

What a joy it is for me to worship with you each Sunday, and to have a chance to share this morning!

The traumatic death of George Floyd and other people of color - at the hands of those charged with *protecting* them, is appalling! The terribly disproportionate Covid-19 deaths and other serious effects on people of color *cannot* be forgotten! As such realities sink in, I trust that what I am feeling is a sense of *awakening*, and hopefully more and more Americans are sensing the same. I pray that a sense of urgency to change will actually bring *real* change – and that we will come out of the shade into the light.

Newly awakened white Americans are trying to face head-on our *ancestors'* part in the design of what we are now seeing as “a *caste* system” - centuries old – which still prevails - and I am complicit. This has brought me to confession and repentance. Repentance means a *turning* – and here I mean a turning *from* the status quo *to* a sense of renewal and transformation!

Renewal requires *action*. Whether it's in relation to the subjugation of African American, Native American, or other racially oppressed people - if we don't *act* to try to *heal* these relationships, there can never be a healed humanity and Earth.

Most of us will acknowledge the defining place that the *ownership of land* occupies in our American capitalism - in American life! Let's go back 150 years to the consequential year of 1865.

As the Civil War was winding down, Union leaders gathered a group of black ministers in Savannah, GA to consider how to help the thousands of newly freed slaves. From that meeting came Gen. William T. Sherman's “Special Field Order 15”. It set aside land along the Southeast coast so that “each newly freed family *shall have a plot of not more than forty acres of tillable ground*”. Gen. Sherman then ordered the army to lend *mules* for this agrarian reform effort. For four short months from January to April in 1865, freed people widely expected to legally claim “40 acres of land and a mule” after the end of the war, but soon afterward, the policy was reversed through actions by President Andrew Johnson.

On May 9, 1865, the war ended and freed people were on their own! Just imagine the effect that the payment to each freed family of 40 acres and a mule 155 years ago, might have had on the economic health of their descendants. What a regrettable decision! Some progress was made toward the end of the nineteenth century in the form of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, but white power prevailed!

By the way, the reparation effort continues. Perhaps Congress will pass H.R. 40, the Congressional Reparations Study Bill, in the next few years. This action would at least begin a *study* of how best to bring about justice.

Fast forward to Dolly Cardwell in the 1960's, over a century after the attempt to provide 40 acres and a mule. Amid the unrest of the 1960's and 70's, I was first a young woman teaching in elementary school, and subsequently a stay at home mom after our two sons were born. I was shy and easily intimidated, but knew that "God Was *Not* Dead!" and that the civil rights struggle led by Martin Luther King Jr. and the related protests happening around me were all very important... but I was intimidated nonetheless. Our local newspaper at the time, was the 'intimidator-in-chief'. I didn't speak up in the way Bev Cosby and a few brave friends did. As the descendant of slave-owning ancestors for the most part, "I was who I was". Five years earlier I had been embraced by this church however, and I was learning a new path. I stood close to those who spoke up but I was in their shade and I was mute. But God was not finished with me yet.

In the turbulent 60's and 70's many African American people bravely led the way to an awakening. A few white people woke up and asked "What has happened to us?" Segregation is profoundly unjust! Black and white together they sang, "We shall overcome!" as the struggle continued. Again some progress came in 1965 in the form of The Civil Rights Act. Strides were made but white people kept the power and oppression continued.

Fast forward again to 2021. What healing acts can we take now, to heal relationships with people whose current suffering has evolved from the slavery or the stolen land of the past? How do we sustain our resolve - our commitment? Healing our sorely divided nation seems like a mammoth task these days. To make any progress, those of us privileged white people, need "to remember and acknowledge America's original sin", (or as Isabel Wilkerson puts it - The Origins of our Discontents" and then confess or repent on behalf of our ancestors who live on in us, as well as for *our* own complicity through all of *our* years.

The Church of the Covenant has for years been creating a safe space for people to come together to tackle big, yet specific, problems - in our personal lives and in system' ic problems in our community. As a church we strive to form *relationships of trust* which are so crucial before change can be realized. We try to bring together people whose hearts are aching for resolution, people who are oppressed, agencies with experience, community leaders - to dream of what can be, and then get to work!

Irving Stubbs, one of the founders of our church, tells this little story of unknown origin:

A Native American boy was talking with his grandfather. "What do you think about the world situation?" he asked. The grandfather replied, "I feel like [two] wolves are fighting in my heart. One is full of anger and hatred; the other is full of love, forgiveness, and

peace.” “Which one will win?” asked the boy. To which the grandfather replied, “The one I feed.”

None of us is perfect but each of us has the power to offer our God-given gifts to *equality* and *equity*. The transformation of our minds and hearts is the key that unlocks our gifts. Our *will* is the issue. We need to educate ourselves. More relationships must be formed between oppressed people and people of privilege! We need to show up with courage and to speak up.

Deidre Harris George, expressed this so well in a Facebook post last July:
(I quote) “Combating racism is an individual moralistic choice because it is not a requirement for existence. There is no penalty for being a racist or going along with the status quo. Until everyone admits that the foundations of systemic racism are economic disparity, strength and growth, very little will change. And then white people have to be okay with Sharing, Not being first all the time, Following sometimes, rather than always leading, Listening, rather than speaking, Imbibing the notion of ‘us’ and ‘we’, rather than always ‘I’ and ‘me’”. (end of quote)

Am I willing to come out of the shadows and create a brighter future for my community and my country, for my grandchildren and their children, who by the way, twenty years hence, will be the minority race in America? Is my good will genuine, strong and sustainable? What acts will I take to increase my commitment? How can I share more freely and strategically? Which “wolf” will I feed? Will I learn to practice listening and following, rather than always speaking and leading? Am I thinking and acting for ‘us’ more than ‘me’?

Let me close with the last few lines of the amazing Amanda Gorman poem, entitled:
The Hill We Climb:

“... When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid,
the new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.”