

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, February 6, 2022
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Black History Month
Racial Justice Sunday

“Moral [Person] and Immoral Society”

Second of four sermons in a series on
the United Church of Christ’s Statement of Faith in the form of a Doxology
entitled “Faith Leading to Doxology and Transformation”

Christian Scripture: John 13:31-34

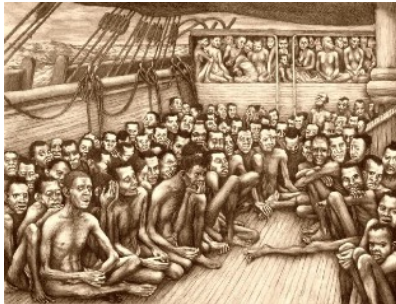


Many times, when the issue of racism is focused upon, I have heard it from those whose hue is as pale and pasty as mine: ‘I’m not going to apologize for being White’. Such a sentiment contains two false assumptions. The first false assumption is that only *individuals* are guilty of racism. The second false

assumption is that 'whiteness' no longer confers privilege, is neutral, and, therefore, any racial analysis is, in and of itself, 'racist'.¹

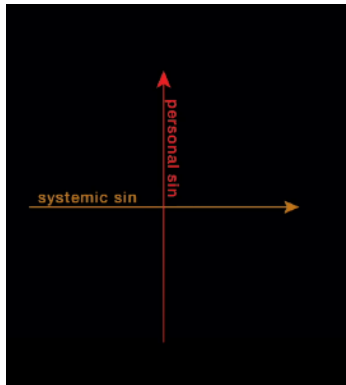


As we recognize Racial Justice Sunday and Black History month this morning, I pray we would hear and accept two lessons that counter these two false assumptions. One, the issue of racism is not *necessarily* only about you or I as individuals; it is about the structural nature of our society. Racism is as much, if not more, a collective or corporate sin as it is a private one. Two, racism is still alive and well in the United States.



¹ This is also a false assumption held by those who oppose Critical Race Theory.

In the region that would become the United States, Whites captured, bought, sold, and held in bondage Blacks as slaves as early as 1526.² The consequences of almost five-hundred years of institutional racism have not vanished in only fifty years since the *modern* Civil Rights movement. If parity, or justice, is sought, then Whites owe Blacks at least four-hundred and fifty years of extreme privilege. Whites as a collective still very much benefit from being White. People of Color as a collective are still very much disadvantaged by being People of Color. Speaking politically, our country is not yet ‘a perfect union’. Speaking theologically, the kingdom of God on Earth is not yet ‘just as it is in heaven’.



Our sacred scriptures teach us that God is more often concerned with societal sin, that is systemic, or structural sin, than with individual, or personal,

² Crystal Ponti, “America’s History of Slavery Began Long before Jamestown (1619)”, *History*, August 14, 2019. Found at: [https://www.history.com/news/american-slavery-before-jamestown-1619#:~:text=Archive%2FGetty%20Images,The%20arrival%20of%20the%20first%20captives%20to%20the%20Jamestown%20Colony,as%20early%20as%20the%201500s.](https://www.history.com/news/american-slavery-before-jamestown-1619#:~:text=Archive%2FGetty%20Images,The%20arrival%20of%20the%20first%20captives%20to%20the%20Jamestown%20Colony,as%20early%20as%20the%201500s.,), accessed February 5, 2022.

sin.³ This morning I would like us to focus on the corporate nature of racism and patriarchy and thus on the collective nature of sin.

Please notice something very curious about our denomination's Statement of Faith that we are exploring for four weeks. Listen to its emphasis on the collective.

“You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin. You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through the prophets and apostles. In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.”

Please read with me the second stanza of the doxology, “You seek in holy love to save all people [‘all people’, that is ‘everyone’] from aimlessness and sin”. That is collective. “You judge people [the word ‘people’ is plural] and nations [not ‘individuals’, but ‘nations’] by your righteous will declared through the prophets and the apostles”. Our doxology continues, “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us [again, ‘us’ is corporate] and shared our common lot [again, ‘our’ is plural and ‘common’ means ‘shared’] conquering sin and death and reconciling the world [‘the world’ is collective and it

³ José Porfirio Miranda, *Communism in the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 41-48.

even includes the Creation in which humans live and are but only a part] to yourself". In our statement of faith, there is no 'me'; there is no 'you'; there is no 'my *personal* Lord and Savior'. No! It is all corporate, collective. It is about us, together, inclusive, the nations, the world! Friends, just as salvation is corporate in our Statement of Faith, so also is our sin corporate. Therefore, *I do and will* collectively apologize for what 'whiteness' has been for four-hundred and fifty years and still is.

When we address the issue of racism, those of us who are White must examine ourselves as individuals. Yet, as people of faith we are also compelled by the scriptures to examine issues of sin corporately. You and I can be the most moral people in the world, yet the systems that society creates often cause you and I to inadvertently, unknowingly, and even *unavoidably* participate in sin.



As Franz Fanon (1925-1961) so eloquently explained, even oppressed peoples can participate in their own oppression because they, like their oppressors, are trapped in the same collective systems.

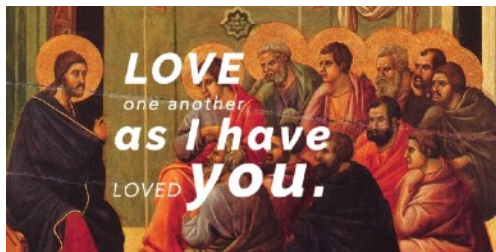


I consider myself moral. Yet, much of my privilege today is due to the fact that my father and grandfather attended Dartmouth College that at the time did not admit Blacks or women. People of Color and women today are still disadvantaged by the privilege my white father and grandfather received. I celebrate that I belong to a church that has three strong professional women (a doctor, a vice-president of human resources, and a financial executive) leading our church. I celebrate that our new Brattleboro police chief is a Black woman, who many rightfully state is not just qualified, but over qualified, for her position. Truth be told, patriarchy and misogyny are older systemic sins than even racism.



The famous public theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) the dynamic of how individuals are often good while collective groups are sinful in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). Niebuhr wrote, “As individuals, [people] believe

they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic, and national groups they take for themselves, whatever their power can command”.⁴ Without even yet witnessing World War II Niebuhr explained, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) did after him, how moral individuals, even in a so-called ‘Christian nation’, can act corporately with profound evil. In his book, Niebuhr explained how collective groups deny or explain away “the brutal behavior of human collectives of every sort” while also suggesting “how individual morality can mitigate the persistence of social immorality”.⁵ I can love and support my Black daughter, Madeline, as much as I do my White son, Micah. Yet if I do not participate in forums and advocate that racism be addressed at the Brattleboro Area Middle School, then I am perpetuating a sin that has existed since the 1520s.⁶

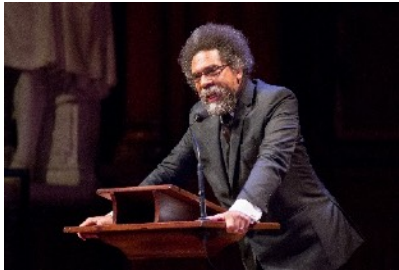


⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 8-9. Found at: Amazon.com, <https://quotepark.com/works/moral-man-and-immoral-society-13772/>, accessed February 5, 2022.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Nicole Pereira, “Why Should Anyone Be Punished for Having the Courage to Call Out Racism”, *The Commons*, February 2, 2022, C1.

In our scripture this morning, Jesus offered his disciples a new commandment: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another”. In this new commandment I hear from Jesus a morality that is directed corporately as much, if not more, than it is individually. Sadly, contemporary evangelical White Christianity has privatized Christianity, making Jesus a Savior of individuals with whom he is in private relationship. Yet, Jesus was deeply embedded within the Hebrew prophetic tradition that understood morality on corporate scale, as *nations*, just as our Statement of Faith does! Our Statement of Faith proclaims that Jesus judges people and *nations*!



As we celebrate Black History month and as we remember Jesus’ command to love one another, let us understand that which Cornel West once proclaimed: “Justice is what love looks like in public”.⁷ In other words, West stated ‘love’ is ‘private’ and the equivalent, ‘justice’, is ‘public’. Justice is public love. Friends, this is the hard truth of the matter, the only way to obtain justice, that is ‘public love’,

⁷ Cornel West, “Justice Is What Love Looks Like in Public”, Howard University, April 17, 2011. Found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqP7S_WO6o, accessed February 5, 2022.

is through *politics*. I am thankful for Brattleboro's own Curtiss Reed, Jr.; he demonstrates to us in Vermont how politics implements 'public love'.

But we are not here now for politics. We are here for doxology.⁸



We are here, as Jesus' disciples around our tables. At our tables, we take the bread and the wine, and share in a meal together. Black and White. Male and female. With this bread and wine, we express our love for Jesus and for one another. With this bread and wine, we fill ourselves with the divine, so that we have the wisdom, and the power, to go out in the world to fight for justice, that is, 'public love'.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"

⁸ Praise. 'An expression of praise to God'.