

Sunday, August 21, 2016  
Luke 6:20-26; Ephesians 6:10-17

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### **Why Black Lives Matter**

Sadly, I can't remember exactly which shooting this experience followed, but not too long ago, at one of the many vigils we've held in Old Towne, a man came to the microphone and said something like this, "Please don't tell me you're 'color-blind'. I'm black. I want you to notice that. It's important for you to pay attention to the fact that my skin is not the same color as your skin because it means that my life is not the same as your life. Just the other day I was pulled over and stopped by the police where they kept me waiting for almost an hour. I hadn't been speeding, my brake lights were working, my tags and insurance were all up to date... there was no reason for them to pull me over – except that I was a black man driving in a white neighborhood."

After the shooting at the Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston last summer Rev. Sam Muyskens and Bishop Wade Moore – two faith leaders here in Wichita spearheaded something they called "Beyond Tolerance", encouraging other faith leaders to move beyond mere tolerance towards genuine, meaningful relationships with people who are different than themselves. They organized several breakfast meetings for clergy – black and white – so that we would have opportunities to start to learn to know one another. It's a sad truth that these opportunities had to be created because we don't know one another! Then they encouraged us to partner up and bring our congregations together, to learn to know one another.

My friends and colleagues Cliff Loesch and Alan Stucky (Cliff pastors the University Friends Church and Alan pastors the First Church of the Brethren) partnered, respectively with Titus James, pastor of North Heights Christian Church and Roosevelt DeShazer, pastor of the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church. I partnered with Dr. Cynthia Davis, pastor of the Greater Faith Christian Church. We've all been learning a lot from one another! Parts of my sermon this morning are taken from a sermon Alan preached two weeks ago. He did some great research and graciously offered me his notes. One of the first questions Alan asked as he researched was, "Why don't we know each other very well?" He learned that Wichita is actually a very segregated town – and it has been for a very long time.

North Heights Christian Church, Progressive Missionary Baptist and Greater Faith are all located in the northeast part of Wichita. That's no coincidence. Alan found a series of maps from 1940 to 1970 that showed where African Americans lived throughout Wichita. As we scan through these maps, it's striking how crisp and consistent the borders of this area are. First, 1940. The darkened area shows where 90-100% of the Black community lived. Now, 1950. On this map, each dot represents one black person. 1960. This map, again, shows the percentage of the Black population and where they lived. Finally, the map from 1970, showing the percentage of African American residents in the total population of Wichita and where they were located. I don't know how well you could tell, looking at those maps from such a distance, but they all showed clear, straight boundaries that really didn't change much over those 4 decades – and haven't changed much in the decades since. The maps showed specific streets where there were 90-100% Black folks living on one side of the street and on the other side of the street it's almost 0%. Why?

Well, for starters, Wichita is so deeply segregated because of legal and political restrictions. Until 1954 there were laws on the books about where Blacks could and could not live. Some of those lines are so straight because there were laws saying that those streets were the boundaries.

Political forces were also at work. In the 1950's there was something called "Urban Renewal", but it wasn't that for everyone. Among other things, it relocated hundreds of people from the area which is now where the city and federal buildings are. All of that used be the black business district, but during that period, those people were relocated to north of WSU.

In addition to these forces there were economic forces. Starting in the 1930's and going into the 1960's there was a federal program called the Federal Housing Administration. As part of the New Deal the FHA started backing and subsidizing all kinds of home loans and very low interest rates... that is, if you were white. There were maps created during this time period that rated neighborhoods according to their "stability". This next map, from 1937 shows how this rating system worked. Essentially, if you were an all white neighborhood you got the highest rating which was green. If your neighborhood was full of "undesirables", Blacks or other people of color, your rating was the lowest, indicated in red. Not only did this system of "redlining" keep people from getting legitimate loans, it allowed predatory lenders to come in and extract a tremendous amount of wealth from communities of color. This map gives us evidence of systemic racism that continues to shape our city today.

We've looked at some of the legal, political and economic forces responsible for the segregation of our town. These forces were also powerfully present in the educational system. Some of you might remember how hard Dean Stucky, member of this congregation, worked for desegregation when he was Deputy Superintendent of USD 259. Gretchen Eick writes about it in her book, *Dissent in Wichita*.

"Many Wichitans clung tenaciously to their opposition to desegregating elementary schools. It is not clear whether they were guided by organizations, but they came out in force whenever desegregation was on the school board's agenda, packing the meetings. Although many black parents attended board meetings, whites, who made up 90 percent of the city's population, predominated. Many were determined that their children would not be bused into black residential areas. For the superintendent (Alvin Morris) and his deputy, Dean Stucky, who both supported cross-busing, the animosity of this group was daunting. 'It was almost like being in the middle of a war,' Stucky remembers...Both men required police protection during this time (which was 1970). People berated them and telephoned threats, someone threw a Molotov cocktail at Morris' front door, and windows were shot out of his home. Opposition was fierce. Stucky and Morris' task – to work in the background and build a new consensus – required skill and courage."

Neighborhoods in Wichita were created explicitly on the basis of race. And the shaping of these neighborhoods has had a huge impact on the last 100 years of our city's formation. The last map I'll show you is the 2010 census date map. The blue dots represent predominantly white neighborhoods, the green is predominantly black neighborhoods. The black community remains, overwhelmingly, where it has been for nearly a hundred years.

What are the implications of housing laws that prevented people of color from owning homes? Home ownership is one of the key ways to accrue generational wealth. If you can't own a home, it's much more difficult to pass on wealth to your kids. Property values have become the tax base for the community which means that you have lower property values it affects things fire and police department services and all kinds of other social services. A huge implication, though, is access to quality education, which affects your ability to get well-paying jobs which means people often turn to illegal activities to pay the bills, which affects the number of people in jail, which destabilizes families, which creates increased poverty... and the problems continue to grow.

Systemic racism is not just a thing of the past. It's a thing that continues to affect our lives today. When you begin to look at the data, you realize that what I've shared here this morning is only the just the tiniest tip of the iceberg. Here are just a few statistics about the criminal justice system: On average black men's prison sentences are 20% longer than white men's for comparable crimes, and while black people and white people use illegal drugs at similar rates, black people are far more likely to be arrested for drug use. Blacks are far more likely to be stopped and searched even though white people are more likely to have something illegal in their car. Those wrongfully convicted and later exonerated by DNA are disproportionately African American, and black kids are far more likely to be tried as adults and to receive life sentences.

When we're talking about economics and jobs, blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed. Black former convicts get fewer employer callbacks than white former convicts. One study that sent out thousands of identical resumes showed that if you have a name like Emily or Brendan you are more likely to be hired than if your name is Lakisha or Jamal. High schools with mostly African American and Latino students are less likely to offer courses in Algebra or Chemistry than high schools with mostly white students. And African American kids are more than twice as likely to be suspended as white students, even in preschool. Race has a tremendous impact on wealth disparity and inheritance which can be seen in the fact that the average net worth of white people is about 13 times greater than the average net worth of black people.

There is huge disparity within the healthcare system. One study found that 67% of doctors show negative bias towards African American patients and did you know that right here in Wichita the infant mortality rate is 4 times higher for blacks than for whites? One study looked at people's implicit biases and found that about 75% of white North Americans had trouble associating the word "black" with the word "good".

The point Alan and I are trying to get across in this sermon is that when we talk about racism we're not just talking about somebody yelling the n-word. We're talking about something much deeper, much more engrained. We live in a culture, a society, in communities, in social structures, in governmental and legal and economic and educational structures that are vastly different for different people, depending on the color of your skin. Even if we don't think of ourselves as being "racist" we've all grown up in a world that treats different people very differently based solely on their skin color.

Or, to say it in the vernacular of our time, regardless of our good intentions or the way we think we might treat others, the reality is that the world around us treats some lives as though they

matter less than others. The reason that it is absolutely critical for us to say things like Black Lives Matter is because the overwhelming evidence is that our world says they don't.

Which is what Jesus was telling us in the Lukan version of the Beatitudes. Jesus was living in a world not that much different than our own. He lived in a world in which some lives did not matter as much as others. For example, Roman citizens had explicit rights and privileges that non-Romans did not. Roman lives mattered. Others did not. If you were wealthy, or famous, or in a position of power your life mattered more than others.

And what did Jesus have to say about this? He named and lifted up all the people who were told that their lives didn't matter. The Bible uses the language of being blessed. If you're blessed, you matter. In the face of a society that said some lives matter and others don't, Jesus didn't say all lives matter. Jesus said poor lives matter. Weeping and mourning lives matter. Hungry lives matter. Hated, excluded, reviled lives matter. Meek lives matter. Peacemaker lives matter. Persecuted lives matter. Jesus lifted up and named those who were marginalized. To do the same in our world today is to speak the words of Christ right now.

Racism is not simple prejudice. Anybody can be prejudiced against someone else. But racism is prejudice plus power. Racism is about systems and governments and economics – the “bigger than ourselves” kinds of things that shape the very DNA of our society.

As Christians we have a biblical mandate to fight against this kind of systemic racism. The NRSV says in Ephesians, “For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” The old King James version says that our struggle is against principalities and powers. Our core struggle as Christians is against those principalities and powers and racism is one of those. It's bigger than any one person. It's something that is beyond each of us, but yet it shapes our daily lives. It is an evil force that holds *all* of us captive – black, white, brown and everyone else! We are called to fight against racism because we are as trapped by it as anyone. We as white people are not truly free until our brothers and sisters of color are also free.

This is why Black Lives Matter. And this is why the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church is partnering with the Greater Faith Christian Church for a weekend of relationship-building, and worshiping together three weeks from now on the weekend of September 10 and 11. On Saturday, the 10<sup>th</sup> the Greater Faith congregation will join us here at Lorraine Avenue out on the lawn for an afternoon of bar-be-que and potluck lunch, lawn games, music and fellowship. Then on Sunday, the 11<sup>th</sup> up to 50 of us will go to their meeting place to worship together.

In doing this, I know that we'll make new friends, we'll cross some boundaries and break down some dividing walls. We'll also challenge the principalities and the powers. We'll break bread with these brothers and sisters that the forces of systemic racism would rather keep us apart. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of this present darkness. Let us face into this struggle, for it is the work of building the kingdom of God. Amen.