

“Racism and Caste: The Skin and Bones of the Matter”

I Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Part III of VI in the sermon series “Then and Now”

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 12th Sunday after Pentecost, August 11, 2024, dedicated to the memory of beloved Organist/Choir Master Emeritus, G. Dene Barnard who entered eternal life on Saturday, August 10th, to the memory of Jenkins Smith who passed away in September 2023 at 75 ³/₄; 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 fight for racial justice every day, including the Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan, and the Ohio Council of Churches and always to the glory of God!

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*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.*

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The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr. Senior Emeritus Pastor of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio has been one of Ohio’s and our nation’s great prophetic voices for the past 70 years. Otis Moss Jr., the son of Magnolia and Otis Moss, Sr., and the fourth of their five children, was raised

in LaGrange in Troup County, Georgia. Born in February 1935, Otis, Jr. was only two-years-old when Mitchell Moss, known as Grandpa Mitchell, died.

Grandpa Mitchell was born into slavery in Merriweather County, Georgia in 1861. Freed from slavery at four-years-old, Mitchell Moss rose in freedom successfully running his agricultural business and accumulating 1100 acres of farmland across his lifetime. When the Great Depression hit, Mitchell had his land stolen from him by white businessmen and government officials. He was swindled as he mortgaged part of the land to help his family survive in the depths of the depression. Then all his land was taken when he “defaulted” on a loan. He died with very little to show for a lifetime of hard work and entrepreneurial brilliance.

However, Grandpa Mitchell’s powerful story of rising in freedom is embedded in the Moss Family oral tradition. Several years ago, Otis, Jr. preached at Branch Hebron Baptist Church in Odessadale, Georgia where Grandpa Mitchell had been a deacon. And there in the cornerstone of the church building originally founded by former slaves in 1868, Otis, Jr. found Mitchell Moss’s name. He was a founder and builder of Branch Hebron Baptist Church. No one could ever take that away from him.

Growing up in rural Georgia, it was Family, Church and the African American Community that were THE three pillars in the early life of Otis Moss, Jr. Each was a sustaining force. And each was under constant attack. The Family was constantly demoralized as fathers and mothers struggled to provide housing, food and opportunities for their children. The Church was a powerful witness for God. But whenever and wherever a black pastor addressed economic and racial inequality, the church was burned or bombed. And Black schools at the heart of the community were, in the words of Otis Moss, Jr., *“inadequately supplied, criminally neglected, structurally dilapidated and filled with too many children in too small a space. In spite of that, each day my school was filled with affirmation and love.”*

With Family, Church and Community under persistent vitriolic racist attacks, each institution NEVERTHELESS found ways to overcome what was happening. Dr. Moss says, *“Each was a carrier of the liberation motif. They embodied faith, hope and love so that in the worst circumstances a song, a sermon, a lesson, a prayer, a prophetic voice kept coming on.”* Dr Moss continues, *“Often spoken in a language that only our Black community understood, ‘ain’t gonna let nobody turn us around’ we had sung from deep in our souls. We were marching up to Calvary. We were marching up to Freedom land. Nothing could stop us.”*

The grandson of a former slave, a man who he knew, Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr. rose from the racism and poverty of rural Georgia to come alongside Dr. King and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement to fight for changes in this nation for his times and for all time constantly battling and overcoming the pain of racism.

I tell the story of 18 African American geniuses of justice. In listening to the stories of their lives, it was apparent that every single African American 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 from Mitchell Moss, church burnings and bombings, torture and murder, beatings, lynchings and so many forms of abuse – verbal abuse of children and adults, physical and emotional harassment, threats of murder, and racial divides all because of “color lines.” For more than 405 years in our nation, Slavery, Racism, Racial and Economic violence have criminally altered lives and disrupted and destroyed families.

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 – and like Dr Moss, it was almost always embedded in generations of memory and experience.

To deny the depths of racism in America and its lasting impact up to this present day, is like denying the existence of the Transatlantic Slave Trade or denying or minimalizing the systematic elimination of our Native American sisters and brothers, or denying the Holocaust, or denying the existence of climate change.

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 danger today – just as it has been throughout our history. For Black Americans – this is part of daily pain and experience. But Racism is ONLY the skin of the matter. Below the skin of racism are the structural injustices known as Caste.

In 2020, Isabel Wilkerson authored and issued her groundbreaking book, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*. In *Caste*, Wilkerson tells the story the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s pilgrimage to India in the winter of 1959. Dr. King went on a pilgrimage to see the land of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of nonviolent protests. Dr. King had recently finished leading the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama and now he wanted to meet the people whose battle against the oppressive rule of Great Britain had inspired his own fight for justice in America. During his month-long stay, at the invitation of Prime Minister Nehru, he sought out the so-called Untouchables, the lowest caste in the ancient Indian caste system.

Isabel Wilkerson takes us to the southern tip of India, to the city of Trivandrum in the state of Kerala. There, Martin and Coretta Scott King, visited high school students whose families had been Untouchables. The principal introduced Dr. King this way, “Young people, I would like to present to you a fellow Untouchable from the United States of America.”

In Wilkerson's words, "King was floored. He had not expected the term to be applied to him. He was, in fact, put off by it at first. He had flown in from another continent, had dined with the prime minister...and 'For a moment,' he wrote, 'I was a bit shocked and peeved that I would be referred to as an untouchable.'" Then he began to think of the reality of the 20 million people, consigned to the lowest rank of American society for centuries. In his words, "we were still smothering in an airtight cage of poverty, quarantined in isolated ghettos, exiled in our own country." Finally, he said to himself, "Yes, I am an untouchable, and every Negro in the United States of America is an untouchable."

More than 62 years ago, in a high school in Trivandrum, India, Dr. King came to realize the truth of the America system of caste – Black people in America are treated almost exactly like the Untouchables of India. We **also** have a Caste System in America – and it is a system that Adolph Hitler studied and sought to emulate as he worked to eliminate Jews, gays, comedians and others from the face of the earth.

King would speak to Caste in the final years of his life, but it was not a major theme of his speaking or writing. It took the brilliant research and expository writing of Isabel Wilkerson to uncover and reveal the long and twisted history of Caste in America.

Caste is the unseen structure of systemic injustice in America. America is an old house built on a faulty foundation with an infrastructure of caste. Wilkerson writes, "Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist in the same culture and serve to reinforce each other. Race, in the United States, is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place."

The “Untouchable” Dr. King, in all his brilliant, provocative, and powerful ways, was able to recognize this long before most people did. He was not the first to write or speak about the structure of our old house whose foundation stones were laid in 1619 – when the first slave ship arrived on our shores. Ashley Montagu (1942) and Gunnar Myrdal (1944) wrote books about our caste system. Bhimrao Ambedkar, an Indian Untouchable who came to America to study economics in 1913, wrote about this. He reached out to meet and talk with W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois had already written about these comparisons. Together, Ambedkar and DuBois were able to develop these concepts and comparisons. Ambedkar rejected the term Untouchables and even the term *Harijans* given to his people by Gandhi. He chose to call his own people, *Dalits*, which means “broken people.” He saw the pain and brokenness of his own people and felt they needed their own word to name and claim their reality.

Again – Caste is the bones. Race is the skin. The bones of America are broken. Our system is broken. Black Americans are broken by this old house built in sand on a 405+ year old foundation of injustice. White people – especially – often get caught up in arguing about how bad the foundation is or how much progress Black folks have made. However, we need to rebuild our foundation based on a rock-solid foundation of justice for ALL.

It will take all of us naming each of the broken bones in our structure of injustice to begin to build a just body. Let us take the discovery of the Untouchable Dr. King and the revelations of the Incredible Isabel Wilkerson to name our caste system for what it is. Then we can build a new house on a solid foundation of justice and human equality for all.

On the walls of my study, there are eight beautiful pictures of African American women and men. They are Breonna Taylor, Riah Milton, Oluwatoyin Salau, Hank Aaron, Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige, Bill Willis, Sr., and the Rev. Dr. Jeffery P. Kee. Breonna, Riah and Oluwatoyin are martyrs of violence against women of color. Hank, Jackie and Satchel are my sports heroes from baseball – America’s greatest game. Bill Willis, Sr. broke

the color barrier in pro football in 1946 and was a second father to me. Jeffery is my brother. The loving spirits and memories of these women and men remind me daily of the millions who battle against racism and injustice. They inspire me to stay on the path of antiracism. They guide my steps each day in the battle against our caste system and the racial injustice and inequities which are embedded in it.

I encourage everyone here and everyone listening to vow to be an antiracist beginning in this moment. Even if you have not experienced racism and caste firsthand, you live in this old house and you know it is real. Also, you have known pain. You know what it feels like to be hurt by others.

Acknowledging the pain and the hardship that more than 41½ million Black Americans have faced, and then to make choices which bring new life and hope to others who have experienced the pain of racism and caste in America must be each of our jobs – all of our commitment. Remember the names of Antonio and Isabella, the only two names which have been retained from “the 20 and odd” number of Africans who arrived on our shores August 25, 1619. They are our ancestors in our American life as much or more so than Martha and George Washington are. And we need to remember and honor all of our ancestors forevermore.

Remember these words from Fannie Lou Hamer, *“There are two things we should never forget. We should never forget where we came from and the bridges that carried us over.”* This truth is for all of us not just some of us.

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). 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. 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, to breathe and to act as anti-racists in America.

I turn to literary genius and guiding light of racial critique, James Baldwin to help us with 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 405+ years of genuine and justifiable anger in the soul of Black America because of the skin of racism and the bone structure of caste. Racism and caste are the skin and bones of the matter.

God is calling each and everyone of us to hear the cries from the ground and the cries above the ground and respond with justice and love for all – until we do – the skin and bones of America’s original sin will continue to cry out to us. Amen.

