

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, June 21, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Why are you afraid?

Last weekend, I attended the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference, United Church of Christ, along with two delegates from our church: Sonja Martens and Arch Williams. Barb Green and Alex Heetland also joined us on Friday morning for a lively Church Vitality workshop. More will be shared in coming weeks about what we experienced and what we learned.

I feel as though I need to add a warning: Some of you may find the content of this sermon to have political overtones!

What I want to share with you in today's message is about the primary focus of the Annual Meeting, which was the need for the church to consider a radically different way of dealing with the consequences in our world of the effects of racism, particularly upon people of color. Dr. Jennifer Harvey, author of the book, *Dear White Christians*, proclaimed that our country is, in fact, worse off in regards to racial equality today than we were in the 1960's and the 1970's. Her address triggered deep feelings within me and reignited memories of a powerful story in my life that I will share in a few minutes. Dr. Harvey suggested in her keynote that those of us who have been engaged in racial reconciliation work based in significant part on the work of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., have failed to bring about significant change. She proposes a need to transition to a reparations model rather than a racial reconciliation model. Her argument convinced me of the need to consider a radical change in my own approach and to explore ways in which this church and the wider church can bring about the needed changes – whether that change is reparations or some other model is yet to be discovered.

Even though I do not feel complete with my understanding of what radical changes are needed, the events on Wednesday evening at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Charleston, SC., where nine people were murdered for clearly racist motivations, caused me to believe that I could not preach this morning without addressing these deep concerns regarding the current status of racism in America.

Writers Allen G. Breed and Tamara Lush wrote an Associated Press article titled: "‘You are Welcome’: The night a SC church opened its door to evil." I commend this article to you since it contains the personal stories of those who were so senselessly murdered. The article was published online yesterday on startribune.com. The authors tell us that the persons who were murdered were, in fact, studying the Mark text that is our text for this morning. After quoting verse 40: "And he said unto them, why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?", the authors conclude with this interpretation of verse 40: "It is a verse rooted in the power of clinging to one's convictions in the face of adversity."

It is clear that in today's text fear was the prominent emotion for the disciples both during the storm and following the storm. They feared for their lives in the storm and seemed almost to rebuke Jesus for being able to sleep and for not caring that they might be perishing. After the storm, the text says that they were "filled with awe" which could also be interpreted that they were afraid of the power which Jesus displayed. They said, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4: 41) The disciples were possibly even more afraid that they were associated with such a powerful person – as we, today are associated with the same powerful person.

Our Job text for this morning tells us about the nature of God – maybe even a somewhat surprising aspect of the nature of God. God rebukes Job for questioning his motive by saying, "*Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?*" (Job 38: 2) God is further interpreted as putting Job in his place by saying, "*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*" (Job 38:4)

I believe great harm has been done in our world by people who come to understand themselves as knowing God's mind with certainty, even some who have sought to have their followers - such as in a cult - worship them rather than worship God. Jim Jones, former Disciples of Christ minister is an instance of this most familiar to me. Jim Jones founded the People's Temple in San Francisco and later moved to Guyana. His confusion resulted in such devotion that the end result was a mass suicide.

Biblical commentator, Michael L. Lindvall has this to say in an attempt to interpret our text for today: "*Fear. The visceral response of Jesus' terrified disciples in a frail storm-tossed boat resonates both in the individual lives of Christians and in their corporate life in congregations and civic communities. We are afraid of the "wind and waves" that assail our fragile vessels—our lives, our churches, our cities, and nations. We fear disapproval, rejection, failure, meaningless, illness, and of course, we fear death—our own death, the death of those we love, and the potential demise of the communities we cherish.*"¹ I also firmly believe that overcoming our fear of those who are different from us and our fear of losing our own white privilege and power, is core to the radical changes needed to overcome personal and institutional racism.

Here is my "stormy seas" story that has shaped much of my understanding of race in America.

During the summer of 1968 I was serving a summer internship as an Associate Minister for a church in the Northview Heights housing projects in Pittsburgh, PA., under the supervision of the church pastor, Rev. Leigh Jarvis. I had come to have deep respect for Rev. Jarvis, who was white, and his commitment to both live in the projects and to serve a church in an impoverished area with a nearly 100% black population. He was deeply

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Proper 3-16).

passionate about the work of racial reconciliation. He was a social activist who fought to address social injustice and economic disparities between whites and blacks.

I was a 21 year-old young adult soon to be entering my senior year of college. My primary responsibility for the Northview Heights church was to oversee the work of several African American high school students who managed and ran a “soda fountain” in the basement of the church. This church outreach program attempted to provide part-time employment and teach skills for operating a business for young residents who operated the “soda fountain” and also to provide a safe gathering place for youth in the neighborhood. I participated in and led other church activities during the week. I was unable to attend most Sunday worship services, because I also served year-round as Student Pastor for a small church, Chapel Hill Christian Church, in West Virginia. My primary responsibilities at Chapel Hill included leading worship and preaching on Sundays. The churches were about 50 miles apart, so I lived with Rev. Jarvis in Northview Heights and traveled to West Virginia on Sundays.

I remember Sunday June 16th, as a beautiful Sunday morning for my drive to West Virginia. I had no idea that my life would be significantly changed that day due to events that happened while I was away. When I returned there was chaos in the streets as a result of a significant disturbance that occurred between residents and the police during that quiet Sunday morning. It was later described by the newspaper and local television as a race riot. I soon learned that Rev. Leigh Jarvis had been charged with disorderly conduct for his role in the disturbance. Knowing Leigh, I trusted his account and I believed these charges to be false. Leigh had also gone to the police station and initiated a charge of police brutality. Again, because of my trust in Leigh, I believed these charges to be true.

Leigh’s account of the initiation of the riot came from several trusted residents who were eyewitnesses. They reported that three African American students were slowly crossing the street in front of a police car. They did not move quickly out of the way. Without justifying their behavior, I also believed then and believe now that their behavior was not overtly hostile and did not necessitate the police response that occurred. The police confronted the students. The students responded with angry verbal responses. The police immediately called for back-up.

At least 20 squad cars responded immediately. I believe that the nature of this over response certainly has roots in the racism of the police. Soon, more than a thousand residents were filling the streets concerned about the presence of so many police cars. Leigh would later describe the disturbance as a police-induced riot.

My primary responsibility on that Sunday evening was to answer the phone at Rev. Jarvis’s residence. Numerous angry, racially based calls were received. Callers screamed into the phone and would not listen to any of my attempts to calm their anger or to provide an alternative understanding of the day’s events. I cannot repeat the language that I heard. I was shocked by the one-sidedness of the calls. All of them sided with the police and against Leigh and other residents.

The story that I believed then, and believe now was true, was never reported by the press. All the written and spoken accounts by news media placed 100% of the blame on residents. Even though I do not deny that there was some blame for the residents, the police never accepted their part of the blame. They denied the charge of brutality and denied that excessive force was used to quell the riot. I understand more fully today, that racism was behind the actions of the police. Racism was also the reason for the media conspiracy to cover-up the police brutality.

The effect on my life was that I was “radicalized” that day. I lost trust in the accuracy and fairness of the press. I lost trust in the practices of the police. I also found that the trust I had established with the soda fountain employees was diminished. I was a white enemy not to be trusted simply because of the color of my skin. Over the remaining weeks of summer, I was able to rebuild some of that trust with the individuals with whom I maintained close relationships. I certainly found the residents more willing to hear my pleas for deeper understanding and compassion for all, than what I found from the people who called that Sunday evening and who continued to call in the days and weeks ahead. Leigh and I worked diligently to bring the community together and to prevent future violence.

I am not asking, today, that you agree with my interpretation of events that I experienced in 1968 or even that you agree with some of my stated beliefs about racism in America today. I do ask that we all open ourselves to learning more about our own inherent racism and about ways of overcoming racist beliefs. I do believe that overcoming our fear is the first step. The second step is trusting in God that God’s presence is with us through all the storms of our lives and our world. *“And he said unto them, why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?”*

I conclude with these words from theologian, Frederick Buechner:

“Go....Go for God's sake, and for your own sake, too, and for the world's sake. Climb into your little tub of a boat and keep going... Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and...in whatever way we can call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us, each one, our way. May he be with us especially when the winds go mad and the waves run wild, as they will for all of us before we're done, so that even in their midst we may find peace, find him.” (Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons).²

Amen.

² http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_june_21_2015