

What's Our Nation's Story? Our Past? Our Future?
Rev. Sarah Campbell
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Mayflower Church

"It feels different somehow," Nikole Hannah-Jones writes in the New York Times, noting that the uprisings all across the country, even in smaller communities, are fully multi-racial. If you have to choose between experiencing this sermon and reading this *remarkable* article entitled "What Is Owed" in the New York Times Magazine, June 28, read the article! I hope you can do both.

I know we are all reading a lot, having a lot of conversations, remembering a lot and wondering about our memories and what we were taught and what we weren't taught about racism in our lives, and in our country these last many months. Saturated we are. And as well we should be *if* we are white. No matter how much work we've already done, in our own minds and institutions, we are all in it together now, at the same time, grappling with our nation's story, our history, how we tell it, *and so, our future.*

Come with me now, in your imagination, into Howard Thurman's childhood in Florida, in the early 1900s. For some, those of us who are black or brown, this may be familiar. For others, we who are white, it may be shocking. From his book written in 1965 [The Luminous Darkness](#).

When I was a boy growing up in Florida, it never occurred to me, nor was I taught either at home or in church, to regard white persons as falling within the scope of the magnetic field of my morality. To all white persons, the category of exception applied. I did not regard them as involved in my religious reference. They were not read out of the human race—they simply did not belong to it in the first place. Behavior toward them was amoral. They were not hated particularly, they were not essentially despised; they were simply out of bounds. It is very difficult to put into words what was at work here. They were tolerated as a vital part of the environment, but they did not count in. They were in a world apart, in another universe...

What was true for me as a boy was true also of any little white boy in my town with an important and crucial difference! The structure of the society was such that I was always at his mercy. He was guaranteed by his society; I was not. I was always available as an outlet for his hostility whatever may have been the cause. Thus I was taught to keep out of his way, to reduce my exposure to him under any and all circumstances.... It was taken for granted that the very existence of law was for the protection and the security of

white society. Always and everywhere you were strictly on your own and your life depended upon the survival techniques you had learned in the living....

The only way I am able to preach this sermon this morning is knowing that there are other voices in this pulpit, that we try to have many voices in this pulpit, and not just 60 year old white people. Our congregation is racially mixed, predominantly white. I'm white, but we as a church are not, and so choosing words, like we and you and us, is daunting in this particular sermon.

Perhaps a little locating of myself is in order... raised liberal Christian, shaped by the social ferment of the 1960s as a child, I am a minister because of MLK. Developed my own major in college, entitled social change, mostly studied American history. Spent one semester in Chicago, studying race, the only class. Justice has been at the heart of my 30 years of ministry. Still and all, I was naïve, thrilled by the election of a Black president, thinking all of our civil rights work had come to fruition. Marjorie Otto, late member, much wiser than I, shook her head and said "oh the hard times are just beginning".

This is a thumb nail sketch of the person through whom you are hearing God's word this morning. And remember, it is only God's word if it touches your heart. You know this. These words of the Psalmist are particularly meaningful for this preacher this morning:

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, Oh God...

We are in a time of national soul searching, of honesty before God, and of repentance. What is our story as a country? What is our history? What is our future? Who are we?

Nations do this. Nations enter into seasons of soul searching. However imperfect and however certain some future backlash, nations create pathways and containers for this brutal honesty. Think South Africa: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And Germany has been ruthless in its soul searching after the Nazi era. "Germans have applied the lessons of their unique and horrid history to every aspect of their postwar democracy, including how they police their country. They have eradicated any Nazi culture from their policing, pulling it all out by the roots. They've decentralized and demilitarized. Police are required to pass a rigorous multiyear curriculum with history and Germany's constitution at its core. The bedrock of public safety in Germany is a strategy of communication and de-escalation. When they graduate they are rewarded with high trust levels in society and civil servant status that guarantees decent pay and job security." (Bennhold)

We are grappling mightily with the issue of policing, with potent words like “abolition” and “defunding”, deciding what changes we need to make so that everyone can feel protected. Every city in the history of civilization has had to figure this out. Minneapolis is going to the root of the problem and of the need.

And what we are discovering as we grapple with the issue of policing is a broader truth of our nation’s history, whole sight... You follow the thread of policing back and you discover things that shift your entire understanding. It changes how you tell the story of your nation. This is not just about learning the interesting facts of history, it’s about learning and hearing, as if for the first time, something that breaks open your heart and you will never forget and it changes you...

...and we’re wondering these days, at least I am.... If the story many of us tell, about our nation’s Black history includes slavery, the underground railroad, the civil war, the civil rights era, the electing of a Black president, and the backlash. But this policing thread, it seems, is taking us more deeply into some lesser known stories. The stories of the Reconstruction and Jim Crow. Of course we’ve known about them but we may wonder why haven’t these two stories been as imbedded in our mind and prominent in the way we tell our history?

Part of it is because the way the history has been written and taught. The civil war was made fuzzy and complex, intentionally framed this way: that it was about two sides who fought bravely for their own good reasons...rather than that it was about slavery. And part of it is about intentional cover up. Intentionally erasing history. How many of you know about the Tulsa race massacre, and the burning of what was called black wall street in 1922, when White vigilantes murdered and looted one of the most affluent black communities in the US. Gone in the blink of an eye-- 40 square blocks, 1000 homes, a dozen churches, a library, a hospital, and 300 people, the story was buried with the bodies....

So part of it is the history books and what we were taught or not taught as children, but part of it is something else, very disturbing, this is why we whites need to do soul searching, why this season of atonement is so essential...For example, Speaking personally, *Maybe I did* learn about the Tulsa massacre in college, or the lynching in Duluth, in the same state of that college, but why don’t I remember this?!

Howard Thurman writes: “May it be remembered that the cost to the perpetrators of segregation is a corrosion of the spirit and the slow deadly corruption of the soul. ...”

The policing thread, you follow it back to its origins, the culture of American policing began when slavery ended and whites needed a way to subordinate and control the freed black people. Whatever policy it was called-- black codes, vagrancy laws-- it was a mechanism for social control of black people. It had little or nothing to do with protecting all the people.

Which begs the question? Why did they need to be controlled?

This brings us to one of the most remarkable and lesser known stories in our American history. Perhaps the civil rights story pales in comparison to this? The story of the reconstruction.

Once freed, the first thing the former slaves do is look for their family members. After that they build a new life. The future feels limitless! They want land and it happens for some, very few, those 40 acres and a mule... but then this distribution plan is promptly shut down. They vote. In the ten years between 1868 and 1878 1500 black men were elected to congress or state legislatures. As one black legislator from South Carolina said: Behind us lie 243 years of suffering, anguish and degradation. Before us lies our mighty future." Reconstruction legislatures built public schools, hospitals, welfare systems, churches. Black businesses were created.

But, as one historian says ominously, "the more African Americans achieved, the more they put their lives at risk." (Gates Jr.)

It was all so promising, these 12 years after the civil war, kind of like our "nation's second founding." (Foner)

And then.. it all halted. It was as if the red sea rose up again, trapping them and pushing the promised land even further and further still into the future. The southern elites regained control and the federal government did not step in. The promise of 40 acres and a mule was never fulfilled in the south, ... Voter suppression soared and the violence... oh the violence... lynching was commonplace, this public form of intimidation, like crucifixion in the roman empire, to keep the whites in control. There is also a little known story within the story the reconstruction and the Jim Crow backlash... The elite whites were *most* threatened when interracial coalitions of poor blacks and poor whites, started to organize for their shared economic interest. This was deeply threatening to the financially dominant whites.

I remember learning about slavery as a child. It took me to evil in a way I could never have imagined. Now some 50 plus years later, when learning more about the healing, the real and fast transformation of the Reconstruction era that both blacks and some whites created... imagining the hope these former slaves were feeling,... and then!!! how brutally and thoroughly it was defeated, shut down, all hope shattered... and the glee of the masses of white people at lynchings ? ...grappling with this period of history?... How our country went from the greatest hope to the greatest terror in a matter of months...this, one of the most degrading moments in US history...well, we are in greater need than ever of confession... as the story we tell of our country only intensifies....

This must be what happens when people worship a false God. The golden calf.

Could it be that this is what racism in our country is ultimately about? Wealth. And the power to control in order to keep the wealth. The rich whites convinced the poor whites that it was all about race when it was really all about wealth. Slavery was about wealth. Share cropping was about wealth. Lynching and police brutality, all forms of social control, about wealth. As Ta-Nehisi Coate's puts it: "racism is the child of economic profiteering, not the father".

Blacks created the foundational wealth of this country with their slave labor. When freed they were given nothing and hindered from getting something, all the while people with white skin were receiving entitlements from the government, like the homestead entitlements that many new white immigrants benefitted from -- 160 acre tracts of free land... 20% of those of us who are white are homestead entitlement descendants. It is no wonder that the wealth chasm between whites and blacks is huge today. "The average black family with children holds just one cent of wealth for every dollar the average white family with children holds." (Hannah-Jones)

President Johnson, a powerful white man from the south, the architect of the Great Society saw this clearly. He said, and I'm altering this a wee bit using the word Black instead of negroe... *"Black poverty is not white poverty. These differences are not racial differences. They are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice and present prejudice. They are anguishing to observe. For the black they are a constant reminder of oppression. For the white they are a constant reminder of guilt. But they must be faced, and they must be dealt with, and they must be overcome; if we are ever to reach the time when the only difference between Black and whites is the color of their skin."*

Yes we need deep changes in policing. Yes, we need to understand implicit bias, the automatic thoughts in our brain that culture has put there and how our white souls have been sickened by all of this. WE need more Black CEOs and our culture our arts our institutions all must change profoundly. WE must expand voting rights and secure them. All of this must change. But if we don't address wealth acquisition, it is all for naught. We must finish the work of the reconstruction. It's still all about those 40 acres and a mule...

Justice for George Floyd. What does that look like?

Justice for George Floyd is a verdict appropriate the crime.

Justice for George Floyd is changing our policing model, pulling it out by its Jim Crow roots and creating something entirely new.

Justice for George Floyd looks like the institutional and cultural purging of racism.

Justice for George Floyd looks like completing the promise of the reconstruction.

Do we really believe in the constitution, We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (all people) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness?

Do we really worship one God?

Summer has passed away now. The journalist Charles Blow writes at the beginning of the summer... *“White Allies don’t fail us again. How will our white allies respond when this summer has passed? How will they respond when civil rights gets personal and it’s about them and not just punishing the white man who pressed his knee in George Floyd’s neck? How will they respond when true equality threatens their privilege”?*

And Howard Thurman reassures all of us that “God is not through with us.”

Sources

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Introduction to Scripture and Reading of Scripture

Our Jewish siblings are now in their holiest season...this period of time between Rosh Hashanah, the new year and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. It is the season of soul searching, of fasting and prayer, of brutal honesty before God, and of repentance. There's something seasonally so right about this, this soul searching, as the sun sets earlier and the cold sets in. And this year especially, after the lynching of George Floyd, and the awareness that it is people of color who are suffering the most from Covid in the US, we are being plunged into a time of national soul searching, honesty before God, and of repentance.

One of the important Yom Kippur stories is the story of the Golden calf. One rabbi says, "the sin of the golden calf is widely regarded as one of the most degrading moments in Hebrew history."

Remember: the Israelites were in the wilderness, en route from Egypt to the promised land, and they had very recently heard these words from God via Moses:

"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol." They had just recently heard this and then they do this!. Listen:

Exodus 32

32 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."² Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold,^[a] and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD."⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷ The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them.