

“Touching the Untouchables”***Acts 8.26–40******The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC,
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Whenever I have preached on this text, which is a beautiful story, I have focused on including people whom others consider outcasts, often the church’s exclusion of LGBT people. But recent events in our nation have weighed heavily on my heart and lead me to offer a different sermon this morning. I want to start by thanking you for the privilege of sharing my thoughts and feelings with you; you do not need to agree with anything that I say, and I am grateful that you are here to listen.

The enduring legacy of racism continues to poison our nation, and it needs to be said. It needs to be prayed about. It needs to be named as sin. It needs to be changed.

You don’t need to look very far to find African people in the Bible. Whether Pharaoh or the Ethiopian eunuch, black and brown people populate both testaments. The Ethiopian eunuch was not untouchable because he was black...he was considered ritually impure because he had been castrated. Though he was reading the Hebrew scriptures (the Christian ones hadn’t been written yet...), the Ethiopian eunuch could never be a full member of the Jewish tradition because of his ritual uncleanness. So, why does the author of Acts include this account? Because Christianity replaced the centrality of ritual purity with the core value of compassion. Christianity is meant to welcome the other, the untouchable to be part of God’s household. That is our goal, as yet unattained.



“Daddy, where are all the brown people?” That was my son Cameron’s question to me when we moved to Fort Collins in 2002. We had moved here from Hartford, Connecticut, where people of color comprise roughly two-thirds of the population. And a six-year-old noticed that there are very few people of color in this community. Here in Fort Collins, approximately one percent of our population is African-American, about three percent is Asian-American, and roughly 10 percent is Latino.

Every now and again, I am asked by a well-meaning member why we don’t have more people of color at Plymouth. My usual response is to encourage you all to invite your friends to church who are not part of the dominant white culture...because I have exactly one good friend in Fort Collins who is not a member of Plymouth. (I know, I need to get a social life.) Apparently, some of us think of ourselves as “color-blind,” which was what people aspired to be in the 1960s, and they don’t see or notice the Asian-American or Latino members of Plymouth.

But when you read or listen to national news, you get a different view of the world. You hear about Ferguson, Missouri. You hear about Baltimore, Maryland. And some of us are old enough to hear the echoes of Rodney King’s beating by police in Los Angeles in 1991 and the ensuing riots. (As background, I’d like to let you know that I have been part of a small group of clergy pressing our police chief to work even more assiduously on the department’s use-of-force policy, which is already pretty strong.) Some of you remember the waves of race riots in 1968 following the assassination of Dr. King. Those are the events that make the headlines, but the reality behind them is what pervades the lives of many African-Americans today.

Yes, we see Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake of Baltimore, an African-American woman. Yes, we see Attorneys General Loretta Lynch and Eric Holder, African-Americans. Yes, we see President Barack Obama, an African-American. So, how can there be a problem?

I don't want to diminish the accomplishments of any person, but having gifted African-Americans in positions of political influence and law enforcement is only a first step, not the finish line.

We allow ourselves to forget the legacy of slavery and lynching in this country and consign it to the past. And we forget that the Ku Klux Klan lynched 19-year-old Michael A. Donald in Mobile, Alabama, in 1981¹, not so very long ago. And for Christians, especially African-American Christians, the cross on which Jesus died can look an awful lot like a lynching tree.

"Daddy, where are all the brown people?" Here is one place: "In 2010, all black men were **six times** as likely as all white men to be incarcerated in federal, state and local jails, according to a 2013 Pew Research Center study. [Pew] also found that black-white gaps in median household income and wealth had widened in recent decades, while gaps in high school completion and life expectancy had narrowed."²

I have never needed to have a conversation with my two sons about the police what to do if they are arrested in order to avoid violence. I have never had to tell them not to wear hoodies, because they look dangerous to white people who may be packing a gun. I have never needed to wipe their tears when they come home from school because someone called them "nigger."

I don't have time to walk through the troubled history of racism in this country, and there are no easy answers to this seemingly intractable problem. But I will tell you that it is something that racism is fundamentally a white problem, even in its subtlest forms...in the fears and stereotypes and assumptions we make that never pass our lips. It is something that we need to acknowledge. It is something that requires repentance — *metanoia* — among the dominant culture of this country.

Here is a good place to start: **listen**. Listen with an open heart and an open mind to what you hear African-Americans saying. Put your own judgments on hold and try to let their voices and frustrations soak in. It is bitterly painful to hear, but it is a step toward reconciliation and transformation of this deep sin.

Columnist and teacher Julia Blount wrote this last week in *Salon*:

Please let me tell you what I hear:

I hear hopelessness

I hear oppression

I hear pain

I hear internalized oppression

I hear despair

I hear anger

I hear poverty

If you are not listening, not exposing yourself to unfamiliar perspectives, not watching videos, not engaging in conversation, then you are perpetuating white privilege and white supremacy. It is exactly your ability to *not* hear, to ignore the situation, that is a mark of your privilege. People of color cannot

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/13/arts/television/13lynch.html>

² <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/18/chart-of-the-week-the-black-white-gap-in-incarceration-rates/>

turn away. Race affects our lives every day. We must consider it all the time, not just when it is convenient.”³

You can continue listening with upcoming adult ed. programs, including our visiting scholar lectures with Andrea White, a womanist theologian from Union Seminary in New York.

Deep *metanoia* starts by listening, hearing the brokenness of American history played out in millions of lives. It continues to transformation: changes of heart and mind, shifts in our patterns of belief and behavior. And it concludes in wholeness. Our nation can never be whole while the wound of racism remains open. And it takes people like all of you to really continue making a difference. It’s in the way we raise our children, talk to our neighbors, lift up our voices, and vote to affect social change.



You may know the passage from Isaiah the Ethiopian was reading: it is the story of the suffering servant from Isaiah 53. Let me read to you from that prophecy:

By a perversion of justice he was taken away

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living.⁴

We need to end perversions of justice. We need to work toward our goal of including “the other.” We need to work on our own racism and that which is rooted deeply in American culture. May God add blessing to our efforts at continuing to live into the kingdom Jesus proclaimed.

Amen.

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³http://www.salon.com/2015/04/29/dear_white_facebook_friends_i_need_you_to_respect_what_black_america_is_feeling_right_now/

⁴ Isa. 53.8