

“Love Is Still the Answer”

I thought we were further along. I really did. I was alive during the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's. In my lifetime I've seen huge strides in equal rights for people of color and minorities. I've seen increased numbers of African-Americans holding high level cabinet positions in the Federal government, including Secretary of State. And, of course, President, Barack Obama. African-Americans have excelled in the world of sports, the arts and entertainment, and provided valuable leadership in all walks of life. I think one would be hard pressed to prove that our country hasn't made tremendous strides forward since those early days of the Civil Rights Movement. But I thought we were further along than this.

Most of us by now have probably watched on the news that excruciatingly painful video of a white police officer in Minneapolis with his leg across the neck of a black man named George Floyd. For almost 9 minutes he kneeled there while the man pleaded, “I can't breathe.” Mr. Floyd later died. I thought we were beyond this. But obviously, we're not.

This event has once again fanned the flames of racial tensions in our country. I want to talk about this today. I want to be as honest as I can be. I don't want to take sides politically. (Remember, God is not a Republican, nor a Democrat! He's an Independent, *very independent!*).

I don't know what it's like to be a black person. I haven't experienced what it is to live in this country as an African-American or a minority person. So I speak with some hesitation and much humility. You may not agree with everything I say, but I hope you will listen.

As you well know, this latest case of a white police officer killing a black man has spurred protests not only all over the United States, but even in some foreign nations. Protests have turned violent. We've all probably watched news clips of looting, burning stores and businesses and torching cars. Harassing and shooting police officers, and even murdering them. I thought we were beyond this, too. But obviously, we're not.

Now we all know, don't we, that violent protests are not the answer. Thank God we live in a country where we have the freedom to take to the streets and protest. To let our voices be heard. But violence? Yes, there's pent up anger and rage. But acts of violence just intensify the divide and the hostility between the races. Martin Luther King, Jr. was committed to *nonviolent* protest as a means of bringing about social change. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a *hero*. Those who smash windows and loot stores and burn down buildings and shoot cops are *hoods!* I saw a video of Terrence Floyd, a brother of George Floyd, pleading for people to stop the violence. He said, “My family is a peaceful family. My family is God-fearing...let's do this another way... let's do this another way.”

Most of the time I have been sympathetic towards law enforcement officers. A few bad eggs - bad cops - spoil it for the rest. The majority of cops are hard working men and women who care about their communities, and put themselves at risk in order to protect us. I believe that. *But maybe things are not as good as I thought.* There was an editorial recently in the Lancaster Newspaper, where a black pastor, Rev. Roland Forbes, a community leader in Lancaster, tells of the racial profiling and indignities he has experienced by police, especially outside of Lancaster

City. He relates how he was followed one night as he drove his daughter home from work and berated by a police officer. On another occasion he was quizzed by a police officer where he had gotten his newly purchased car. He said, "People can discount racism and say that 'you're just paranoid,' but unless you experience what people and I experience through life...you will never understand."

I have a relative who married a black man. Just recently I heard how different times when he has been driving he's been stopped by the police for no reason - and how frightening that can be. Maybe we're not as far along as I thought.

The reality is: racial prejudices run deep and are difficult to overcome. Some of the messages about black people I got growing up were just so hurtful, and wrong: they're not as good as us, don't trust them, best to avoid them. It's taken a lifetime to work through those early untruths that became ingrained in my thinking. It's hard to overcome some of our racial prejudices, isn't it? If only you could flip a switch and make them go away. But it doesn't work that way.

This tendency to pre-judge people of other races, to stereotype and lump everybody together of a particular nationality is a common human defect. There seems to be something in the heart of every human being to prejudge those different from us. White people can hate black people; black people can be biased against Hispanics; Iranians can think all Americans are rich pigs, etc. There seems to be something in the heart of every human to prejudge people and not give them a fair shake. Prejudices don't just run on a one-way street. This may not be politically correct to say, but isn't it true?

I was Senior Pastor of a church where a black man was appointed to serve as our Director of Christian Education. As a United Methodist, we do not hire our own pastors. They are appointed but our conference (by the bishop). We were an all white church in an all white neighborhood, so it was a surprise to us when he was appointed. But what a wonderful opportunity it was to break new ground for that church.

But we got off on the wrong foot. The man wasn't qualified. I interviewed him and discovered his only qualification for heading up our education ministry was that he had taught Sunday School. I called my District Superintendent, but I was told that the appointment was set and couldn't be changed.

It was a disaster. Not only was he unqualified to do Christian education, he was incompetent in his pastoral responsibilities. When I finally tried to make known what was happening, people took sides. It got ugly. And I was told that the word was out in our Annual Conference that I was a racist. In a congregational meeting to deal with the matter someone got up and said I should resign.

Well, he *was moved* to another church, but some were unhappy about that, and that whole episode pretty much spelled the end of my ministry in that congregation. He went to another church, and in his first year as that church's pastor he ran their nursery school into the ground,

and shortly afterwards was discontinued in the ministry by the conference. (My District Superintendent later said to me, “We owe you one!” I thought, “Yeah! You sure do!”)

I don't want to minimize the long history of institutional racism in our country. In no way do I intend to do that. But I do believe this tendency to prejudge people and see them through biased eyes lies close to every heart!

So, what, if anything, can root this evil out of the human spirit? ***Well, the first Christians, the early church, struggled with racism.*** At the time of Jesus and the first Christians, one of the biggest racial divides was the animosity between Jews and Gentiles. God-fearing Jews, devout Jews, would not associate with Gentiles (Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, etc.) – wouldn't eat with them, wouldn't have them in their homes. The Jewish religion actually created division in society. God's people – especially the leaders – used their faith to distance themselves from other races.

Sometimes religious people are the most prejudiced people! I will never forget Noah Dzobo. Noah was an African man, studying at Lancaster Theological Seminary. He was an intern at our church. I was probably in Jr. Hi School at the time. He worked with the youth. I learned that churches in his denomination had brought Noah to this country to study, but some churches in that very denomination did not allow him into their church because he was black! Sometimes the church, and those in the church, can be part of the problem.

First century Hebrew religion created racial discord; there were all kinds of rules to separate the races. ***Jesus came along and broke those rules.*** He associated with non-Jews. He loved them and befriended them. For instance, one day He had a long conversation by a well with a *Samaritan woman* (a 5 times divorced woman living with yet another man). Jews hated Samaritans. Jewish men would not talk with a woman in public. This didn't bother Jesus.

Those who followed Jesus, and paid attention to Him, saw in Him a love that healed the strife and divisions between people of different races and nationalities. John was one of the 12 disciples who followed Jesus. He later wrote these words: “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them...we love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister” (1 John 4:16, 19-21).

That's pretty clear, isn't it! If you don't love a brother or sister, you don't love God. If you really love God, you will love people. If you say you believe in Jesus, and it doesn't make you more loving and gracious towards people of other races and nationalities, you're following the wrong Jesus!

So these first followers of Jesus had a new model, a new vision, of how God wants us to treat people of other races and colors and nationalities. *But it was still a struggle to put away the old prejudices* Take Simon Peter for example, one of the 12 disciples. In Acts 10 there's this story

where he has this vision to go to the house of a Gentile named Cornelius. He's reluctant. The guy's a Gentile – "unclean". Eventually Peter goes, and when he gets to the house of Cornelius he begins to preach about Jesus to those Gentiles in the house. As he's preaching the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentile people gathered in Cornelius' home. This is the first time the Spirit is given to non-Jews! So, Peter sees the light! His prejudices begin to filter away.

But later he regresses into the old ways of doing things. He begins, again, to disassociate from Gentiles and he lets his old biases get the upper hand. The Apostle Paul calls him out on this. What Paul said is recorded in the Letter to the Galatians in the NT: "When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with Gentiles. But when they arrived, they began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray" (Galatians 2:11-13).

He had overcome the deep-seated biases of his upbringing, but slipped back again.

It's tough to let go of our prejudices against people, isn't it! But not impossible!

A beautiful and powerful thing began to happen in the first century church. As people caught something of the love of Christ in their own hearts, barriers began to come down, hostilities subsided. People came together. This new unity that marked the early church is described: "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28).

So, even though religion can sometimes get perverted and distance people from one another, and the church can fail miserably to reconcile people to each other, the love of Christ at work in His people can still heal the racial divide that tears people apart. Let's not forget, it was the church that fueled the Civil Rights Movement in our country. A clergyman, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led the movement, along with other pastors and church leaders.

We can all learn and grow and change in the way we see people of other races and nationalities and color. *And the answer is still found in the word "love". The love that Jesus showed.*

It is a love that judges people not on the basis of the color of their skin but on the content of their character" (to quote Martin Luther King, Jr.), a love that works hard to build bridges of understanding rather than forming hasty evaluations of people and groups that are far from reality, a love that takes time to build friendships with people who are different from us, only to discover that we're more alike than we imagined, sharing the same human joy and pain.

Over the years, with the Lord's help, I've been able to overcome some of the early prejudices that shaped my view of people. But I have to admit, I've got a ways to go. I'm still working on it. I hope you are too.

