

Honoring Dr. King's Legacy

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church Pastor Bill Chadwick

Isaiah 58:4-6; Luke 4:16-21

Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday January 20, 2019

This year is an ignominious anniversary, the 400th anniversary of Africans being captured from their homeland and brought to this country in the fetid holds of slave ships in shackles and under the lash.

Please allow me to be personal today as I share with you some of my own evolution in regard to racism in the United States.

I'm ten years old. We are on a week's vacation in Florida, the "we" being my dad, my six year-old brother John and myself. The first evening we are seated in a restaurant and I notice that on each table is a little placard. What does it say? Anyone remember? It was standard practice throughout the south. "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone." I understood the words, but I was puzzled as to why they had to have a notice on each table. I ask my dad, "What does that mean?"

He quietly responds, "It means they don't serve Negroes." I was rendered mute.

The next day we went to the wharf and saw sea turtles for the first time in my life. I also saw more signs for the first time in my life: "Whites only" and "Coloreds Only," on the drinking fountains, which were not identical. The next year those signs came down, as segregation was officially made illegal by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

I grew up in an entirely homogeneous neighborhood. *This* neighborhood, four blocks down Old Shakopee Road. In twelve years in the Bloomington School system I never had a person of color in any of my classes. Not an African-American. Not a Mexican-American. The exchange student was from Sweden. She looked like all the other girls at Kennedy HS except she didn't shave her armpits. I went to St. Olaf College and during my freshman year for interim, now know as January term or J-term, I took a class entitled, *Black American Literature*, in which we read and discussed 20 books in four weeks. The class was taught by...a white man. Even back then, I found it ironic. It *was* St. Olaf. Their idea of diversity in the faculty was one or two professors that weren't Lutheran, though they no doubt were still Protestants.

My parents taught me to respect all people as the same, *except* ...for the time when my mother said, "You wouldn't *marry* one, would you?" She was a prisoner of her own experience...or lack thereof.

Suffice it to say, I am a recovering racist.

I reluctantly share with you two very regrettable events from my life. When I was a teenager working at Cal's Market, two doors east of here, a number of us guys were talking about what we wanted to do for a vocation when we grew up. One of my co-workers, a lad of sixteen, said, "I want to be a cop when I grow up, so I can beat up Negroes." Though he didn't say Negroes. His statement is seared into my brain. I was rendered mute.

(I hope it goes without saying that I understand that the VAST majority of police officers are people of integrity motivated by the desire to serve. Vast majority!)

Then a few years later, in college at the University of Minnesota, after St. Olaf kicked me out, I was in a theater class. About thirty students. None of us knew each other. It was the U, with 40,000 underclassmen. For the first assignment we were to pair off and act out a short scene. I took notice of a beautiful blond student nearby and made a beeline for her to pair up. We discovered that the section we were to act out had a kissing scene in it. I was, needless to say, delighted. She was appalled and refused, and so we chose a different scene. She eventually went on to act in movies, starring opposite Matt Dillon in *Drugstore Cowboy*, and appearing in dozens of other films. Kelly Lynch. Back to the class. Assignment two we had to switch partners, unfortunately. Kelly was matched up with an African-American man this time. The scene they were to play also included kissing. And again she refused. And I thought, "Gosh, I'll bet he thinks it's because he's black. I should tell him that she's an equal opportunity refuser of kissing scenes." But I didn't. I have no idea why.

I am utterly ashamed and regretful of my silence in these cases. Two times I said nothing. For the past 45 years I've chosen to speak up and speak out.

Certainly, in regard to racial equality and opportunity, things are better than they were in 1963. In many, many ways they are better.

However, they are not as much better as I ignorantly believed three or four years ago. Three phenomena have helped me to see more accurately the reality of where we are today.

First, bringing Jermaine Ross Allam, a young African-American, on our staff as interim associate pastor from fall of 2015 through the summer of 2017, was an education for me. I was surprised—and dismayed—at how ignorant I was about life for a black man in the Twin Cities.

I had come to know Jermaine a bit through presbytery stuff and I was tremendously impressed by him. So I was beside myself with excitement when I learned in August of 2015 that Jermaine was interested in joining the Oak Grove staff, which I had sounded him out about earlier. He had already been invited to preach at Oak Grove before I learned of his interest, and even though I was on sabbatical I decided I'd sneak in the back of the sanctuary at the last minute to hear him preach. So I parked across the street and was making my way toward the back entrance when I see Jermaine walking in from the parking lot... at 9:27! Worship was to start at 9:30. I thought, "Oh boy, THAT'S not going to work, if he joins the staff here. At Oak Grove we function by uptight white guy time."

Turns out that Jermaine had left home in plenty of time. He had been pulled over by the police on his way in...despite the fact that he had done nothing wrong, was wearing a suit and driving his entirely innocuous Toyota pick-up. I later learned from Jermaine that he regularly got stopped about seven to nine times a year. And every time he is stopped, he fears for his life. (And I recognize that every time a police officer makes a stop of anyone, he or she is understandably fearful.)

I get stopped about once a decade, and I have always done something wrong to warrant getting pulled over.

Over the course of the two years that we worked together I found it so educational to see how we each—Jermaine and I—reacted to news events, such as the killing of Jamar Clark. We start from such different places, based on our personal experiences. Again and again I was reminded that "We don't see the world as it is; we see it as we are."

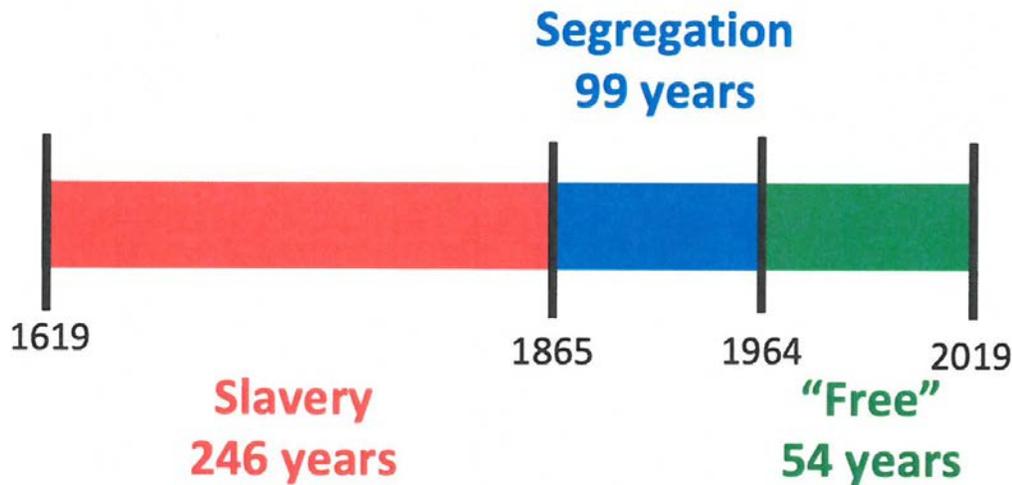
He was the first one to educate me about the different experiences of African-Americans versus recent African immigrants. There's something very different about having your ancestors come to this country on a slave ship and living with generations of slavery and mistreatment, versus coming to this country by your own volition.

As many of you know, Jermaine worked half-time for us and half-time for Kwanzaa, now renamed Liberty Presbyterian Church. He administered their after-school tutoring program for kids in North Minneapolis. One day he said to me, "The difference between the schools in southwest Minneapolis and the ones in North Minneapolis...well, it's apartheid. There's no other word for it."

The second eye-opener was in the past few years reading about transgenerational trauma, how trauma can be passed down through the DNA, likely a significant factor—not the only factor, but a significant factor—in poorer health among African-Americans than

white Americans. www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/daily-videos/can-trauma-be-passed-to-next-generation-through-dna/

Milissa Carter shared with the elders at the session retreat a week ago some of the precautions that her husband, Eric, an African-American man, finds it necessary to take every day of his life. When he enters a room, he looks around for potential allies or foes. He often works in Atlanta, and when he does, he lets his colleagues drive. What does that daily stress do to a person?



Milissa also shared this powerful graph. Some say slavery is “ancient history” and black people should get over it. But look: slavery for 246 years, followed by legal segregation for another century. And into the present continuing institutionalized racism in so many ways today—education, housing, gun violence, effects of climate change, health care...

The third phenomenon that has educated me, and all of us, to the true reality of racism in the US today, was the 2016 presidential election. As many have observed, it was clearly a reaction to the Obama presidency. And that election has given permission for underlying attitudes to bubble up into the public eye from the cesspools in which they had been festering. Mattie Hawley observed at the session retreat last weekend, “I hope that what this is, is a death sputter of hate.” We certainly hope. At any rate, it has shown us more accurately where we are today and how much work we yet have to do.

In other sermons I have talked about evolutionary biology in regard to the use of violence. Over the millennia of human history, our ancestors who were good at fighting or fleeing lived long enough to pass on their genes. Thus, we today have a highly

developed sense of “fight or flight response” in the face of threats. But Jesus called us to a Third Way, neither fight nor flight, but to choose the power of nonviolent resistance.

So, too, in the category of race relations we need to overcome our evolutionary biology. Our early ancestors found it valuable for their survival to stick with their own groups and to fear “the other” who didn’t look like them. “A study following Hurricane Katrina found that people showed more empathy to victims of the same race than they did to victims of a different race—in a way that affected people’s willingness to help after Katrina.” This no doubt helps explain the pitiful response to Katrina as distinct from other natural disasters.

A series of studies released recently “used various visual tests to see how people perceive the bodies of white and black men...When participants believed the man in the images was black, they generally saw the man as larger, more threatening, and potentially more harmful in an altercation than a white person. And they were more likely to say use of force was justified against the black men than the white men.

www.vox.com/identities/2017/7/24/16019440justine-damond-police-shooting-race.

“Another study found that people tend to associate what the authors call ‘black-sounding names,’ like DeShawn and Jamal, with larger, more violent people than they do ‘white-sounding names,’ like Connor and Garrett...A character with a black-sounding name was assumed to be physically larger, more prone to aggression, and lower in status than a character with a white-sounding name.” The lead author of the study, Colin Holbrook, stated, “I’ve never been so disgusted by my own data.” (*Ibid.*)

Jesus calls us to rise above our biology and our prejudices and see each other as sisters and brothers.

As many of you know, Minnesota has the largest racial disparity of any state in the country in relation to things like income, home ownership, graduation rates, etc. There is work to be done. So what do we do, as individuals and as a congregation?

As a congregation, we already do things in our participation with any number of organizations that serve a disproportionate percentage of people of color: Oasis, Sheridan Story, VEAP, Liberty Church, Northside Women’s Space, supportive housing, Aeon, and others.

As individuals, let us speak up, in the face of racist hatred, or racist ignorance. Our Black Lives Matter signs have engendered some heated phone calls and emails. I’ve remained calm, but I have not backed down.

Let us always be educating ourselves. A number of books and podcasts are listed for you in the bulletin.

Pastor Mary suggests that we make charitable giving choices that help people of color.

Here's also a place to put some money. And you get it back. Right now, in north Minneapolis there *are* lots of predatory payday lending businesses, charging exorbitant rates of interest. (The average loan term is about two weeks. The finance charge ranges from **\$15 to \$30** to borrow \$100. For two-week loans, these finance charges result in interest rates from 390 to 780% APR. <https://paydayloaninfo.org/facts>) However, there are no credit unions in north Minneapolis.

Kris's older sister, Lynn and her husband Rich, are helping a group that is starting a black-owned credit union in North Minneapolis, Village Financial. (villagefinancial.org) If you have some money to deposit, please go online and check it out. Even a thousand bucks would help. And you're not donating it, you are just depositing it, like in any other credit union.

Many people have invoked the name of Dr. King in the face of the immigration situation. As King often said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice anywhere." Any time we are working for justice we are extending the legacy of Martin Luther King.

And the legacy of Jesus.

May we be courageous, creative, compassionate and above all faithful. Amen?