

“Who are we to be in 2021?”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 1/3/2021

Matthew 13:31-32; Jeremiah 17:7-8

To know who we are to be is to begin with who we have been (play video):

The Camp (Tish Farrow):

Bev Cosby, a white man from Lynchburg serving in the Pacific during WWII, had served alongside black sailors. But when they all boarded buses to come back to Virginia after the war, both black and white sailors, he observed how badly the black sailors were treated in the Southern towns that they would stop in. They couldn't use the same restrooms, they couldn't eat or stay in the same places, and the black sailors often had to be taken off to the black communities to receive services during their trip. Several black soldiers weren't able to make it back to the bus in time and they were later dishonorably discharged and denied benefits, really as a result of systemic racism. This injustice greatly affected Bev. When he and his brother Jack would later start a recreational camp for the neighborhood kids in 1950, having both just come back from war, they wanted to base it on peaceful principles that embrace nature and love for their fellow human beings. It was never a racially segregated camp though most of its campers at first had been white due its location. Eventually, though, more and more black campers began to enroll, which unfortunately caused some white families to pull their children out in protest. But Bev and the camp staff stood firm and even embraced its new name “kum-ba-yah” to describe our collective interracial “friendship circle,” reminding us that we are all members of the same human race and that we should care for one another and the earth we depend on.

The Church (Ruth Harrison):

After already starting the camp, Bev felt like a spiritual dimension was desperately needed. He and his brother Jack were already nurturing the spiritual needs of their camp counselors and he wanted to start a different kind of church where everyone felt like they belonged, where age, race, and economic status were irrelevant. However, Bev ran into issues with several of the local denominations when trying to find support for his new kind of church. He went to his home denomination, the Presbyterians, but they felt like an interracial church would be too controversial. He went to his older brother Gordon's denomination, the Southern Baptists, but they felt it was again too controversial. He got the same response from the local Methodists and Lutherans too, and it wasn't until he was up north that he came across a denomination he'd never heard of, Congregational Christian (which is called the United Church of Christ today). He met with its president Dr. Horton, who explained that their churches had a long history of being integrated and would of course support his new church. That is how Church of the Covenant became the first intentionally integrated church in Lynchburg in 1954. It is also why it is the first United Church of Christ congregation in the area. And our inclusiveness has grown to include people not only of all races, but also of all mental & physical abilities, sexual orientations, gender expressions, gender identities, immigration status, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

The Lodge (Jerry Griffin):

In 1960 in Lynchburg, like in the rest of the country, folks were in the midst of tearing down racially oppressive structures. The “separate but equal” fallacy was out the window and the black community wanted equity in education, equity in goods and services, but people were slow to change. Local schools were still segregated, hospital services were segregated, and even restaurants were segregated. In defiance, two white Lynchburg college

students—one a camp counselor and member here at Church of the Covenant—joined with two white Randolph college students and two black Virginia Seminary students to implement a sit-in at the Whites Only Patterson Drug store downtown thanks to Dr. Virgil Wood and the local NAACP's support. They sat at the counter and asked to be served, only to then be arrested and jailed in December 1960. Bev along with the leadership of the church, the camp and LCF, pushed to open a coffeehouse they had already been working on opening in this converted garage here on our property. They called it The Lodge of the Fisherman (today people know it as "Common Grounds Café") and opened its doors as Lynchburg's first fully, racially integrated restaurant in January 1961. And it was a place known to accept people from all walks of life, people from the margins. Artists, musicians, poets, people of different races, religious beliefs and even sexual orientations were welcome here, at our coffee house where people were given the freedom to engage in authentic communication with one another. However, the whole city at the time wasn't so supportive and tried to close it down, but it endured anyway, overcoming obstacle after obstacle. And when Rev. Martin Luther King came to town in 1962 to encourage de-segregation in Lynchburg, he came right here to the Lodge to meet with local church leaders the same day he would give his "American Dream" speech. Bev and other white leaders from our church and camp would serve the lunch to Dr. King and Dr. Wood and other local black leaders. The next time some of the folks from here would see Dr. King would be while marching with him from Selma to Montgomery three years later.

The Pools (Jesse Teasley):

July 4, 1961 was a particularly hot day in Lynchburg. Already restaurants were being forced to racially desegregate, but schools wouldn't desegregate for another year yet, and well swimming pools—that was a big no, no. Everyone knew back then that whites would not swim with blacks. Many here thought there was something dirty about us and they refused to swim in the same water. Can you imagine that level of prejudice? By 1961 some white families had realized we had both black and white campers using our pools and decided to pull their kids out of the camp because of it. But as soon as six young black boys had asked to swim at the all-white Miller Pool, the city decided to shut all the city pools down in response, including the "black pool" at Jefferson Park. This move left no place for poor folks and folks of color to swim during one of the hottest summers on record. A 12-year-old black resident would drown two weeks later while forced to swim in the canals downtown to cool off. This was more than Bev Cosby could handle and made sure to open the camp pools to the whole city. The pool was easily at capacity as mostly black families descended on the grounds to get some relief from the heat wave at the time. But it was in these waters that you had the first public interracial swimming in Lynchburg the summer of 1961.

I think the Lord has helped us understand more and more of our purpose as a community this past year, even in light of a pandemic that has tested us over and over. Like any time of upheaval we are each forced to stop in our tracks, take stock of ourselves and reflect on what we're really about. What are you all about? What am I all about? These are the questions that have bounced around in our heads and hearts this past year in 2020, and like we discussed last week—this past year has most certainly forced us to appreciate the power of community, even when we're physically isolated from one another. We learned early on in our 2020 pandemic that our church embraces the symbol of the "tree," even adopting it as our logo. I had been reading "The Secret Life of Trees" and was touched by their acting as selfless "life-givers" to the forests all around us and seeing this fact juxtaposed with Jesus' alliteration of the kingdom of God being a tree planted from a mustard seed in Matthew 17, I was convinced more than ever that our very essence as a spiritual community was wrapped up in that very idea. We're a tree providing shelter, refuge, and sustenance for all who seek it whenever and wherever. And in that vein we did not waver as painful injustices confronted our society throughout the summer months once

again. We recognized the importance to stand with our hurting brothers and sisters of color. We led out even among our fellow progressive churches in writing letters to the editor about racial injustice and publishing letters of solidarity with the hurting, committing to see systemic racism finally come to ruin. We embraced our own identity as a tree that provides a place for even the birds to build their nests. Our dear friends of the LGBTQ+ and Allies Spiritual Group called Refuge needed a place to build their nest recently and our members offered them to build it here with us, in our community—on our branches. When there was clearly a need for more strategic effort needed to see systemic racism eradicated in our larger community, several of us banded together to explore what we could possibly build together in cooperation with our local leaders that would provide more branches to build nests; this has morphed into our newly forming Mission Group that hopes to one day build a Center for Racial Justice & Healing.

When we were growing up and became familiar with the phrase to “offer an olive branch” I don’t think many of us had envisioned it was to be our actual branches, but it is, and most of us know this now. We are actually offering our own branches for the taking because God gave them to us to give—and my hope is that in 2021 we grow our branches immensely and provide even more space for “perching” for those who need the rest and even more shade for those who are in need of relief. But with such a commitment to an outward extension of ourselves comes with it an equally critical task to maintain an inward journey that is substantial.

In Jeremiah 17:7-8, it says, *“But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence rests in God. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”*

Our mission of loving others, for in John 15 Jesus specifically tells his followers to “go and bear fruit, fruit that will last,” referring to a love for one another, we must maintain our roots in the river on one side as well as extending those roots out to others. We must stay in a state of inward growth, inward healing. This will be the test as well in 2021, can we stay refreshed and awake enough to be the tree we need to be. I believe we will, but it will take considerable commitment from all of us. We must prop each other up and provide opportunities to practice the disciplines many of us ascribe to: 1) Daily connection with God through prayer, contemplative silence, and study of Scriptures and God’s wisdom. 2) A true stepping out in love-of-others each day (we must demonstrate our love for all God’s creation, including our fellow human beings). 3) Let us not harbor the resources God gives us but let them flow freely in the direction of healing all those around us, alleviate suffering, and bring about transformative change. This is the Gospel Message, a message of **being**, not simply of “telling.” Transformation of heart and mind of the world starts with our own transformative work. So may 2021 be our defining moment, working towards love in all things, heart in all things, transformational living in all aspects of our lives. Let us grow out our branches a bit.

Shalom