

“Always?”

Genesis 1:1-2:4; Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2020, dedicated to the memory of George Floyd, lynched on the streets of Minneapolis, MN in broad daylight by four police, one who choked him to death for 8:46 Minutes, three who pinned him to the ground with the full weight of their bodies, to all who have been lynched in America and to all the men, women and children of First Church who are Black, bi-racial or people of color now and throughout our history, to Sarah Grossman who died after marching in Columbus, to Black Lives Matter and our young First Church marchers and all the protesters on the streets of our nation in over 700 cities and towns and now across the world and always to the glory of God!

“Always?”

Genesis 1:1-2:4; Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20

I spent a lot of time in prayer and preparation for today. You might say, I have spent all my life preparing for today. I looked over my sermons, my writings, and the actions of my life and realized I had preached about Race and Racism, police issues and equality well over 500 times – including eight years as a contributing editor to the Columbus/Dayton African American New Journal. I have marched and advocated for change my entire adult life. Racial and Economic Justice is my passion and commitment in this life. Justice for all!

People were asking me this week what to read. Look in the database of Sermons at First Church and read what many black and white preachers have said from our pulpit over the last 20 years. I would recommend “How to be an Anti-Racist” by Ibram X. Kendi. I would like us all to take this on as a church wide Book Study this summer. Then we can dig into the 24 books the New York Times has recommended on Racism. But only after we become the change that we want to see. Let’s get started!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Everything has a beginning. Today in the opening words of the Holy Bible, Genesis tells our Judeo-Christian Creation story - the beginning of new life and the goodness of life created by God. Each day of God’s creation is called “Good” by God. This beginning is filled with life and hope. Many beginnings are beautiful. The beginning of Creation in Genesis is beautiful and good.

The beginning of the protests in our streets in Columbus was horrid in the eyes of God and the entire world. The beginning of the protests across America and now the world happened on the ground outside Cup Foods Store at the intersection of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in the Powderhorn Park neighborhood of Minneapolis, MN around 8:20 p.m. on Memorial Day, May 25th. This beginning will never be forgotten.

That is when and where George Floyd was murdered by officer Derek Chauvin with the assistance of officers Thomas K. Lane, Tou Thao and J.A. Kueng. As Lane and Kueng pinned George Floyd to the ground, Thao stood nearby and Derek Chauvin, with his left hand in his pocket, kept his knee on Floyd's neck for 8:46 while George laid face down pleading for his life and surrounded by people screaming for the officer to stop. It was a horrible execution of another Black man – all caught on cell phones. George Floyd should never have died on Memorial Day. He never should have died on that day.

In the past two weeks, hundreds of thousands of men, women, teens and children have taken to the streets of the United States in over 700 towns and cities and now across the world have marched and raised their voices about police brutality and violence against African Americans. George Floyd's death, together with Breonna Taylor's death in her home in Louisville, Kentucky in March and Ahmaud Arbery's death while jogging in a neighborhood in Satilla Shores, Georgia in February was the final act of violence that mobilized people to take to the streets. People have reacted like never before. Eleven days later there is no end in sight. People young and old, of colors and backgrounds will not be stopped.

There is an awakening. – A new beginning – it is as if people woke up to realize that Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter.

Everything has a beginning. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an international human rights movement, originating from within the African-American community, which has led campaigns against violence and systemic racism towards black people. For seven years,

BLM has regularly held protests speaking out against police brutality and police killings of black people, and broader issues such as racial profiling, and racial inequality in the United States criminal justice system.

BLM was born out of the pain of George Zimmerman's murdering Trayvon Martin in Florida in February 2012 and being acquitted for this murder in 2013. Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014; Eric Garner on the streets of New York pleading – like George Floyd – “I can't breathe” – the same words, the same form of execution – this time by New York City Police, brought people to the streets. Seven years of marching, chanting, facing down the police in towns and cities across America. Black victims climb in numbers each year.

Since January 1, 2015, **1,252 black people** have been shot and killed by police, according to *The Washington Post's* database tracking police shootings; that doesn't even include those who died in police custody or were killed using other methods.

The cry of “All Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives Matter” are forms of drowning out – once again – that **Black Lives Matter**. Until we address the devastation of racism brought against Black Lives, I feel like we need to stop the counter-chants. Let “Black Lives Matter” be the actual cry for unity.

Here in Columbus, from 2013-2016, our police rose to the top of the national statistics in killing black men on our streets. Julius Tate, Jr., Henry Green and Tyre King (only 13 years old) – all young, all black, all dead on our streets from the weapons of our Columbus police officers.

Last Saturday night, when the protests came to the corner of Cleveland Avenue and Broad St., rubber bullets and wooden projectiles were fired at people in the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park. (Hold up one found in the Social Justice Park.)

Tear gas had been fired earlier in the day. As our own 15-year-old activist, Alyssia Palmer told me, we were peacefully demonstrating and then tear gas was shot into the crowd. I ran four times from the tear gas as it spread. Carly Kutschbach was maced and threatened by police as she protested. She said, “I never threatened them. I did scream when I was maced but that was a reaction not an action against the police. They were the aggressors as I saw it from the crowd.”

The roots of this violence in the Columbus Police Department are something of which I have become all too aware as I have stood with Black and Brown Officers in the CPD and Black and white clergy to address the internal racism. I have come to learn from one conversation and one report after another, that there is a deep seeded racism within the Columbus PD that is systemic in nature. It is not a few bad apples - it is a culture that eats away at our city's police force and makes the entire tree sick in an orchard that is infected as well. I was listening to more stories yesterday and it is not being dealt with – no matter what you hear in press releases coming from city hall. I ask you to believe me – it is really sick. The hundreds of stories I have heard – often whispered for fear of retaliation- would make you ill.

The root of this all is in the ground itself. Seeds planted 400 years and 293 days ago. It is a sickness that is like none other in America. Racism is our Original Sin. I would say, that Racism is our first and worst pandemic.

Racism is certainly the longest standing pandemic in our nation. Racism has been imbedded in the cellular structure of America since its arrival August 21, 1619 in its nascent viral form of white men selling “20 and odd Negroes” from their slave ship, the White Lion to colonists at Point Comfort, Virginia. They were nameless – how sick is that?

The Africans who arrived on August 21, 1619 were slaves. They didn't land at Plymouth Rock. They didn't land at Ellis Island. These were not free men and women landing in the new world filled with hope and ready to begin their adventure in freedom and exploration. They arrived in exploitation. They were called human cargo. They had been captured in Kabasa, in the Angolan region of Africa, chained and then sold as part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Like every pandemic, Racism started small. Primarily found in the southern states on plantations with slaves doing the agricultural work for white families plus building white people's buildings, schools, and universities, Racism could not be contained. The pandemic of Racism spread like wildfire across the Americas. Books were written, myths created and lies, art and film bolstered its foundation of sickness – all established as truths to undergird and validate the disease. Little was done to stop its spread. This pandemic found receptors in every hamlet, town and city across our land. It spread from south to north, from east to west. In its most virulent form, this pandemic led White people to beat, cheat, lynch and assassinate African-Americans who seemed strong and healthy. The Racism virus caused White people to crush Black and Brown people from embryo to grave. When in full-fevered form, Racism brought the slaughter of hundreds of black children, women and men in the most heinous and hateful ways.

In order to feed the beast of the Racist disease perpetrated against Black people, from the 20 and odd Africans of 1619, over the next 241 years, the slave population in the United States would grow to over 3.9 million slaves by the 1860 Census –all with 500,000 free blacks. In the slave trade, at least two million captured slaves died in the passage through the Atlantic Ocean from Africa to the Americas. But historians have documented that mortality rates were even higher in Africa with the capture of free people to be enslaved. Some have calculated the number of deaths directly related to slavery in the Americas between 1500-1900 were 4 million people (Rosenbaum, Alan S., and Israel W. Charny, *Is the Holocaust Unique?* 2001, pp. 98–99).

The numbers kept rising after the bloody Civil War – which was fought to end slavery. More than 4,400 Black Americans were lynched between 1877-1950 – as free Black Americans. The more a Black American prospered, the greater a threat that man or woman became to the KKK in their area (and remember Ohio had one the largest KKK in the nation for years). This number doesn't include those who died in police custody or who were not hung from lynching trees. This is sick. This is seriously sick. To fight this pandemic will – like the fight against COVID-19 – take a change of heart and a change of behavior.

Almost 401 years of pandemic pain have brought us to this day. Let us turn the pain into promise. Here are some steps to end the pandemic of racism forever.

First, we have to stop hating people in this country because of the color of their skin. Second, we have to start loving all people regardless of their skin. But this is more than skin deep. We have to

go deeper. Third, we have to change police officers and departments that feel they have free reign to abuse their own and also abuse black and brown people. We have to take funding that is set up for militarist response and turn those dollars into community action for change.

Fourth and most important - We have to have justice FOR ALL.

By that I mean we need to find out what has been taken from poor black, brown, and white communities and return it them – health care from embryo to end of life, jobs, housing, education, food stores with healthy options, transportation, recreation centers, and non-violent community policing – all this and more. We need to deal with a criminal justice system that is criminal indeed. We need to get non-violent inmates out of jail. We need to give REAL second chances before someone has spent half a lifetime in prison on trumped-up charges and lies. We have thousands of people languishing in prison with DNA evidence to prove their innocence and they wait for help, for trial dates and for freedom from a crime they didn't commit. This is criminal! We need to return to those who have been forsaken and disposed the full rights, privileges and opportunities they have as Americans.

This is an amazing moment. In the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic (and it scares me that COVID-19 is out there, too. I don't want to lose friends and colleagues to COVID-19 while battling Racism), God is empowering and inspiring each of us to deal with the Pandemic of Racism. We are being led by young black, brown, and white visionaries for change – a growing number right here in our congregation! This movement is for all of us.

This must become the movement to eradicate Racism.

We have our own youth to thank! Please read my “First Reflection” sent on Friday talking about Alyssia Palmer, Sophia Polo, Mia Provenzano, Carly Kutschbach marching and protesting for change. Allison, Teresa, and Jen sent me news of their daughter’s marching. Bob raised up Carly in prayer as she was mace and Diana reached out as well. Friday, 13-year-old Caroline Thompson was marching too! It was Caroline’s idea to march with her lifelong friend! You all are rock! Dr. Andrew Thomas and his son Jake were right at the heart of the OSU Medical Hospital’s witness for justice on Friday – masked and socially distanced. Rev. Emily has been out as a clergy witness for justice. Thank you all for leading us! Thank you to all supportive parents, too. You raised children to witness for justice. Thank you! Please, let me know if you have been marching.

If you can’t march, call city hall. Call the statehouse. Call the White House. Call Congress. Write. Do something. All of us can do something. **VOTE!**

Change must come now. We must face Racism and defeat it once and for all. In the words of author James Baldwin, “...*nothing can be changed until it is faced. It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.*” Let us end this now.

We are not alone in this effort to end Racism. We have each other to uplift and support one another in this battle to defeat racism and injustice. We have the promises of God to sustain us. When Jesus left this earth in the care of his disciples (yes – that includes you and me!), he said, “I will be with you **ALWAYS**, even unto the end of the age.” Jesus is **ALWAYS** with us through this all.

Always means Always! Thank you, Jesus for your ever-present love and power!

Outside of the love of Christ – Always with us – everything else has a beginning and an End. Let us put an end to Racism now and forever. Amen.