

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

June 7, 2020
Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28:16-20
Genesis 1:1-2:4a
Psalm 8
2 Cor. 13:11-13

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Let me start by saying I feel entirely ill-equipped to preach this morning. I know you are listening, possibly looking for direction, trying to make sense of the unfolding grief and anger over racism and violence that is demanding to be heard. Maybe you don't know what to do or what to say. Maybe you are struggling to understand the pain that others are feeling.

So, let us come together this morning with a listening ear and open heart as we seek God's call in our lives. To prepare our hearts, I want to offer this litany to help guide us.

**A Litany for Racial Justice based on Micah 6:8
by Katya Ouchakof**

God has told you what is good.
What does God require of the faithful?
The prophet says, "Do Justice."
The crowds shout, "No Justice, No Peace!"
The prophet says, "Love Kindness."
The people cry, "Hands up, don't shoot!"
The people lament, "I can't breathe!"
The prophet says, "Walk humbly with your God."
The faithful have no choice. They walk. And they pray.
And they stand between the innocent and the would-be perpetrators.
God has told you that justice is good.
God has told you that kindness is good.
God has asked you to walk humbly.
And so.
You must walk.

Will you walk with me this morning? I know it isn't easy. There will certainly be hot button issues for some of you and deeply painful issues for others. But, we must walk with one another, humbly seeking God's guidance in the midst of these troubled times.

I thought the best way to enter this walk together is to simply share some stories with you. Stories from my own experience as a white person growing up in the south, coming to understand the dynamics of racism that were all around me. These stories are hard for me to share because they expose some very difficult truths. But they are necessary to hear as we all begin to shine a light on the path toward change.

Growing up in the south I heard two dominate narratives...you were either rich or poor. You were either black or white. Within those narratives there were typically three combinations...The rich white folks, the poor white folks and the poor black folks. The town my father's family came from was a small cotton mill town in South Carolina. And, back in the 40's, 50's and 60's those combinations were broken down even farther. There were the mill owners, the mill workers, and the cotton field laborers.

My grandfather worked as a mill mechanic. My grandmother worked on the lines of the mill spinning cotton onto spools. My father, when he was young, worked in the fields. I heard how his hands would bleed from the sharp edges of the cotton boll, sun beating down, back aching from hours hunched over filling buckets with cotton. If you worked in the fields you were most certainly poor. Poor white or poor black. And, you worked alongside each other on those grueling hot summer days.

But as I listened to these stories as a child, I began to notice something. It was important for white people to make it known that they lived on the "right" side of the tracks. No matter that they were both poor, white and black, it was critical to be able to point to someone who had less than you did. Because, someone else's lack of mobility was your ticket to a higher rung on the social ladder. Do you understand the dynamic?

It was for me the first lesson of racial discrimination that I would hear as a child. As in, we may be poor but we aren't that poor. It seemed to be a consistent narrative...to feel as though you were better than or had more than, you had to push someone else down to help yourself get ahead. So people did whatever it took to make their life better even if that meant convincing themselves that someone with darker skin deserved less. Is this making sense?

Ok...let's keep walking.

In the 1980's, when I was in middle and high school, I remember learning that certain business owners whom I knew wouldn't hire a black person because they were convinced that if they did, no one would shop in their store. I remember hearing from those folks that most shop lifters were black and you had to be suspicious of them and watch them carefully when they came in.

I remember that you were never to date a black person because you would be immediately austrocized in town. People would talk about you in whispers yet at the same time wanted you to hear their snide remarks about how you were white trash for dating outside of your race.

I remember there were no black kids in some of the schools in the county. I was told it wasn't safe for them to go to certain areas because they might get beaten up.

In the early 2000's (really not all that long ago) I was visiting friends in North Carolina and I started hearing racial slurs from people who were pillars of their community. These were people I respected (or thought I did). I was so upset that I started to write down what I was

hearing and over the course of a weekend I had filled two legal pad pages full of racist or derogatory comments. I needed to see it all written down to take in the depth of what was happening. Did those whom I cared for really believe what they were saying? Did they understand how harmful it was? Did they know it was wrong? My heart ached. I didn't know how to address it at the time. But I knew over the many years of watching and hearing and witnessing both subtle and not-so-subtle prejudice that I couldn't just turn the other way.

I know we often hear in our white communities things like, racism doesn't exist anymore. Or, we all have the same opportunities, it's America after all. Or, why can't we all just get along and move on. Or, I don't see color.

I am sure that most of us want to believe that we have come farther as a society. That we have done a lot of good work to overcome racism. And we have. There are so many wonderful people working to make a difference. I know so many of you have worked tirelessly to raise awareness and to love your neighbor and to listen to the injustice that others are facing. I am so thankful for your commitment to working toward justice because we need you.

But, the simple fact is that racism has never gone away. It seeps in to our lives even when we ourselves have worked hard to make the world a better place.

Now, (this gets trickier but it's necessary to address) let me ask you this...when someone brings up those hot button words like discrimination, prejudice, white privilege, oppression...do you start to feel guilty? Do you start to get defensive? Do you start to say things like...I didn't cause the problem, stop pointing fingers at me? I get it. None of us wants to feel bad especially when we try hard to do the right thing.

Please listen, because this is so important to say (and I think many people get hung up here)...acknowledging the reality of oppression experienced by our black and brown brothers and sisters does not harm those of us who are white. Listening to and understanding someone else's pain is not meant to cause deeper divisions. Instead, learning about someone else's experience provides an opportunity for us to seek ways to help heal the brokenness and the pain of racism. It allows us to see a different reality from our own and it allows us to say, I didn't know that is what you have experienced. How can I help?

Folks, we need to walk together, humbly seeking God's guidance. Maybe our first step is to have an honest look at the times we have witnessed discrimination against someone because of their skin color. The second step (and this is much harder) is to acknowledge when we have participated in an act of prejudice, either knowingly or unknowingly. And, we can take note of the times we have stayed silent in the face of racism so that we commit to learning how we can change that pattern. We can commit to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

Racism does not have to be a reality. Violence and hatred do not have to win. God told us what is good. We, the faithful, have no choice but to walk and to pray and to love. Let it be so. Amen.

