

“Anti-Racism: A Prophet in the Land”

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Texts: Ezekiel 2:1-5, Mark 6:14-29, and II Corinthians 12:6-10

I am an educated person. I grew up during the Civil Rights era, and my Canadian parents always taught me to respect everyone regardless of the color of their skin. I listen to NPR and watch PBS. I voluntarily participated in a workshop on white privilege, led by two non-white women who were very patient and encouraging. I joined in vigils for gang black-on-black violence in the Chicago suburb where I ministered back in the day. I am enlightened. And I was severely challenged in June by the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ Annual Meeting presentations, discussions, and worship focused on anti-racism.

Like I expect all of you, I do not personally consider myself a racist, and I have been hyper-vigilant about racism in me and in my children. I thought I was doing okay. But I wasn't really listening, not deeply. And when I listened at Annual Meeting, and heard anger, I found myself defensive, nervous, wondering what the right response would be. I was deeply distressed for days, wrestling with some guilt, some shame, mostly confusion, unsure how to understand whiteness or blackness or Native-ness, or how to hold onto hope. I realized I was experiencing what sociologists call “White Fragility”: Not having to deal continuously, at both personal and societal levels, with the costs of racist structures, I have little muscle, little stamina for being in the uncomfortable place I've been in lately. That in itself has been a humbling blow. I am more immersed in racism than I have admitted in a long time, and even more, I recognize that I have done little, risked little, to change that.

Just two weeks after being so confronted with my racial reality, came Charleston. Suddenly the whole conversation about race in America moved front and center again. Immediate response, especially from Christians, has of course been horror, condemnation of racism, deep sympathy (or at least, it feels deep), prayer and presence and public cries for change. It was a horrific act, and therefore easy to respond to. The call for the Confederate battle flag to be removed from South Carolina's state capitol grounds, its disappearance from other states, its image gone from goods at Amazon and Walmart, mark a powerful symbolic shift. But all the same, voting rights protections remain curtailed in southern states; economic opportunities are not equal; the justice and penal systems are stridently racialized; the education gap between white students and students of color in Minnesota is higher than ever. Infant mortality for Minnesota babies born to black women with PhD's and good-paying jobs is higher than it is for white women with high school diplomas in low-wage jobs. The “weathering hypothesis... speculates that the health of black women may begin to deteriorate in early adulthood as a result of the cumulative effect of dealing with societal disadvantages such as segregation and racism... ‘It causes stress on people that really impacts how they function. It impacts their cortisol levels, it impacts their brains [and] it impacts the babies that are born.’”¹

This is intractable racism permeating the structures of our society, and we who are white keep benefitting and protecting it in ways that we don't even see. We don't intend to be racist. But still we benefit from the way things are, and from the way we do and don't see things. God's response to intractable sin, to societal structures that benefit some and oppress others, remains what it has always been: God calls forth prophets to speak truth to power and engender change.

Carri Hoagland, Clyde and Julie Johnson and I were deeply challenged, taught, and privileged to hear Dr. Jennifer Harvey speak to us prophetically at the Minnesota Conference UCC Annual Meeting. There's much more to be said, but the core of her message is that we must abandon our attachment to reconciliation language in dealing with race and racism. "Dear White Christians" is the title of her book: "For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation." It's not that reconciliation isn't a laudable goal, especially for Christians who see reconciliation as core to our religious and spiritual identity. Reconciliation is the heart of the gospel. But we have not done the hard work necessary to achieve real reconciliation. If we had, if we had truly listened to angry, truth-telling black voices in the 1960's, we wouldn't be where we are today. Our faith lifts up the one who died for reconciliation to happen. But we expect it to be easier than that. Maybe, if it were white people dying instead of black, or Native, or Hispanic, maybe we'd see things a little differently.

To be about the prophetic work, the holy work, of dismantling racist structures, we need to spend much more time listening, and listening, and listening, and listening. Not explaining; not defending; not having our say or insisting upon our own way, but listening, listening. Only when painful stories in South Africa were told, could the Truth and Reconciliation Commission even begin to consider the possibility of reconciliation between individuals. The work of national reconciliation never ends; we must listen, and listen, and listen again, we who are used to things as they are, who benefit in invisible ways, who never quite get it. And as we begin to hear, and to understand, we need to repent — to think anew, to accept our complicity and regret our role in unjust structures, and to earnestly desire change.

The other action Dr. Harvey calls us to is reparation – literally, actions to repair the brokenness, the injustice. Concrete actions, beyond listening and listening and listening. Please note that "reparation" doesn't necessarily mean cash payments to descendants of those who had been held as slaves, or to all people of color. It may mean that, but it means so much more. It means going beyond standing in solidarity at vigils and marches, though these are good, too. It means speaking up to lawmakers about policies that can break old cycles. It means creating a scholarship as a concrete action to right educational disparities. It means investing white privilege in changes that undermine white privilege. We engage in these actions, and let reconciliation come, if it will, as honest fruit, not prematurely pressured by our discomfort and our power.

This is a weekend for "Dear White Christians" in America to reflect upon America's uniqueness, which I offer up as a more apt descriptor than "exceptionalism," a term loaded with racism, arrogance, ignorance, and injustice. Because alongside remarkably powerful principles and insights, America was also founded, economically and morally, upon genocide and slavery. It's a complex heritage which, the better we understand it, the more it can inform the future. We who are Jesus-followers are always Jesus-followers first; our citizenship, like every other identifier

and commitment, is lived out in light of our first commitment. That makes us all prophets in the land.

It's a tough calling to be a prophet. Jesus noted that many prophets were killed, revered only in retrospect. I invite you to study today's scripture lessons yourself to see what they say it means to be a prophet; here are a few core elements I found:

- Prophets are called by God, not self-appointed nor acclaimed by leaders or even the people
- Because they are called by God, prophets are inspired and empowered, speaking and acting with moral, divine authority
- Prophets are courageous and strong, yet personally humble; they speak not for or of themselves, but for God, and of the way of Jesus, of the good news
- Prophets cannot expect to be popular, understood, or accepted
- Prophets never go it all alone; Jesus gathered a cadre, and sent them out in pairs; prophets have each other to "test the Spirit" and for support. Thus when Bree Ann Newsome scaled the flagpole on the South Carolina Statehouse grounds last week to remove the Confederate battle flag, she quoted scripture to fortify herself and had a companion with her.
- Prophets are not responsible for the response of others, but simply to be faithful to their calling to speak and act

"Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. ... Do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words ... and do not be dismayed by their looks ... You shall speak my words to them" (Ez. 2:5-7). May it be said of you that there is indeed a prophet among us who speaks up, who listens and listens and listens, who sees in new ways and repents of the old, who engages tirelessly in acts of reparation. Perhaps we can glimpse the possibility of true reconciliation. At least we can be faithful to that good news, and trust in the power of Christ to keep us honest and at it. Amen.

¹Lorna Benson, *Infant Mortality Higher Among MN Blacks, Indians*, MPR News 6/30/15.