

**“I think we might have a ‘race’ problem in America”**

**1 John 4:17-21**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**Battle Creek, MI**

**7/9/23**

**<sup>17</sup> Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.**

**<sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.**

**<sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us.**

**<sup>20</sup> Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.**

**<sup>21</sup> The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1Jo 4:17-21 NRS)**

Greetings First Presbyterian Church! I am grateful to be with you today! I want to start today by saying thank you to your new Pastor, Lorenzo Small for this opportunity to address your congregation, and to do so at this specific time. I want to thank my friend Rev. Doug Nettleton and his wife Judy. Doug has worked with me in the Reimagining America Truth and Reconciliation Project for almost two years from Battle Creek. And I want to thank you as a congregation for welcoming Pastor Lorenzo with open arms, for taking on the challenge of stepping across “racial” lines, hard fast lines drawn in the sand, sand ***grown rigid like cement!*** For having the courage to welcome the best pastor for your congregation at this time, regardless of his color, his culture, his contexts...***because of his Christ!*** For working against the racial re-

entrenchment so prevalent at this historical moment and hearing Christ's promise of possibility and new-ness. Thank you for welcoming my former student, my brother, my colleague in ministry. I have a very simple message to bring to you today. It can be summed up quite simply as: ***"those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."***

I know that I come during a troubled time, that we are in an apocalyptic moment; that eschatological crises seem to beset us from every angle:

-We are just about a year beyond a global pandemic that not only took more than a million American lives, but that claimed a disproportionately high number of black and brown lives...it showed us that though black and brown folk were no more susceptible to the disease, the fact that so many live in poverty, work "essential" jobs that they could not work from home, rely on public transportation that forces us to be in proximity to others, are forced to live in densely populated neighborhoods (or ghettos and barrios); are making less than our white counterparts, are unable to afford healthcare or live in states that did not expand Medicaid for the working poor...that because of disparities evident along what we call "racial" lines...***we just might have a race problem in America!***

-We are just a few years removed from the Shelby v. Holder Decision of the Supreme Court that undermined the Voting Rights Act of 1965, an act that was paid for with the blood of James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo and Jimmie Lee Jackson and Andrew Goodman and James Cheney and Michael Schwerner and Medgar Evers and eventually Martin King. The day after that decision states like my home state of North Carolina passed a Monster Voter Disenfranchisement Act that the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals said worked with "Surgical Precision" to impede black and brown folks from voting. Because of the Shelby v. Holder decision, states across the nation have intentionally and shamelessly passed bills that made it harder for black and brown people to vote...***We just might have a race problem in America!***

-Worse last week the Supreme Court...which seems to be habitually exercising a particular bias, ruled that "race" can no longer be considered a factor in admissions in educational institutions, eliminating a measure that has been effectively used to provide

access to opportunity for people who had often been systematically shut out of equal access. The reason that this is worse is knowing how the past decision with voting rights clearly harmed Bipoc people, this should have served as an indication of what will happen now that the protections of Affirmative Action have been eliminated...***the Supreme Court should have known better! We just might have a race problem in America!***

-I also want you to know on a personal level, that the racial tensions in this nation have been incredibly high. As an avid waterfall hiker, I frequently find myself in Western NC on a Sunday afternoon when the weather is good, like today. I have been disturbed of late to see not only a proliferation of confederate flags...but a plethora of such flags hanging from pickup trucks alongside of trump flags. I know that some of you may question why the confederate flag...a symbol of Southern pride and heritage is such a threatening symbol?

Well, in part its because ***if it were the confederate flag***, it would symbolize people fighting for the right to dehumanize my ancestors, to enslave them and treat them as property to be bought and sold...***but it really isn't the confederate flag at all***. It is actually a flag used by a single Virginia regiment that only really gained popularity long after the Civil War, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as ***a symbol of the ku klux klan***...it was brandished in their meetings, imprinted on their identification coins, a symbol of terror used at lynchings and cross "lightings" and rallies. It was later used by Southern states, added to their state flags as recently as the 1950's and '60's as a reaction to "Brown v. Board of Education" and its order to end Jim Crow, for "Separate could never be equal." That which we call the confederate flag is really a supremacist symbol of terror and hate.

Jesus said...**"those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."**

I say all of this to say that it has been a “terrorizing” experience to be a black man, as the father of a young adult daughter in my own country, in the state in which I live, as we have sought solace in God’s country in the woods... The divisions we have over race are consequential and real!

**So, “I think we just might have a race problem in America!”**

And the problem is not just with supremacist groups and overt individual racist acts; *the problem is systemic!*

-That’s why in spite of the fact that blacks and whites commit crimes at roughly the same amounts (as Michelle Alexander notes in her book *The New Jim Crow*), blacks are prosecuted for the same crimes at a rate of 20-30x the rate that whites are prosecuted. In fact, for an African American male born since 2000, there is a 1 in 3 chance that he will spend some portion of his life in jail, or under the supervision of the criminal justice system.

-That’s why:

-We have frequent recurrences of Black Lives Matter Marches as innocent unarmed black people like George Floyd at a store and Brionna Taylor in her bed and Oscar Grant at a train station and Eric Garner on a street corner are killed by police and Trayvon Martin buying Skittles and Ahmaud Arbery jogging in his neighborhood are killed by vigilantes at a much higher rate than their white counterparts;

-We have school systems across our nation that continue to undervalue and underestimate and underfund and underserve and hence undereducate black and brown children;

-We have such a problem with homelessness because black and brown peoples who often, though working full time for un-livable minimum wages, can’t afford

to buy or rent a home at their low-wage income level as housing costs continue to skyrocket to prices out of reach.

-We have college educated African Americans males who are less likely to get jobs than their formerly incarcerated white American male counterparts.

-We have African American families that average 1/10<sup>th</sup> the wealth of similarly constituted white families.

**Why? *Because we have a race problem in America!***

***But Jesus said “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”***

Yes, that is what the problem is, a problem with *race*! I have often heard it framed as a problem with *racism*.

-As such it is described as a problem with *racist cops or a problem with racist people or even a problem with racist policies*. But that is not it!

-It is often describe as a problem with *“a few bad apples” or a “few bad procedures” or a “few bad practices.”* But that is not it!

The essence of our problem is not with individual racists or even groups of racists.

**Our problem is with the issue of “race” itself.**

-Race, the made up notion that we are all fundamentally different based on the colors of our skin;

-Race, the concept that differences on the outside can be correlated to differences in our qualities and in our value has human beings;

-Race, the belief that we exist in a hierarchy of human worth with those with less melanin in their skins being more valuable than those with more melanin;

-Race, the “legitimizing ideology” that made it alright for Europeans to take land from people (Indians) and people (Africans) from land;

-Race, the rationale used to justify slavery of black and brown bodies in our nation.

You see, *the fact that we believe in the concept of race is the fundamental problem that we face.*

*I don't think you get what I'm saying yet...*

*Let me try it this way...*

So we got rid of slavery, *but we kept race*, the legitimating ideology that was the skeletal structure that propped slavery up and race gave us the Klan, and Jim Crow, and Separate but Equal.

So we have the Civil Rights Movement pass the Civil Rights Act in '64 and the Voting Rights Act of '65 and Affirmative Action Policies, *but we kept race*; and race gave us the War on Drugs (what Michelle Alexander called a war on black and brown bodies) and Mass Incarceration.

So we elected Obama, began with Van Jones and Newt Gingrich to address Mass Incarceration and shift our policies on drugs, *but we kept race*, and race gave birth to Making America Great Again, the undermining of the Voting Rights Act, and now the undermining of race as a consideration (just a dimension to consider) in educational admission programs, and the racial animus of today.

As the Bryan Stevenson, the author of the bestselling book and now movie *Just Mercy* notes:

The enslavement of black people in the United States lasted for more than two centuries and was justified by an elaborate narrative of racial inferiority. *This ideology has endured beyond the formal abolition of American Slavery.* (Legacy Museum)

But, Jesus said “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

**Story of the rose bush by the mail box:**

**I planted a rose bush by the mailbox thinking it would make pretty pink flowers and beautify the neighborhood. A few month later the bush had grown and had lovely flowers and it really did what i had hoped...except... The neighborhood kids would go around the cul-de-sac and get caught on thorns (“Could you please get rid of that bush Mr. Sadler?”) and the mail carriers would get pricked by thorns putting my mail in the box (“Could you please cut that thing down Mr. Sadler?”). So reluctantly I cut it down and thought it was done.**

**But a about a month later, it had come back. At the end of the summer I cut it down again thinking that over the winter it would surely fade...but the next spring it grew back. Finally one of my neighbors who is a landscaper told me that if I want to get rid of the plant, I can’t just cut down the bush (the presenting problem); instead I would have to get rid of the root (the actual source of the problem).**

**If we want to eliminate the impact of racism and racial disparities, we have to eliminate the idea that undergirds these issues, the construct of race itself, the notion of irreconcilable differences in our ontology, biology, genetics, the notion that we are fundamentally different and that these differences are consequential; race is the root of our problems.**

***Our fundamental problem is not racism, it is “race!” It is this idea of fundamental ontological difference that must change if we are ever to change the system that supports it.***

The solution is not just found in changing a few hardened hearts or a few closed minds...our problem can only be resolved by ***changing a racialized system***. Frankly none of us today is guilty for creating this system; ***it is not your fault...it is not my fault***; it is something that ***we all*** born into, something that ***we all*** inherited. It is a system that has evolved in America since the

first Africans were brought here as indentured servants in 1619, were racialized, were dehumanized, were turned into commodities, things and not people. Each of us today has been ***raised in and shaped by*** this system... ***it is not our fault that it exists.***

It is not our fault, but as followers of Jesus, but as believers in the Good News, but as those equally created in the same image of the same God, but as members of the Church of the Resurrected Christ, ***it is our responsibility to do something about it.*** We can see the brokenness of this system,

-the way it differently values human beings; the way it treats some as though they are ***better*** than and Others as though they were ***lesser*** than;

-the way that it allows us to pretend that such differences in color that cause difference in outcomes is alright.

-the way it divides us all along color lines and ***gives those perceived to be white undue privilege and unearned advantage in our economic system,***

-the way that white privilege comes at the expense of black underprivilege and disadvantage and suffering,

[Tell the School drop off line story—Dropping off my daughter in the school line. There was one line to get into the school and occasionally people would pass in drive in the oncoming traffic lane. When oncoming traffic came down that lane they would have to pull in front of others in line until the other car passed. They would by taking advantage, disadvantage those who were waiting in line. There is not such things as advantage with out attendant disadvantage; no such thing as privilege for some without the cost of underprivilege for others. White privilege is not innocuous...it costs someone something for some to have advantage...]

We may not have caused these systemic imbalances, but many of us are benefiting from them and; ***but we are all responsible to do something to overcome them.***

Jesus said, **“those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”**



Yes we as Christians are heirs not only of the concept of race and a racialized system; we are also the heirs of the early Christian Church. The first problem that those in the early church had to overcome *was the racial line*. At that time, *we* were the racial Other. *We* were the outcasts deemed unworthy! All of *us* in this space are descendants of the Gentiles...those outside of the Covenant of Abraham, those fundamentally viewed as “UNCLEAN,” *Yet a Jewish Jesus by God’s Grace made space for us all!*

The early Christian community addressed the racial line that kept us Gentiles away from the Jews, and made of us a single table, a common people, we became:

no longer Jew or Greek, ...no longer slave or free, ... no longer male and female; for all of [us] are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28 NRS)

**We became one in Christ!**

And now in this time of racial division, it is imperative for us to come back together again, overcoming the racial lines, eliminating “race’s” power to define our being and separate us from each other, obliterating the gross disparities that make life on earth heaven for those in white skin and hell for those who are black and brown!

We have the power in Christ to overcome race. I know that many of us think of race as an eternal and intractable problem, one that has been with us forever and forever will be. But race is not eternal, it was a bad idea that is only a few hundred years old, was created to legitimate inequality, *and if we made it, with God’s help, we can surely unmake it as well!*

We former Gentiles, former outcasts, former unclean, former rejects *are now all the children of God*, made in God’s image, equally valuable, equally mortal, equally moral, equally intelligent, equally gifted, equally worthy of the best that God has to offer. Our equality is undermined by a bad idea, race; but *race is just that, a bad idea*. It has no power but that which we have given it; *and it cannot stand up against the power that God has given to us.*

We have overcome race before, we can overcome race again, we must overcome race, we will overcome race, *once we Christians realize who we are.*

*We are God's children of the resurrection*, those born of the promise, convinced of the reality that the Savior of the world was brown Palestinian Jewish carpenter from a ghetto town called Nazareth from which “nothing good could come.” This poor working class man of color was arrested by the oppressive power of state sanctioned force, convicted unjustly by a biased judicial system, and executed wrongly, “lynched from a tree” in an act of judicial malfeasance. The crucified Christ was buried on Friday afternoon with all hope; the promise of a better day was crucified with him! He laid in the ground all day Saturday...*but EARLY SUNDAY MORNING, God raised him from the dead!*

If God raised Jesus, then God can deal with race!

If God raised Jesus, then God can bring us back together!

If God raised Jesus, then God can make us agents of reconciliation!

If God raised Jesus, then God in us can overcome the divisions in this world!

We children of God have been charged to deal with race and to end this demonic division of human beings. We have the power in Christ to overcome this evil, and a constant reminder of why we must. Our Love of God is expressed in our care for each Other, each sister, each brother, for we cannot say we Love our unseen God if we do not first Love our sisters and brothers...regardless of their color, their culture, their creed, their “race.”

**For, “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”**

**So allow me today to end with a poem...I sometimes use verse to say more clearly what I want to convey:**

**We can't Love our brother or sister and**

**racialize them, minoritize them,**

**oppress them, distress them,  
incarcerate them, segregate them  
denigrate them, eliminate them  
ghettoize them, stigmatize them  
criminalized them, victimize them  
That's not what Love looks like.**

**We can't Love our brother and sister and  
Commodify them with slavery  
Terrorize them relentlessly  
Separate them unequally  
Treat them inhumanely  
Sentence them to poverty  
That's not what Love looks like.**

**We can't Love our brother and sister and  
Eliminate their opportunity  
Violate their dignity  
Limit their prosperity  
Deny their equality  
Question their humanity**

**That's not what Love looks like.**

**If we ever did believe**

**We Loved our God Who is invisible**

**Then that Love would be manifest**

**In our care for those for whom we're responsible**

**And we would not consider race**

**For we'd realize that behind each face**

*Is the very face of God*

**Reflected though unseen**

**So**

**Equality and justice**

**Equity and peace**

**Sharing of God's gifts**

**Captives are released**

**Poor are hearing good news**

**Aliens are being welcomed**

**Liberation is coming**

**Reign of God is beginning**

**That's what Love looks like**

**And when we Love each Other**

*That's what Loving God looks like*

In Jesus' name, Amen!

*I know this was a hard sermon to hear (didn't get many "Amen")*

*Imagine how hard it was for me to preach it...*

*We live in a wholly broken racialized system...*

*None of us here today is guilty for having made this system*

*We all inherited this broken...intentionally broken, twisted system*

*We are not responsible for creating the brokenness, but we are responsible to do something about it!*

*We are accountable if we leave this world without doing what we can to change it*

*Jesus' prayer gives us the solution: Your Kingdom come, your will be done, as in Heaven, so on Earth! May we work to build God's Kingdom!*