

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

February 7, 2021

No Favorites

Rev. Susie Maxwell

Let us pray ~

Ah ~ Isaiah's famous words:

Have you not known?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood ~

In light of the systems of injustice and oppression that are designed to benefit white folks like most of us here, I'd say the answer was a big fat no.

Because when it comes to white American Christianity, a significant and influential number of believers assert all kinds of things in the name of God and Jesus, suggesting they unequivocally know, have undeniably heard.

Got the message loud and clear and feel that from the beginning, God *especially* blesses white America, especially blesses all that we - we being the keepers of western white exceptionalism (to borrow a phrase from Walter Brueggemann) - God blesses all that we have and all that we do.

In a September 2020 article in *The New Yorker*, called “American Christianity’s White-Supremacy Problem” author Michael Luo summarizes the research and data and the bottom line is not pretty. It implicates white evangelical Protestants, white mainline Protestants (that’s us) and white Catholics when it comes to a Christian hold on racist views and beliefs. For example a majority said that the “Confederate flag is more a symbol of Southern pride than of racism” and nearly two-thirds of white Christians over all said that killings of black men by the police are isolated incidents rather than part of a broader pattern of mistreatment. And over 60% of white Christians disagreed with the statement that “generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.”

Luo cites the work of Robert P. Jones, who heads the Public Religion Research Institute. Jones’ work leads to the hard truth that: “the more

racist attitudes a person holds, the more likely he or she is to identify as a white Christian.”

And, interestingly, the correlation is just as pronounced among white evangelical Protestants as it is among white mainline Protestants and white Catholics—but here’s what’s shocking: that stands in stark contrast to the attitudes of religiously *unaffiliated* whites.

Jones’s concludes that, “If you were recruiting for a white supremacist cause on a Sunday morning, you’d likely have more success hanging out in the parking lot of an average white Christian church—evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, or Catholic—than approaching whites sitting out services at the local coffee shop.”

Luo also cites the 2020 book “Taking America Back for God,” in which sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry examine the white Christians idea that America is, and should be, a Christian nation.

They write that the defining concern of Christian nationalism is the preservation of a certain kind of social order, one *threatened* by people of color, immigrants, and Muslims.

Crucial to helping us with where and how to help effect change are their findings that Christian nationalism is *not* the same as personal religiosity.

Whitehead and Perry found that religious commitment—as measured by church attendance, prayer, and Scripture reading—*tends to improve attitudes* on race, therefore serving as a progressive influence.

Luo reminds us that during the era of Jim Crow, when Southern statutes enforced the strict separation of races and restricted the rights of black people, Northern Protestant churches remained largely segregated and muted in their criticism. Why? Many white Christians saw segregation as simply part of God's plan for humanity.

As a result, he reminds us that we still hear “slave-holding religion” preached on Fox News, conservative talk radio, and the rest of the right-wing media ecosystem; they daily bear false witness.

I’d add that this ugly bottom line clearly points to silence and the resulting consent from far too many pulpits. Including mine.

So what to do and how to do it? Well, in situations like this, after turning to God, I typically then turn to Biblical scholar and wise person Walter Brueggemann when needing sensible guidance.

I’m reminded of his words in his 2014 publication, “Sabbath as Resistance; Saying No to the Culture of Now” Some of you may recall me referencing this book in the past.

Brueggemann says the North American church first has to extract our western white entitlement which in the US has to do with this history of

political exceptionalism where we've come to think we're God's chosen people in the world.

We have to separate THAT notion from the Gospel. Brueggemann writes that our elevated identity and the Gospel have been confused and entwined. The Gospels weren't written to justify what we do from the lens of perceived exceptionalism and military might.

The Gospels were written to hold the tension of what is done with what should be done.

And so, Brueggemann goes on to say, if they can be pulled apart, then the church is in a much better position to speak critically to our culture.

Our sacred texts give us some big cues on how to pull the notion of our own exceptionalism out of the Gospel.

The first big clue is something Jesus did time and again: Naming.

Wherever he shows up, he goes to the center of what is going on and he names it — in other words, he enters all the wounds and illnesses and

through his willingness to encounter and stand in those places, and trusting God to work through him, he brings healing.

You see it in the Gospel reading for today — it's a story from Mark and in the story, Jesus shows up in the center of wounded places, shows up where there is pain and discomfort and as a result:

Cures a woman of her fever,

Cured many who were sick with various diseases,

And casts out many demons.

Beloveds, we too need to show up in the center of our wounded places, show up where there is pain and discomfort. We do that by beginning to name the wounds.

That means we need to tell the truth about our society.

And the truth is that as a nation, we are firmly founded on white supremacy. And this system keeps blacks oppressed and gives most of

us here leverage, and the benefit of an imbalance of power and control and the socio-economic upper hand.

I feel certain, given the last 4 years, most of us here are not surprised to hear these words. Whether we like hearing them or not is a different matter, and so I also imagine there are all kinds of responses to them from anger to denial to shame and sorrow.

If you need to, feel free to set up time with me to process any of your thoughts and feelings around these things because until we can accept and manage the truth that we are a racist nation?

Then that truth is always going to be somewhere over there . . . and nothing will change.

Brueggemann reminds us that in our fear to let go, we are increasingly exploitative, abusive and violent in our practices and our socio-economic political policies.

So, another piece of absorbing the painful truth is reflecting on how damaging these truths are to those who are vulnerable in our society.

Telling the truth also makes us confront our own limits and beliefs.

To our limits, how far are we willing to go and what are we willing to let go of as people who benefit from the systems in play, in order to bring blacks to the same table that we enjoy.

And to beliefs, what do you believe about God?

Do you believe God holds white America as favored?

Do you believe that if we work to bring all to the table that God will lead the way?

Do you believe that God will provide enough for us if we work to bring about change and justice? Trust God's vision and provision?

It is an enormous faith wager and it can be an awful hard sell when it comes to our individual rights and comforts.

But lest we forget, there is one profound gem across all of Jesus's healing stories and it nearly knocked me out of my chair as I read:

After Jesus heals and cures people, word gets out and everyone in the area is searching for him.

But his response? Not to stay there.

In other words, not to keep the message in one place. In other words, not locating and setting aside as special. No exceptionalism. No favorites.

In chapter 1 verse 39, Mark's Jesus says, *Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do.*

Beloveds, these healing stories are a reminder that the good news belongs to everybody.

The message is

Not special for America

Not particular to those who are white

Oh and here's one that might even sound heretical, the message is
not just for Christians

Because the way the message works is that the message comes first, then everything else falls into God's realm. Not the other way around where the message is distorted for justifications and distortions to keep false senses of favoritisms in place.

We have so terribly far to go, both deep within our individual selves and as a privileged people.

As we move through this month and begin widening our understandings and making room, my prayer is that we take intentional time to reflect on our white luxuries. Read articles, watch films, attend some online virtual

Black History Month events (I'll continue to provide the link to many events through the National Museum of African American History and Culture). Join forces with our Just Action Committee.

And when Black History Month ends, may we find that our work continues, as we heal the sick and broken places in our beliefs, in our culture and in our systems that keeps our black brothers and sisters from the same fruits that we enjoy.