

June 7, 2020

*"What's to Prevent Me?"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Acts 8:26-38

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Last Sunday morning, when John and I were leaving for church and driving out of our neighborhood onto Sandwich Road, we noticed that somebody had put out a sign saying "Black Lives Matter." I'm sure all of us have seen that sign recently. "Black Lives Matter." Now I think it goes without saying that any right-thinking person, anyone with even an ounce of understanding, when they read that sign, would think, "Of course, black lives matter." We both thought that. But my husband, being the far more caustic one in the family, immediately said, "I'll bet you that sign will be gone in twenty-four hours." And sure enough, it was!

Now not to take away from the good intentions of the person who put out the sign, nor to diminish the message of what that sign was conveying, but the fact is, that sign was placed there to politicize a horribly tragic event. The death of George Floyd. And someone felt it important enough to put up the sign, perhaps to motivate white people to become more aware or to assign some collective white guilt for what happened, yet someone else, probably of a different political persuasion, felt it offensive enough to take down. Perhaps, because, they felt blue lives matter, or, because all lives matter, or they didn't share in that collective guilt. I can't be sure of anyone's thinking, especially these days, but the result is what our country is going through right now. We've politicized all of it. Again! You know, I've heard it mentioned a number of times over the past week that when we first all saw the horror of the George Floyd video, the policeman kneeling on his neck for over eight minutes, his call for help and that he couldn't breathe, his calling for his dead mother as he was about to succumb... everyone, everyone, came together in one voice and condemned it. Conservatives and liberals alike. Blacks and whites alike. For maybe a day, we were all of like mind. Because not only what that policeman did was inexcusable, but even worse, it was a sin. And we all agreed that something had to be done so that it would never happen again. And just imagine if reasonable people had come and worked together and built on that common ground. Imagine the changes in justice and equality that might have resulted. But like I said, we've now politicized it again, making it worse, and who knows if anything constructive will come out of this tragedy. Because once again, it's no longer about George Floyd, it's become an 'us' versus 'them' scenario, polarizing us all. Let's see now, are they just peaceful protesters or are they really rioters and looters and anarchists. Let's see now, is it ANTIFA or really the white supremacists who are instigating the violence and destruction. Let's see, is it the failed policies of the Democratic party who control the big cities where there is so much pent up hate and anger, or is it all about President Trump and his tiresome rhetoric. Let's see, does this now prove that all blacks are hoodlums, and all whites are racists.

Now I know from talking to several of you, we all feel frustrated and disheartened over what's happening. And I hope this has made all of us think about our own reactions, our own thoughts. Like, if, after hearing what I just said, you find yourself becoming defensive or taking a side, then perhaps you're politicizing this as well. We all have our opinions and biases, often we think our side is right and the other side is dead wrong. Now the race issue is a complex situation that goes back hundreds of years. And today, we're all willing say yes to the good and right things. Of course we want justice, of course we want equality, of course we're against discrimination. Yet, for some reason we don't deliver on those values. Why? Well, I don't know all the answers. But let me share some of my own personal thoughts.

One, I think we have a tendency to generalize and label people and groups of people. Blacks, Latinos, gays, Jews, Muslims. We don't see them as individual human beings with the same hopes, dreams and desires we have. Therefore we never put ourselves in their shoes. Take police officers for instance. Right now, they're the bad guys. And yes, there are some bad cops out there. Just as there are bad doctors, bad teachers, bad lawyers, bad pastors. There are bad people in every walk of life – that's a given. But as chaplain to the Falmouth Police Department, I can tell you that the men and women in blue have a job none of us would want. Because they see an underside of society that plays on their emotional well being every day. And they face dangers that you and I could never imagine. You know, the whole of society has shut down due to COVID 19 and the fear of death. Yet they put their lives at risk every day in order to protect you and me. And if you recall, in July 2018, two Falmouth Police Officers, one black, one white, were both shot by a black man. Thankfully, they survived, though they left the job. And remember, most of the people police have to deal with are not upstanding, law abiding citizens, and they could pose a threat. And so they are always on guard. But they are not always bad, and people are now generalizing. Even a Falmouth officer I know was working a detail the other night, and several who drove by in their cars gave him the finger. That is wrong.

Another thing that comes into play is that our human nature is to first and foremost look out after our own self-interests. Let me say that again. It's our human nature, maybe even our sinful nature, to first and foremost look out after our own self interests regardless of which side of the political spectrum we're on. Because think about it, when it comes to race and racial profiling, there's not much difference between a white male conservative Republican from Alabama who's a blue collar worker, and a white female liberal Democrat from New York, who's a highly paid executive in an investment firm. How so? Well, Amy Cooper, the white woman walking her dog in Central Park and provoking an incident with a black man who was just out bird watching, proves my point. And I could give you many more examples

as well. Yes, we who are white want to protect what is identified as our “white privilege.” Now, before anyone politicizes this and gets defensive, this does not mean someone is a racist – it only means they have better access to certain advantages. Maybe a better term would be “white advantage.” And think about it. On average, whites have higher incomes, finer neighborhoods, better quality schools and education, and a psychological well-being that make us feel secure, very secure, when driving a car or walking down the street or bird watching. That's just naming a few. And we have access to these privileges, for the most part, because of who we were born to and where we were born. And we certainly all want to preserve these advantages, these privileges, for ourselves, and our children and grandchildren first and foremost, no matter what we say about racial equality. And this could be part of the problem we don't want to admit.

Now what might black people want? Well, I'm not a sociologist or a psychologist, and I'm not black, so I won't profess to speak for them. But I do know the gospel. And I know that every human being is made in the image of God. And I suspect that black people want to be treated the same way God wants us all to be treated – with respect, with dignity, with equality, with justice. Things inherent in being human. But because of systemic problems that go back years, I think a lot of the anger and frustration many black people feel can be described in a word: hopelessness. That's why they cry for social justice and equality in a nation of plenty, because they feel hopeless. They feel a hopelessness that politicians can't fix with all their false platitudes and promises and welfare checks. And the CNN and Fox News anchors can't resolve with all their haughty pontifications and oversimplifications. No, the hopelessness I see is a combination of things. And again, I don't want to politicize any of this, but look at housing. When hundreds of families who are struggling financially are cramped into segregated living in something referred to as a “project,” where is there hope? I think there's a hopelessness resulting from an educational system that fails black children, making them unprepared to enter the mainstream of society, leaving them to face an uncertain future. I think there is a hopelessness spawned by our culture that glorifies money, fame, power, material things and a lifestyle that many of them will never be able to attain unless they turn to crime or violence. And when people feel hopeless, it only serves to highlight our differences. The differences between the blacks and the whites, the differences between the haves and the haves not, the differences between the police and the public they are sworn to protect and serve. And when people look at and treat each other differently, that's when misunderstandings grow, that's when intolerances develop, that's when quarrels and anger and protests erupt.

So what's our part in this social and moral mess this country is going through? Perhaps today's Scripture about the early evangelist Philip and the eunuch can give us some Biblical guidance. There's a lot to say about this lesson, but I'm going to keep it very simple. The eunuch was from Ethiopia, so you know that he had to be black. Now this eunuch was obviously a very accomplished person. He was a court official of the queen of Ethiopia, and in charge of her entire treasury. Still, that made no difference, he was ostracized. Probably because of his color, and definitely because of his sexuality, he was prevented from entering and worshipping with the assembly inside the Temple. He could only worship outside the Temple. Thus, being segregated and discriminated against. The scripture doesn't explain what happened in Jerusalem, but somehow the eunuch was fortunate enough to come away with a verse from Isaiah. The passage read, "He was led like a sheep to slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before his shearers, he did not open his mouth. He was humiliated, and received no justice." The person the prophet is talking about is Jesus. Now the eunuch doesn't understand, but definitely identifies with the person in this passage. So Philip, looks past the stereotyping and prejudices of his day and shares with the eunuch the good news of Jesus Christ. And because of what Philip told him, the eunuch becomes full of new hope. As they come upon some water, the eunuch asks, "Look, here is water, what is to prevent me from being baptized?" The answer of course for all of us, is nothing. Nothing! What this scripture is telling us, commanding us, is that nothing should prevent anyone from being treated with equality and with justice. So what can we do? Like I said before, let's examine our own hearts and thoughts and reactions, especially in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ whose primary call was to love – love God and love others. And so let us model the behavior we want to see among our family and friends. And let us pray. Pray that good will come from this, and that all parties will begin to work together in love and peace.

Let me close by reading for you excerpts of a poem by Carolyn Gillette that we can pray together. *Christ Jesus, you lived in the same way you taught us; you welcomed the people that others despised. You talked and you ate with the poor and the outcast; you saw every person through your loving eyes. Forgive our re-building the walls you have broken— our making of barriers you came to tear down. The gift of your cross is the world's reconciling, with God and with all of God's people around. O God, by your Holy Spirit, now give us a vision, of life in your kingdom through Jesus your Son— where birthright and culture don't lead to division, where all your children are welcomed as one. O God, may we now work with a new dedication for justice, equality, freedom, and peace, until we are called to your great celebration and all share at your table in your banquet feast.* Let us come to the table of Christ, so that we can be better prepared to go out into the world to be the Body of Christ. And then, perhaps, what we saw in Minneapolis might never happen again. Amen.