

Shoot for the Moon
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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"Shoot for the Moon" Pilgrim Church UCC, January 15, 2017, Second Sunday after Epiphany/
MLK Day (John 1:29-42)

There's a wonderful movie that you must go see—Hidden Figures. It's based on a true story about African American women who worked at NASA and helped the United States space program continue to advance during the time of the space race with the Russians. Katherine Johnson was a brilliant mathematician and her colleagues Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson (as well as other African American women) worked largely hidden away in the segregated West Area division of Langley Research Center in Virginia. Yet these women through brilliance and tenacity and even forcing their NASA co-workers to confront systemic racism helped our country in significant ways. The movie focuses on their roles in helping John Glenn become the first American astronaut to make a complete orbit of the earth.

There's so many poignant scenes in Hidden Figures. Though one concerned Mary Jackson who wanted to become an engineer. Mary (who was already a mathematician) began to work with engineer Kazimierz Czarnecki in the 4-foot by 4-foot Supersonic Pressure Tunnel—a wind tunnel capable of blasting models of the space craft with winds that approached twice the speed of sound. NASA scientists had to be sure that once astronauts were up in space they could safely land on earth and the heat shield would withstand the heat and wind of re-entry. Kazimierz suggests that Mary should become an engineer and she scoffs at him. It's impossible as an African American woman. He presses on, saying "And I'm a Polish Jew whose parents died in a Nazi prison camp. Now I'm standing beneath a space ship that's going to carry an astronaut to the stars. Let me ask you—if you were a white male, would you wish to be an engineer?" Mary Jackson looks at him and says without missing a beat, "I wouldn't have to. I'd already be one." [1]

Trainees at NASA who yearned to become engineers had to take graduate level math and physics classes managed by the University of Virginia. The classes were held at Hampton High School in the evenings—a segregated high school that Mary could not attend as an African American woman. So what was Mary Jackson to do? She wanted to be an engineer at NASA and she couldn't unless she took more advanced classes. Those advanced classes were held at a school that would not permit her attendance because of the color of her skin. So she went to court. She went to court to take those classes at a segregated high school at night to become an engineer at NASA. And spoiler alert though it will not ruin the movie for you—in 1958 Mary Jackson became NASA's first African American female engineer. [2]

On this Martin Luther King Jr. weekend we should be celebrating stories of triumph like those shown in Hidden Figures. Stories that show how brilliant African American women in this specific context overcame the obstacles put in their paths. Obstacles there not because they were not brilliant in their own rights, and not because they couldn't keep up with the men in those rooms doing advanced mathematics alongside them. Obstacles there because of how society was structured and because of the effects of systemic racism that constantly tried to bring them down.

Yes, we should be celebrating stories of triumph. Stories that show the depth of perseverance in the human spirit. Though racism is still present in our society. We may not have separate bathrooms, drinking fountains, and segregated schools anymore. That doesn't mean that racism just disappeared. If you go see Hidden Figures please pay attention to how white

people in the movie behave. Some of them understand their position of privilege and make things better as good allies will do. Some are outright hostile to anybody who has a different skin color than theirs. And some are this silent majority who may have felt that segregation was wrong but wouldn't do a thing about it. Pay attention because those lessons are timeless.

During Lent we'll have a wonderful opportunity that I was just speaking with Rev. Paul Shupe at Hancock Church about this week. The UCC has come out with a white privilege curriculum to engage with one another in a transformational dialogue. Pilgrim and Hancock as UCC congregations here in Lexington are going to team up for these conversations that we'll have on four Wednesday evenings in Lent over at Hancock. Topics will include whiteness as the norm and speaking about the binary of white/black and dark/light, the cash value of whiteness, and how to become an ally. The UCC put forth this curriculum because our denominational leaders saw the need to have sacred conversations on race in the church. Here's what the authors write to get started: "We don't promise that this will be easy to discuss. It will challenge basic assumptions about race that help white communities maintain a system of privilege that, while prevalent, often goes unnoticed by even the best-intentioned of white advocates for justice. Nonetheless, the work we do to deepen our awareness of how privilege is made manifest, and the commensurate work of unmasking and dismantling that privilege, is among the most important work we white leaders can commit to." [3]

We can't pretend that just because there is no more state-sanctioned segregation the work of racial justice is done and everything is just fine now. The work of Dr. King continues. That's why there's the King Center and the NAACP and the Southern Poverty Law Center and the YWCA and so many other organizations that work for racial justice day in and day out. The Church should be on the frontlines of these initiatives. Many people are called to make a difference, many people are called to be about this work. And we can find ways to be allies in the struggle for justice and peace. Perhaps that is part of our calling as Progressive Christians in 2017.

After all, calls are not just for ordained ministers. Calls are for everyone who is open to where the Spirit of God moves and compels us to go as we might say in Christianity. You see our Gospel lesson is about Jesus truly seeing people for who they are deep inside and responding by calling them out of the familiar to the unknown. John the Baptist begins our Gospel text today with these huge exclamations of faith about Jesus. He proclaims, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! . . . I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him . . . And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." [4] The next day, Jesus walks by and John again proclaims, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" But the two disciples quietly follow Jesus. They separate from John and they go to Jesus together, in so doing they move away from the crowds and the commotion and the shouting. You get the feeling that they are looking to find out more about Jesus themselves. Jesus turns to them and says, "What are you looking for?" and they ask him in turn, "Where are you staying?" [5]

To recap: Andrew and a buddy follow Jesus (who they were just told by their teacher, John the Baptist, is the Lamb of God.) He's a big deal—Lamb of God, Son of God, Messiah—he is who they've been waiting for. Jesus turns to them and asks basically what can I do for you, what are you looking for? And all they can think to ask is, ummm where do you live? Jesus responds with an invitation, "Come and see." What does that even mean? Somehow Jesus is calling them into a new life with these simple words.

Come and see what your life can be like with me as your teacher and friend.

Come and see the work that we can accomplish together.

Come and see who you will meet along the Way.

Come and see who you will become by following me.

Come and see your potential.

Come and see.

You know, Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson, and Dorothy Vaughn had no idea what an impact their careers at NASA would make. Though they were called to live into their potential. Perhaps they heard a simple message of “come and see” what you may be capable of along the way. And this message helped these women to overcome the barriers put in their paths. Perhaps they felt called to realize their potentials in their respective fields. “Come and see” your potential.

In the end, there’s a part of me that’s rather horrified that I had never even heard of these women before sitting in that movie theater and watching their stories on the big screen. I grew up loving John Glenn because you just can’t avoid that when you’re from the great state of Ohio. Neil Armstrong is also a proud Ohioan—first man on the moon. But had I ever heard of the woman who did the cutting-edge math that brought John Glenn home safely? Nope. Maybe that’s because an astronaut became more famous than a mathematician. Maybe that’s because he was front and center and she was a hidden figure at NASA. Or maybe that’s partly because we’re talking about a white man versus an African American woman in the 1950s and 60s.

Katherine Johnson was the African American woman who calculated the trajectory for Alan Shepherd—the first American in space. Katherine Johnson was who John Glenn requested to personally recheck the calculations made by the new electronic computers before he got inside Friendship 7 and found himself among the stars—the mission on which he became the first American to orbit the earth. Perhaps we can do justice to these hidden figures by making them front and center. And asking ourselves why they were hidden in the first place. And working to ensure that the systems that cause troublesome power dynamics are dismantled in our lifetimes. These are the issues and the questions that we in the United Church of Christ are called to engage with in these still complicated times. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] “‘Hidden Figures’ A Hit With Young Women Of Color Interested in STEM”, NPR, January 8, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/08/508842213/hidden-figures-a-hit-with-young-...>

[2] “Mary Jackson Biography,” NASA, <https://www.nasa.gov/content/mary-jackson-biography>

[3] Traci Blackmon, John Dorhauer, Da Vita D. McCallister, John Paddock, and Stephen G. Ray, Jr. “White Privilege: Let’s Talk, A Resource for Transformational Dialogue,” The United Church of Christ.

[4] John 1: 29, 32, and 34, NRSV.

[5] John 1:38.