cultures as a fun experience in this world, but other

cultures get to know our history and traditions as a way to survive in this world.

I understand that all white kid's cartoons, toys, super heroes, and even their Jesus, look like them.

(As if her virgin conception wasn't bewildering enough, imagine Mary's surprise when she gave birth to a white baby)!

Yesterday at a training class DeLynn and I attended there was a point where they talked about to wolves – a white wolf (the good wolf) and a black wolf (the bad wolf) ... and that we have both inside of us. It is interesting that we always use white for good and black for bad. Think cowboys – the white hat and white horse for the hero and the black hat and black horse for the villain.

All that points to the same conclusion. Indeed, this world is easier for me.

And yet, Genesis 1:27 says ... *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.*

Folks, no matter what the skin color or facial features or hair texture or other genetic traits, every human being in every ethnic group, has an immortal soul in the image of God.

A mind with unique, God-like reasoning powers, a heart with capacities for moral judgments and spiritual affections.

And a potential for relationship with God that sets every person utterly apart from all the animals which God has made.

Every human being, whatever color, shape, age, gender, intelligence, health, or social class, is made in the image of God.

That should inform us, shouldn't it?

In the last couple of years, there have been a number of churches in our area that have put up "Black Lives Matter" banners on their buildings. Maybe, you've seen them.

At one of these churches, someone took a can of white spray paint and crossed out the word "Black." And replaced it with the word, "All."

Now, I ask that you please think about this for a moment. Because I'm guessing that you, like me, may feel a bit conflicted.

For it's true: "All" lives do matter. We are all children of God. And, as such, we are called to care for each person the same, to love all our neighbors as ourselves.

Thus, aside from the little problem of vandalism, what was so wrong with this act of editing?

Well, it's complicated. But, it's also a perfect example of implicit racism.

For, most likely, the person who marked up that sign was not a racial bigot. For, they could have written something far worse if they were.

But what that person did instead was to de-legitimatize this church's plea for racial justice.

By replacing “Black” with “All,” this individual dismissed the need for more focus on and concern for the black lives within our society.

And, in a country that is still struggling with and trying to rise above the legacy of slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, and both explicit and implicit racial bias, we do not have the luxury of pretending everyone is the same.

Because they’re not! Everyone is not yet equal, yes, they are in God’s eyes, but not the worlds.

As the one church’s hash tag put it: *#alllivesdontmatteryet*. And that is the very sad truth.

All Lives Don’t Matter Yet.

I talked to Joe on Thursday night at choir. I told him what I was going to preach on and that I hoped that we could all be color blind.

He reminded me, rightly, that in effect, that just sweeps things under the rug. We need to see color and pay attention to it.

Right now we can’t afford to be color blind. There is too much healing, too much reconciliation that needs to go on.

We need to right the ship so that explicit and implicit racism and bigotry don’t have a part to play in our society. And that has to begin with me.

So, where do we go from here? Well, as always, we listen for God’s call.

We listen, we answer, we repent (in other words, we turn from wherever we have strayed and come back to the love and justice that is God).

We speak up – we examine our own attitudes and prejudices.

And then we act: we share the good news, we spread the word, we create the Kingdom. Here. Now.

But there is one more thing that has to be said. Racism is not the only thing that is deeply embedded inside of us.

More powerful than explicit and even implicit racism is the Holy Spirit that lives in each of us. And that is the Good News!

More pervasive than any racial construct or idea, is the Spirit of God that lives in us and moves in us and works through us.

We are indeed created in God's image. We have God's DNA in our bones and blood and organs and mind and heart.

We are not left solely to our own devices.

And so, we are called to recognize our own racism, if you will, and root it out and replace it with God's love and grace.

For only as we are enlightened, can we hope to be the beacon for justice and righteousness that God expects of us. Only then can we begin to affect change.

May we all be able to look first inward, heal, and then stand up for what is right, live for what I right – so that the kingdom of God may be realized here on earth.

Today! Right now!

Amen...