

“Dealing with Race and Caste is Ongoing”

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Part V of VI in the Summer Sermon Series, “The New Social Gospel”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

August 27, 2023

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Dealing with Race and Caste is Ongoing”

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 27, 2023, dedicated to the memory of Emmett Till tortured and murdered on August 28, 1955 at the age of 14 and his mother Mamie Till-Mobley who lost her only child to racial hatred and to all who have been lynched and murdered throughout American history and all the parents and families left behind to horrors of racial hatred, to all who marched on Washington 60 years ago tomorrow and always to the glory of God!

+++++

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

+++++

Yesterday, August 26 in Jacksonville, Florida, “A white man armed with a high-powered rifle and a handgun killed three Black people at a Dollar General store before shooting himself, in what local law enforcement described as a racially motivated crime. This shooting was racially motivated, and he hated Black people,” Jacksonville Sheriff T.K. Waters told a press conference.

The suspect, whom Waters described as a white male wearing a tactical vest, was not identified. Waters said all three victims — two men and a woman

- were Black. Waters said authorities believed the shooter acted alone, and that before the shooting he had authored “several manifestos” for media, his parents and law enforcement detailing his hatred for Black people. Waters described his weapons as a Glock and an “AR-15 style” rifle, with swastikas on it, referring to a lightweight semi-automatic long gun often used in mass shootings (Reuters).

It could have been August 14, 2023, when six white former Mississippi police officers pled guilty to torturing two Black men with tasers and a sex toy for 90 minutes, after kicking in the door to the men’s home without a warrant on January 24 of this year. The group, which dubbed itself “the goon squad,” taunted them with racial slurs, telling the men to “stop taking advantage of a white woman who lived there” and “go back to Jackson or ‘their side’ of the Pearl River.” Only after a gun went off during a staged mock execution, shooting one of the men in the mouth, did the violence cease as they hastily tried to cover their tracks. The two victims survived, but they will undoubtedly be scarred by this experience for the rest of their lives.

It could have been August 28, 1955, when two white men abducted 14-year-old Emmett Till from his uncle’s home, from his bed in the middle of the night at gunpoint and then tortured him and murdered him and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River – where they hoped his body would never be found. Although Emmett was found several days later, and they were acquitted several weeks later. And several months after that, under protection of immunity, both men confessed that they murdered him in a feature article in Life Magazine.

It could have been August 2023 in Columbus, Ohio where there have been five police shooting deaths of Black people on our streets in the past two months – NOT including the 21-year-old pregnant woman shot and killed while driving directly at a Blendon Township Police officer on Friday, August 25th as she attempted to flee the scene of her alleged shoplifting at a Sunbury Rd. liquor store.

In my book, *The Genius of Justice*, I tell the stories of 53 people – geniuses of justice – 18 of whom are African American. In listening to the stories of their lives, it was apparent that every single African American in my book encountered racial injustice as children, teens and young people growing up in America.

I share six of these stories in the chapter “Racism and Pain Matter: Moving Against Time.” These six stories tell of white people stealing 1100 acres of land accrued over a lifetime by a former slave and the grandfather of Otis Moss, Jr., church burnings and bombings, murder and torture, beatings and abuse, verbal abuse of a child, physical and emotional harassment, threats of murder, and racial divides all because of “color lines.” Slavery, Racism, and Racial violence has criminally altered lives and disrupted and destroyed families for over 404 years in America.

Besides these six Black men who shared painful and difficult stories of racism, the other 12 Black women and men in my genius of justice project also tied their life experiences with racism and racial injustice all the way back to childhood. One thing was clear in the depth and breadth of the conversations, when I asked, “**How did you become who you are today?**” all eighteen African American geniuses went back to childhood and personal familial memories to share painful racist and discriminatory experiences that eventually shaped who they became. 100% of my geniuses of colour experienced first-hand racial injustice. For the 35 White people in my book, their encounters with racial injustice were always learned vs. experienced firsthand.

As I shared my discovery of experiential vs. learned encounters with racial injustice with Black friends and colleagues, they all agreed this matched their experience, too. They have found that white people rarely have experienced life shaping and soul crushing pain in relation to injustice while almost all their Black friends and family have encountered hardship in relation to racial injustice.

When I asked them what needs to be heard and shared, they added their insights. Fred said, “Tim, tell the truth about this.” Jefferey added, “for over 400 years, African Americans have suffered from the effects of constant and continual abuse and the residual effect of PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome – because our life story in America is packed with trauma and stress. Until we treat the cancer of racism, we will always battle the side-effects and after-effects of its violence.” One friend said, “tell people that is not what you SAY but what you DO that matters. How do you treat people in the workplace, in your neighborhood, at school, and in daily interactions? That is what matters.” Ray said, “What also matters is that we see the larger issues of racism – the systemic injustices that prevail to this day. It is not enough to treat people well (although that is greatly appreciated). It is about changing systems that block advancement, opportunity, dignity, and equity.” Kevin said, “Always remember that Race itself is a social construct. It is not a real thing. So, everything that follows is built on bad science and destructive systemic injustice. Also, we all need to remember and celebrate the great achievements of Black Americans who have led our nation in every single area of our life together. There is literally no area where Black Americans have not made advances and a significant difference in our nation’s story.” Thank you to my friends – and Amen!

To deny the depths of racism in America and its lasting impact up to this present day, is like denying the Holocaust ever happened, or denying the Titanic Sunk and on and on. To deny the horrible presence and pain of racism in America before today and up to this present moment is like saying the sun didn’t come up this morning. It is real. It is present. It is a real and present danger today – just as it has been throughout our history. For Black Americans – this is often part of daily pain and experience.

For White Americans, our encounters and experiences with Racism and its deeply rooted twin named Caste is a learned experience (if in fact people learn this at all). For a moment – let me share Isabelle Wilkerson’s distinction between race and caste. “Race in the skin,” she says. “Caste is the bone structure of injustice for people of color.”

For White Americans, it is not felt in the bones. It is not known in visceral realities – aggressions and microaggressions that are experienced regularly. As I have said many times, the first and most prevalent reality of White Privilege is that, as a white person, I can walk away from Racism at any moment on any day. We can walk away today and never really deal with this again.

I saw this with protests following the lynching/murder of George Floyd. Some people protested and walked away saying – “Well I stood up strong against Racism” – never to lift their voices again. We must commit each day of our lives to live and breathe; to act as anti-racists in America.

I turn to literary genius and my guiding light of racial critique, James Baldwin for direction and inspiration. James Baldwin said, *“Because even if I should speak, no one would believe me. And they would not believe me precisely because they would know that what I said was true.”* Genius of Physics and social analysis Albert Einstein added, *“If the majority knew the root of this evil, then the road to its cure would not be long.”*

So let us tell the story, in the words of Genesis 4:10, about our brothers’ and sisters’ blood crying from the ground. There are 404+ years of genuine and justifiable anger in the soul of Black America.

In August 2019, I shared a six-part sermon series with three African American colleagues entitled, “400 years of Africans in America.” The scourge of American slavery and the mistreatment of Black people in our land started in August 1619 as the White Lion, the first slave ship known in the colonies arrived in Point Comfort, what is now Hampton, Virginia.

In what I call the true founding document of this nation, the manifest of the White Lion, it records that “20 and odd” Africans had been captured from the slave ship San Juan Bautista in a fierce battle in the Bay of Campeche in the Gulf of Mexico and now were for sale in our land. We know two names – Antonio and Isabella. We know them only because they appear later in the records of their slaveowner. The other names are unknown. There was no true accounting for the evil beginnings of slavery in America. This

manifest needs to be placed in the National Archives next to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. It is a founding document of our nation.

For more than 400 years, we have reaped what we have sown, and these seeds of racism, bigotry and hate continue to be sown and reaped today. We need to reap and sow a harvest of justice and not hate. We need to confront the machinery of systematic violence and injustice that African Americans endure every day.

We can do this in many ways and in many places. Pick a place to overcome racial injustice and get to work. We can work on social policies which call for the flourishing of all children – especially those who have been left behind by inequities in American life. We can fight for health care protections for minority women, men and families. We can address mental health concerns and prenatal health care – among other health crises in poor and minority communities. We can fight for equal education and against the burning and banning of books and historic truth and the bizarre right-wing attack on Critical Race Theory. We can fight against red-lining and fight for fair housing and justice for low-income people who need safe, secure and affordable housing. We can fight against a criminal justice system which is unjustly designed to incarcerate and kill Black and Brown people. We can work on public transportation issues, immigration rights, capital punishment and more. Each one of us can connect the dots of racial prejudice and pain to design and bring to fruition a better world of love and justice.

It can start today. This week marks the 404th anniversary of slaves arriving on the shores of America to be sold in a marketplace of injustice. Read about 1619 and the roots of racial injustice. Tomorrow marks the 68th Anniversary of Emmett Till's abduction and murder. Read about this and share this story with your children and grandchildren. Tomorrow marks the 60th Anniversary of the March on Washington. Watch all the speeches – not just King's "I have a dream."

Honestly, the New Social Gospel means nothing and will go nowhere if we do not deal with and heal America's Original Sin – the sin of slavery and the stain and curse of racial injustice imbedded in the soul of America. For Antonio, Isabella and Emmett and for the millions of African American children, women and men living still – let us commit – today – to be anti-racists and work each day to right this wrong. Amen.