

What About Racism?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 15, 2023 – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend

Text: Acts 10:30-48

This past Friday, January 13, a spectacular statue was unveiled in Boston honoring the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife Coretta Scott King right here in Boston. Called “The Embrace,” the 22’ high bronze statue located on Boston Common was created by sculptor Hank Willis Thomas. “ ‘The Embrace’ is situated in a new ‘1965 Freedom Plaza’ on Boston Common where the names of 69 local civil rights leaders, ranging from Melnea Cass to Jean McGuire, are emblazoned in stone.”¹ Not everyone is aware of the Kings’ deep connection to Boston, the city where they met as students and fell in love. They attended the 12th Baptist Church together as they pursued their studies in the area, Dr. King at Boston University and Mrs. King at the New England Conservatory. After marrying in Alabama, they returned to the Boston area to begin their life and work together, so it is no exaggeration to say that in many ways, the civil rights movement began right here Boston. Many will find that surprising, given the racial issues which still plague this area making the placement of this magnificent statue here all the more important. Thomas explains that the design was “inspired by the phrase ‘Love 360,’ the nickname that Yolanda Renee King gave to her grandfather’s work”² The intent is to convey that everyone is capable of and worthy of being enveloped in love. Love, in a very real way then, makes all the difference.

¹ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/01/13/metro/city-where-kings-met-embrace-memorializes-their-love-struggle/>

² Ibid.

This beautiful, inspiring statue that I can't wait to see in person can only do so much, though, when it comes to the persistent and ugly truth of racism. Phillippe Copeland explores some of the reasons for this painful reality in an article entitled "The Art of the Denial" which appeared in the *Boston Globe* on January 3, just a few weeks ago. He observes that various public personas, like Elon Musk, and certain political leaders who are campaigning against what they refer to as "woke culture," are actually engaged in what he calls "racism denial."³ Racism denial, he writes, is both a "political strategy" and a "coping mechanism" since "living in a society that preaches equality, freedom, and democracy but often practices the opposite, generates psychic distress, triggering denial."⁴ Dr. Copeland goes on to identify several forms which racism denial takes. These include:

Refuting denies that racism is a problem, claiming that it is not a relevant factor in certain situations (*I don't see race*);

Minimizing tries to make racism to be less of a problem than it truly is (*Racism isn't as bad as it used to be*);

Myopia is an unwillingness to perceive racism accurately (*You're overreacting*);

Replacing shifts the focus from racism to something else (*why does everything have to be about race?*);

Excusing avoids accountability through various means including portraying racist comments as intended as humor (*It's just a joke.*);

Revising history misrepresents the past such as when someone denies a historical example such as slavery to be a product of

³ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/01/03/opinion/art-denial/>

⁴ Ibid.

the past no longer relevant today (*That's just how they were raised. They can't help it.*);

Distorting turns reality inside out to claim that White people are the real victims (*You just hate White people.*).⁵

Dr. Copeland ends his article with a call to confront racism, insisting it's both possible and necessary to do so. He's right, of course. But, what he leaves unsaid, although I am sure he knows it, is just how very painful and difficult this is already and will continue to be. Just look at all the frantic efforts to keep Critical Race Theory, a sociological and historical concept, out of public schools where it has never been taught. Racism is all too real and it is slowly poisoning us all. This is why we must find the strength and courage to confront it with everything we have.

Dear ones, this has been our challenge since Dr. King and Coretta Scott King first stepped up and stepped out to confront racism through marches, boycotts, sermons, and prayer vigils. White churches and synagogues in the North were their active allies in the North and we need to once again become a part of the fight which has become much more subtle and nuanced even as it has turned more violent. This is why the commitment of churches to confront the issue of racism is even more important these days as White supremacism and anti-Semitism increase in this country ever passing day. Painful as it is for us to admit, there are churches claiming the name Christian who also claim God prefers White people. If you saw the response to my Advent piece appearing in *The Westerly Sun* on this topic you know that a local person took me to task for pointing out that creches which portray Jesus and Mary as White are historically inaccurate. How did I know Jesus wasn't White, the person railed! Yes, dear ones, racism is alive and well in Westerly-Pawcatuck.

⁵ Ibid.

So how do these White churches feel justified in taking this viewpoint, that Blacks and other people of color are inferior? They point to stories in the Old Testament like Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain kills Abel when God seems to prefer Abel's sacrifice to God over his own. God discovers Cain's treachery and banishes him, giving him a mark of some sort to distinguish him from others. Some in these churches argue that this "mark of Cain" is any skin color that is not white, meaning any such non-white person is literally born deficient in God's eyes. And, of course, there are other examples of biblical stories used over the centuries to justify all kinds of unjust, and ungodly behavior such as all the texts justifying slavery in this country as ordained by God. These are the texts the Confederates used as they fought to retain the right to keep Blacks enslaved. This same logic is still reflected in statements made by some politicians in the Deep South. You've heard about these people. They're the ones who claim slavery "wasn't that bad" or that enslaved Blacks should be grateful to have been brought here in the first place. Still happening folks, although I wish with all my heart it was not.

Interesting to note is that racism, per se, is not directly referenced in the Bible. In fact, scientists and scholars have recognized for decades that race is not a biological reality but rather what they call a "social construct." In other words, it's a means by which people categorize themselves and other people using a crude methodology that only focuses on skin color. What these differences are really based in, they argue, are things like genetic diversity, genomes and geography. ⁶ So, if race is a social construct developed by humans over time, it's not really surprising that the idea of racism is not overtly represented in the Bible. We do see references to certain peoples, like Samaritans in the gospels for example, who are viewed as

⁶<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/race-is-a-social-construct-scientists-argue/>

a whole category of less desirable people. But, what made Samaritans less desirable was not the color of their skin. It was their choice of where they chose to worship God. Samaritans are a Semitic people – with Jewish roots – who came to be despised by more mainstream Jewish folks because they felt it was okay to worship in alternative places to Jerusalem – like Bethel and Shiloh. The color of their skin had nothing to do with why they were seen as less desirable. The Romans were disliked and distrusted as well, but not because they were White. They were disliked because they were mean, brutal, ruthless and relentlessly greedy. Again, race as we understand it, had nothing to do with those feelings.

There is one story I came across, however, which did come at the issue of racism, albeit from a slightly different angle than skin color. This is the story of Cornelius and Peter which we read today. This is a fairly long story and we only read a brief section of it, but it is worthy of our careful consideration. Cornelius was a Roman Centurion who lived with his family in Cesarea. Cornelius is described as a devout man who, along with all his family, loved God and tried to live his life accordingly. But, Cornelius was not Jewish. At this time, after Jesus' departure, the disciples were really struggling with the entire notion of whether or not one had to be Jewish to be a follower of Jesus – the people who were becoming known as Christian. Paul was always of the mind that Jesus would welcome anybody – Jewish or Gentile – and that's how he conducted his many ministries around the Mediterranean. Peter, however, was much more traditional and had been convinced that no, one had to be Jewish to follow Jesus. This is where Cornelius comes into the picture in a very interesting way.

Cornelius has a dream in which an angel comes to tell him about Peter and that he should invite Peter to come and visit with him and his family. Meanwhile, in Joppa where Peter was staying at the time,

Peter had a vision about eating clean and unclean food – a key part of Jewish faith practice. The message of the vision – which he had three times in rapid succession – was that nothing and no one was unclean to God. At about this time, the people Cornelius had sent to find Peter arrive in Joppa and invite him to visit Cornelius. He readily agreed. When he arrived, they shared the stories of their visions with each other and decided God had been trying to tell both of them something very important – that God saw no differences between them. Peter stayed for a visit of several days while he told Cornelius all about Jesus. The visit ended with Cornelius and his entire family being baptized by Peter, a huge step away from the social and religious boundaries Peter had imposed on himself previously. This incident marked a major turning point for what would eventually become the Christian faith as its own religious tradition rather than just being a sect within Judaism. And it all came down to the simple reality that Peter had just figured out. “I truly understand that God shows no partiality,” he said when he first met Cornelius.

I truly understand that God shows no partiality. That, dear ones, is what it means to confront racism. To understand, to embrace as fully as humanly possible, that God shows no partiality when it comes to those surface things that make us seem different from each other. God does not care about skin color or social class. God does not care about how well educated someone is. God does not care who is rich and who is poor. What God does care about is how we live our lives as people of faith. What God does care about is that injustice in all its many forms be confronted as a part of our living as Christians. Jesus, in his great wisdom, distills this down for us to its simplest form in what we know as his Great Commandment or the Golden Rule. He says we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have AND we are to love the other as much as we love ourselves. That’s it.

That's all. Love God. Love the other. No qualifiers, racial or otherwise. Just love.

But, we all know that as easy as that sounds, real life is never ever that simple. Racism is alive and well in our lives and often we don't even recognize it. We don't see it. Why? For the most obvious reason possible – we're White. No matter what we may think, what we may want to believe, as White people we can never fully understand what it is to be Black or Brown in this country because we do not share that lived experience. We do not know what its like to be followed through a store because a clerk thinks we might shoplift something. We do not know what it's like to be driving a nice car and be stopped just because the police officer was curious how someone like me could afford a car like that. And, dear ones, don't think that doesn't happen around here because it does. I have several Black colleagues who have had that very experience right here in the recent past. Racism is painfully real, and on this weekend, as we celebrate the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, we must have the courage to confront it. The first step in doing that is admitting to ourselves that it is real, that it does exist and that this reality impacts all our lives negatively. Peter learned in a vision that God shows no partiality to anyone based on something as mundane as the color of their skin. We don't need such visions because, we already know that God's love for everyone is exactly the same. We are all equally beloved of God. It's just that simple. Our task now is to learn to practice this kind of love we receive from God, a love unfettered and unbound from the prejudice arising from the color of another person's skin.

Love 360 is how Martin and Coretta King's granddaughter described their life and work. How wonderful would it be if we could all agree to be enfolded in "The Embrace" of their vision of love for the future? What would it take for this to happen? How could we as a

congregation become more involved in learning about racism and its impact on our lives? What might be one thing we could do? I'm ready to have that conversation! If you have ideas, let me know! This, dear ones, is our task from God's own self. Who's with me??? Amen.