People Colors
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
January 19, 2020 (Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Weekend)
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

Texts

Isaiah 9:1-4
9:1 But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

9:2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.

9:3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

9:4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Matthew 4:12-23
4:12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

4:13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali,

4:14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

4:15 "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles

4:16 the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

4:17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

4:18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen.

4:19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

4:20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

4:21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.

4:22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

4:23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Prayer

Sermon

Pantone 38-8 C. That seems to be my Pantone industrial palette shade, the skin tone from somewhere in the center of my nose, when I am not blushing.

I learned this from Brazilian photographer Angélica Dass, creator of the Humanae exhibit. Ms. Dass photographs people’s faces against a plain background, and then zooms in to the middle of each nose, capturing the exact color of their skin and matching it to a Pantone shade which she then makes the background for their portrait through digital editing. She has taken over 3000 close up photographs of people’s faces, folks from all walks of life, folks from 19 different cities around the world. There are nearly 2000 Pantone shades, several hundred of which are part of the spectrum of human skin colors. As near as I can tell, every possible shade of skin is represented in Ms. Dass’ project. Among the most interesting sets of faces - those whom we might categorize as belonging to different racial groups - who share the exact same skin tone.

In her TED Talk, Angélica Dass describes the reason she took on this project. She was born in a family full of skin colors - her father had chocolate skin, her grandmother porcelain, her grandfather’s skin resembled vanilla or strawberry yogurt, her mother was a cinnamon skinned daughter of a native Brazilian. She describes her own skin as like coffee. Within this spectrum of flesh tones, skin color and the social ideas of race did not matter. But as she grew and had more interactions outside of her family, people she encountered perceived her skin color to determine her social status. She was assumed to be a maid, nanny, prostitute.

Her photo project highlights the true and diverse range of human skin tones and examines the codes society develops around skin tone. She breaks open the notions of “black, white, red, yellow” skins and races, and asks what is really going on here. She also offers a mirror for people of every skin tone to find themselves within an amazing work of art, and therefore, within our world.

When I first saw Angélica Dass’ exhibit, I immediately thought of a pre-school curriculum from Teaching Tolerance, a program of the Southern Poverty Law Center which I’ve used in some Sunday School classes . The “People Colors” lesson is a way for each preschooler in a group to find their own unique skin tone in mixed paints and make a self-portrait. At a very young age, many of us are socialized to think of a limited number of racial categories and ethnicities, which don’t represent the full spectrum of beauty and diversity in God’s beautiful people. This exercise also pushes back on those limited categories. But the point is not just to say there are more than six skin tones in the world. The point is to question and reconstruct the norms we have developed societally. These are norms that say there is something called “white” skin and “black” skin, and not only that, but “white” is the default, and “white” is normative, and that lighter toned skin is preferable to darker toned skin.

As we reflect this weekend on the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, I remember his words:

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Our country and many parts of our world have made progress in addressing systemic racism. We have made progress but we have not reached the moment of true equality and equity. We have not addressed the ongoing repercussions of past and present discrimination that result in vast inequality in household wealth between Caucasian, African-American, and LatinX families. We have not addressed why our neighborhoods, schools, and houses of worship remain largely divided among lines of ethnicity, race, and economics. And, in the last decade we have regressed as a country, in terms of racism and xenophobia.

It is a hard topic to talk about, for folks socialized as “white,” and living where we do. We would like to believe that we are progressive, that we are against racism, that we are opposed to mass incarceration that disproportionately affects people of color, that we are on the right side of history. But, self-examination and understanding of white privilege for those of us who have it is very difficult. In the book Lexington recently read as a Community Coalition read, White Fragility, Robin Diangelo tries to unpack this.

“Individual whites may be ‘against’ racism, but they will still benefit from a system that privileges whites as a group. [Racism can be summarized as] “a system of advantage based on race.”...[and] ‘Whiteness’ rests on a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm.”

What the Humanae photo exhibit does is to contradict this norm. By practicing diverse representation and therefore expanding our norms.

Now, let me acknowledge three crucial things:
1) A twelve minute sermon by a white woman is not even a hundredth of a drop in the bucket of the work that we need to do as a society to examine race, racism, and white privilege.
and
2) I am no expert, and I have a lot, a lot, of my own work to do.
3) Thinking about representation is the low-hanging fruit of the work that we need to do. Perhaps, you will rightly say, it’s a bit of a cop out to land on this one small constructive step on this MLK Weekend.

But, changing the norms we operate from does have something to do with rejecting racism. De-centering whiteness is part of working on racism and making a space for everyone. So I want to talk more about representation.

I think about white privilege and implicit racism when I think of Biblical interpretation. The school of Biblical interpretation that I was trained in was predominantly a school of white male scholars. I’ve had to go looking for other hermeneutics and interpretive lenses.

In my sermon research, I am committed to reading commentaries and sermons by a diverse group of scholars, and to spending time reading and reflecting on issues of race and racism. Y’all know my sermons don’t emerge fully formed from my own brain, right?

One of the scholars most helpful to me recently has been Bengali scholar and tutor in Black and Asian Theology, Mukti Barton. As I was thinking about our texts this morning which juxtapose light and dark, I thought about the ways Biblical references to light and dark have been used over the centuries to support racial stereotypes. But Barton overturns the notion that racial stereotypes exist within the biblical text itself. She writes, in part, “Light makes us see and darkness obscures visibility, and for this reason light and darkness have spiritual significance. However it was not readily obvious to me whether or how these metaphors in the Bible were then associated with the colours black and white...The major [Biblical] significance of darkness is not its blackness but its nature of obscuring visibility....It is not darkness but sunlight that makes human skin the color ‘black.’” She goes on to detail positive imagery of dark skin and hair in the Bible.

As a pastor - particularly in the time I spent as a children’s pastor, but also in the months I’ve been with you - one of my background commitments has been to de-normatize whiteness in the images we use in worship and children’s programming. You may have noticed that when we’ve had art on the cover of a bulletin in the last few months it’s most often something by an artist of color or portrays Biblical scenes with non “white” folks. I’m following the work of publications like Desmond Tutu’s Storybook Bible, and Vanderbilt Divinity School’s Art in the Christian Tradition. Representation matters. Every child in this church, and every adult in this church, should be able to see themselves in the story and be reminded that each one of us is made in the image of God.
This is one thing we can do as a community and as individuals - broaden representation. It’s not the only thing. It’s not even the most important thing. We can participate in hard conversations about race and racism in our towns, like the one happening tomorrow morning here in Lexington. We can ask ourselves hard questions about our own biases, and, as Jesus called his followers, we can repent. We can show up for racial justice.

In the words of the UCC,
We can be allies, whose role is to:
Activate other allies
Amplify the voices of marginalized communities
Attend actions to support marginalized communities
And
Always listen first.

Angelica Dass says she does her work because discrimination will not disappear by itself.

We have not yet seen Dr. King’s dream, nor Jesus’ own vision of the kindom - and we will not get there without robust, intentional, hard work. But the dream, and the kindom, are yet still in front of us.

Let us pray….

Prayer of Confession
O God, we as broken creatures have fallen short of all that has been required of us.
Whereas you looked at your beloved creation and said “it is good”,
we have at times looked at that same creation
and rejected its beauty and inherent goodness.
We have looked at the color of one another’s skin
and assigned beauty and worth based on its hue.
We have felt the texture of one another’s hair
and determined what is good and what is damaged.
We have examined one another’s frame and labeled it as human or “other”.
We have fallen short of being family and each other’s keeper but,
Deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome some day.
We have ignored the cries of others as they seek justice from the oppressor
and we told them to wait a little while longer.
We have hidden the wounds of the ghettos of our society
in an attempt to showcase society’s beauty to the world.
We have not fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, or shelter to the stranger because of how they looked or the inconvenience of their need, but
Deep in my heart, I do believe the truth shall make us free some day.
But today is a new day full of opportunities to try again.
What was left undone yesterday can be completed today.
We can turn from the sins of neglect and dishonesty,
and prayerfully move towards reconciliation and mutual respect.
The realization that “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,
tied in a single garment of destiny.
Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly”, \*
forces me to be concerned about what happens to my neighbor. And so,
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe we shall live in peace some day.

Assurance of Pardon
Today we proclaim “to the people of the United States of America and the nations of the world,
that we are not about to turn around.
We are on the move now.
Yes, we are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us.
We are on the move now.
The burning of our churches will not deter us.
The bombing of our homes will not dissuade us.
We are on the move now.
Like an idea whose time has come,
not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us.

We are on the move now.” \*
And we are on the move because The Spirit of the Lord God is upon us…
to preach good tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted,
proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.
We are on the move and we thank you God for going with us.

Amen.