



WORSHIP AT HOME

*with UCC Westerly
during the Covid-19 outbreak*

June 28, 2020
Preaching on Racism Sunday

□ Create a small worship space in your home anywhere. Add a candle, a bible and perhaps a small summer bouquet!

□ If you are doing this on your own, settle into your worship space around 9:30am on Sunday and begin. Make your list of prayer concerns. Then sit in silence and let your mind calm down. When you reach the Prayer Time in the service, aloud or just in your own mind, ask God to bless each of the persons and situations on your list. End with the Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you.

- If you are joining in the prayers during the Facebook Live broadcast, before worship take a few minutes to send them to me via text, email or Facebook message. It is helpful for me to receive them at least 30 minutes before the service begins.
- A reminder I will be streaming our worship service on Facebook Live beginning at 9:45am. You can still access it even if you are not on Facebook by going to the church website, www.uccwesterly.org, and clicking on the Facebook icon on the homepage.

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Light your candle as a reminder of God's presence with you

Gathering Music – "He Leadeth Me"

[MUSIC: Franklin Ritter, ©2000 Lorenz Publishing Co. All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

CALL TO WORSHIP [adapted from *Touch Holiness*, Duck & Tirabassi, Editors, p. 94]

Behold our God who is Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit.

Behold our God who is miraculously one in three and three in one.

Behold our God who heals our brokenness and gathers up all our meanings.

OPENING SONG – *In the Midst of New Dimensions*

[WORDS & MUSIC: Julian Rush, ©1994, The Pilgrim Press. All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *In the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways,
Who will lead the pilgrim peoples wandering in their separate ways?*

*Refrain: God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar,
We your people, ours the journey now and ever,
now and ever, now and ever more.*

2. *Through the flood of starving people, warring factions and despair,
Who will lift the olive branches? Who will lift the flame of care?
Refrain*

3. *As we stand a world divided by our own self-seeking schemes,
Grant that we, your global village, might envision wider dreams.
Refrain*

UNISON PRAYER OF REFLECTION [adapted from *Touch Holiness*, Duck & Tirabassi, Eds., p. 102]
**Creator, Christ and Spirit One, we have lived as if we do not need you,
pretending too often that life is what we make of it. In those exceptional
moments of openness when we receive the gift of faith, we too often think it
was given for ourselves alone. Awaken us by your Spirit to fuller
dimensions of faith. Lead us to find in our neighbors the opportunities for
love, in the social order the possibilities for justice, and in the affairs of
nations the potential for peace. Reform our attitudes and behavior until in
every circumstance we may, by your grace, be the instruments of your
saving Word. Amen.**

SCRIPTURE READING
Morning Message

The Sin of Racism

Mark 7:24-30
Rev. Ruth

A TIME OF PRAYER

Pastoral Prayers

Silent Prayers

The Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

Acknowledgement of Gifts & Offerings*

*Doxology *"Praise God from who all blessings flow; Praise Christ all creatures here
below; Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter; One God, Triune, whom we adore. Amen."*

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CLOSING SONG *"The Battle Hymn of the Republic"*

[WORDS: Julia Ward Howe, MUSIC: Camp Meeting Tune. Public Domain. Reprinted under ONE
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1. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword,
His truth is marching on.*

Refrain: Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, Glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.

2. *I have seen him in the watchfires of a hundred circling camps,
They have builded him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;
His day is marching on.*

Refrain

3. *He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before the judgment seat;
O be swift my soul to answer him; be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.*

Refrain

ANNOUNCEMENTS

A PRAYER OF BENEDICTION – Holy One, like a rock, be under our feet. Like a roof, be over our heads. Like the horizon, be beyond us to encourage our stretching. Like water in a pitcher, be within us and in the pouring out of us. Like a pebble in the sea, may we find ourselves totally immersed in you. Amen.

PASSING OF THE PEACE

Music as the Service ends – *"The Trumpet of Faith"*

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## **SCRIPTURE READING**

**Morning Message**

*The Sin of Racism*

Mark 7:24-30

Rev. Ruth

We had hoped for a big crowd at our Clergy Association Press Conference on the steps of Westerly Town Hall at noon this past Wednesday. I'd sent out notifications to four newspapers, four television stations, the local radio station here in Westerly and the Communications Office of the Southern New England Conference, UCC. We had one reporter and one photographer, both from *The Westerly Sun*. Crickets from everybody else. We also had only seven of the nine participating clergy for this Sunday of Preaching on the Sin of Racism. Last minute issues waylaid two of my colleagues. But we proceeded, some of us robed in spite of the heat. We prayed. We revealed our unity in the joint reading of a beautiful poem, line by line. We prayed again. We handed out the list of participating churches to the lone reporter who had been dutifully taking notes. Then he spoke to a couple of my colleagues for a few minutes. Then it was over. We had been disregarded by the media and drowned out by the traffic but we all agreed it was still so very important to do – to take this public stand as clergy from a wide variety of Protestant traditions that racism is sin. And so it is.

Once we agreed on preaching on this topic, we considered whether or not we should also try to preach from the same scriptural reference point. This, we quickly realized, would not work. And, I am now so very glad we made that decision because in my preparations for this sermon I uncovered a rather curious reality. That reality is that the texts most commonly used as the basis for preaching on the Sin of Racism are not from the Gospels. Ecclesiastes and Psalms were preached at the funerals for George Floyd, the man whose death at the hands of white police officers in Minneapolis touched off this entire powder keg of days and weeks and months of reckoning for our country. Popular too are the Creation texts from Genesis extolling how we are all made in the image of God. Then, of course, there are quite a few texts in the Epistles of the New Testament about the Good News of Jesus Christ being equally accessible to everyone. But, curiously there was nothing from the Gospels, other than the usually references to healing and the universal salvation promised in John 3:16. This was odd to me because surely Jesus had something to say on this issue. The Gospels tell us that Jesus had what liberation theology calls a “preferential option for the poor.” This means that Jesus repeatedly railed against systemic injustices that kept poor people poor and powerless and rich people richer and more powerful. We know Jesus was all about teaching people how to develop a new and more personal relationship with God. Jesus preached unconditional love and acceptance. Well, at least most of the time. Then I discovered even Jesus could be mired in the systemic reality of the sin of racism.

Let’s talk about that more in a minute. What I want to pause and explain now is what it means when I say that racism is systemic and structural. This refers to the fact that racism is much more than just one person being prejudiced against another person purely on the basis of race. This personal racism is sinful because such treatment of one person by another based in a superficial reason devalues and dehumanizes someone who is beloved of God. But we need to realize that all these individual acts of racism happen because, over the centuries, they have created social structures and systems tainted by racial prejudices that are invisible to the naked eye, especially if those eyes reside in a white body. Systemic racism means the entire society – formal and informal, economic and social, religious and non-religious – the entire society contains within it the assumption that some folks are less than others simply because of the color of their skin. Oh no, that’s not true, we think! Look at the civil rights movement! Look at desegregation! Look at Dr. King’s holiday! Look at how many successful black people there are! We have made so much progress when it comes to race! It’s not embedded in our country! It can’t be. We’ve come so far ... haven’t we?

Well, the distance traveled since the days of slavery is considerable, but not nearly enough. It’s not enough because racism is embedded in the very way our society is structured. Consider the reality of the mass incarceration of black men in a largely private, for-profit prison system that has taken hold in this country over the last few decades. Critical to understanding this is a subtle nuance in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment which did away with slavery *except as punishment for a crime*. I could quote statistics here to prove the point, but better you discover it for yourself and it’s so easy to do. Just watch

the movie *Just Mercy*. Or read the book. Or watch the documentary *13<sup>th</sup>*. I had no idea. None of us did, and that was the whole point. Our public school education intentionally omits African American history from required coursework. That is systemic racism. So is the reality that schools with predominantly black enrollments are always chronically underfunded and under-staffed. So is the reality that impediments to voting for black neighborhoods is real, especially once the supervision provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were gutted by the Congress. “They aren’t needed anymore,” was the argument. Really? Then why have Kentucky and Georgia and South Carolina reduced the number of polling places to which black folks have access to? Why are mail-in ballots of black folks routinely misplaced? Why is registering to vote in these states so incredibly difficult if you happen to be black? These are real questions connected to real situations ongoing right now in our country, the supposed land of the free and the home of the brave. The ugly hand of racism is visible for those willing to see.

Much, much more could be said about the reality of racism in this country. Literally thousands and thousands of books have been written about it. One in particular changed the course of history – UNCLE TOM’S CABIN written by Harriet Beecher Stowe published in 1854. When Abraham Lincoln met her, he greeted her as “the little lady who gave us this awful war.” And that was true. I had to read this book at Harvard and I heartily recommend it. But, fair warning, it is not for the faint of heart. It’s descriptions of slavery are brutal, and unfortunately, all too accurate as historians have now proven. So too are the descriptions of slavery found in the book our Books group just read for our gathering this past Thursday – THE INVENTION OF WINGS by Sue Monk Kidd. Slavery is part and parcel of our brutal history in this country and it created the foundation on which the structural sin of racism was carefully built, brick by brick, until we have what we have in this moment finally seen. Or, as the vernacular puts it, we are now “woke.” We can’t unsee what we’ve seen. Innocent black people are being killed by malicious white people at a ridiculously high rate in this country. They are murdered and too often the murderers have gone free. The stain of racism has permeated the very structures of our society, leaving a mark we cannot rub away, just like Pilate could not wash Jesus’ blood from his hands no matter how hard he tried.

And so we are back to Jesus at last. So, what Gospel text did I find to talk with you about this morning as we explore this idea of racism as a sin that is so deeply embedded in us that we just haven’t been able to see it? I found this text from the Gospel of Mark. It just happens to be one of my favorite healing stories about Jesus. I’ve taught it and preached on it for years but until this week, I missed one of the key pieces of this story – the racial identity of this unnamed woman who comes to Jesus to ask him to heal her daughter. You remember this story! It’s one of the rare ones where Jesus says something really surprising, and very unkind. When this woman asks him for help, he says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Say what? Did Jesus just call this woman *a dog*? Yes, yes he did. And in reading all sorts of commentaries about this text these last few days, I have encountered all kinds of hermeneutical pretzels biblical scholars have turned themselves into trying to justify this comment. My favorite is that the Greek word used here is not

used to refer to a stray mut but rather a beloved house pet. Really? A dog is a dog. Jesus called this woman a dog. Why? Again the hermeneutical pretzels kick into overdrive. She was the foil to Jesus, provided by God, to enable Jesus to understand that he had come for all people not just the Jews. She was a Gentile after all. Yes, but she was also Syro-Phoenician and that meant she was of a different race. A visibly different race. A darker race. (See image of Syro-Phoenician woman on the last page)

Could it be, dear ones, that Jesus himself was tainted by the sin of racism? Could it be that he too grew up in a system where racism was so prevalent yet so thoroughly and completely hidden that he wasn't even aware it had contaminated his soul? Certainly, we know her Gentile reality would have been a problem, but Jesus had looked beyond Gentile origins before. In fact, in the verses immediately preceding this story Jesus is condemning the Pharisees for completely missing God's point by their strict adherence to archaic rules. Jesus had also healed the Gerasene demoniac whose demons he cast into a herd of pigs. Nothing too Jewish about that. So, could it be possible that Jesus really is exhibiting some racial prejudice here? As scholar Ched Myers observes in his blog post on <https://radicaldiscipleship.net> it is a distinct possibility. And there are two possible ways to think about this, according to Myers. One is to see it as revealing that Jesus is truly human, including some of our most egregious faults and short-comings bound up in our own entitlements. Another option is to ponder the possibility that Jesus intentionally exhibits bad behavior in his treatment of the woman in order to demonstrate to the Jewish male leadership that personhood was more important than ethnic and racial identity.

In either case, the hinge point for the story is how the woman reacted to being called a dog. She was not going to be deterred. She said, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She used Jesus' own rebuke to her against him as she reminded him she, dog though he might consider her, mattered too. She was at least entitled to crumbs of his help no matter what he thought of her personally. And Jesus agreed. "For saying that, you may go. The demon has left your daughter." So she left, went home, and indeed her daughter had been healed. Just as importantly, perhaps even more importantly, Jesus changed his mind which meant he changed his perceptions. She had reminded him that she was more than her race, more than how society had told him he should see her. This unnamed woman of a different culture, ethnic identity and perhaps even her race, taught Jesus a lesson he hadn't learned before. She taught him that even he could pre-judge people using what he thought he knew about them based on appearance alone. Even he could be caught in the trap of structural racism as sin. He also learned that he could change, and he did.

In closing, I'd like to invite you to consider seriously, deeply and prayerfully the reality of the sin of racism in all our lives – in my life and in yours. Dear ones, we have all been tainted by it. We have all been affected by it. We have all been steeped in it to the point where the stain runs deep. So deep we can't wash it away. We can't wish it away. To change as God would have us change, we must admit our sin and then do as Jesus did and be changed by seeing ourselves and that sin in a new way. We must invest

in making the change our society needs so desperately. We do this at the ballot box as well as in our everyday conversations with the people we encounter. Don't let racist comments go unchallenged. You don't have to be confrontational per se, but you do need to let people know you don't believe anyone should be denigrated because of their race. You also need to become educated by learning what you don't know you don't know about racism. I have personally been startled by all that I didn't know as I have been watching films and documentaries these last few weeks. It's jarring to admit such a dearth of knowledge but so very enriching to invest in learning this truth so long hidden.

Dear ones, the road ahead is long and challenging. The potholes are many and deep along this journey to overcome the sin of racism. But the journey must be made and there is no one else to do it but you and me. The good news is that now we know that when we wonder WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? – we have his answer! He changed, and so must we. Amen.

