

Church of Christ at White Station Shepherd's Encouragement on Behalf of our Elders

Sunday, May 31, 2020

On May 10, 2020, David Jordan, on behalf of the White Station shepherds, spoke powerfully about the unjust murder of Ahmaud Arbrey in Georgia. Three short weeks later, George Floyd was killed. Another needless, unjust and undeserved death of an African American, and here we are again. George Floyd died in Minneapolis after his encounter with the police. The individual police officer's actions during the arrest have been condemned by many, including respected members of the policing community. What should our response be as Christians? What would God want our response to be? How do we love our neighbor in this too often recurring scenario?

Because we are all children of God, I propose three things:

- **LISTEN**
- **SPEAK UP**
- **LEARN TO LOVE ALL PEOPLE**

First, **LISTEN**. When talking about this topic with African Americans, and indeed with anyone of a different racial or ethnic category, including Latino and Hispanic people, LISTEN to them. Let them explain things from their perspective; their experiences and reactions may be wildly different than the lens you see the world through. As Champ Bailey said in 2019 when being inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame: "White people need to LISTEN when black men describe their experiences." Listen without having already decided how things "are." Listen with an open mind. Don't just think about what you are going to say in response. Listen more than you talk.

In the aftermath of the George Floyd death, riots have followed. That collateral damage is unfortunate. Yet remember, Martin Luther King, Jr., who championed non-violence, also said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." Yet, instead of riots, not too long ago, simply kneeling in silent protest of the killing of African American men caused an uproar that still causes heated debates when this issue resurfaces. So do African Americans and others only get to protest on these issues in ways that have been approved by all white people. No rioting, okay. But also no silent protests, no kneeling?

In this dialog about racial issues, your toes may get stepped on. Be glad it is just your toes and not your neck. You are privileged if it is only your feelings that get hurt instead of suffering bodily injury or death.

Second, **SPEAK UP**. Agreeing generally with the idea of racial unity is not enough. It is not okay just to not be a racist or not hold racist views. You must be anti-racist. There is no middle ground, especially for Christians. You have to do something.

Be intentional about confronting even small acts of racism. Be bold. Speak up on those small events that don't even make the newscasts. Speak up in small groups when subtle or not-so-subtle racist comments are made. George Floyd's needless death has all good people angry and upset. The same thing will happen when the next George Floyd or Eric Garner dies. The cycle repeats itself and good people will be angry. But are you going to be angry and upset when a clearly racist comment is made at your workplace or at a family gathering or on social media? Are you going to speak out? If you don't speak out, do you think God will be pleased?

In your workplace, at family gatherings, or on social media, you can, you should, and indeed you must be able to speak up on behalf of God's children when racist actions or words occur in your presence. You can say something as simple as "That's wrong; no one deserves to be treated or talked to like that;" or "That person is a child of God just like I am, and they shouldn't be treated like that." As a child of God, speak up on behalf of other children of God. Be ready. Learn a phrase that you use as your own, a phrase that naturally rolls off your tongue because you have practiced it. Be ready, willing and able to confront racist actions and words when they occur. Ask God to help you. Then just do it.

Third, **LEARN TO LOVE ALL PEOPLE**, because all people are made in the image of God. Our congregation here at White Station has had racial reconciliation in its DNA for nearly its whole existence. Ten days after the April 4, 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. here in Memphis, John Scott, our pulpit minister at the time, preached a sermon that included the following passage:

"Something is wrong when Christian people cannot begin to exercise the leavening of society that they should in a nation that is called a Christian nation. Something is wrong with our practice of Christianity. And if Christian people can't exercise a leavening influence in our society and be a light to the world, and the salt of the earth, as Christ said they were meant to be, something is wrong with us. It's not the Gospel; it's not the theory. Something is wrong with our practice of it."

I appreciate John Scott's powerful words from 52 years ago. They still ring true today. The parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us to love our neighbor, and it expands the view of who is our neighbor. Being religious, attending services with the "right group," staying in "your lane" and not rocking the boat sounds a lot like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan. But, like the Good Samaritan, we need to cross religious, ethnic and cultural boundaries to love our African American neighbors and all others who are different than we are. We needed to do that back in 1968, and we still need to do it now.

Galatians 3.28 (NIV) is very inclusive: There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

On our website, there are six focus areas referred to as Our Six Lenses of Vision, which flow out of our vision from Ephesians 4.15-16. One of the six (6) Lenses is entitled Unity in Diversity. It reads as follows:

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

As a body, we have all been reconciled to God through the cross, regardless of racial, economic, or ideological differences. Through the unity of the Spirit, we will respect the uniqueness of each member's gifts and experiences as we work together in the Kingdom.

Are we really committed to this? We should be. It is essentially just a paraphrase of Galatians 3.28. As Rick Atchley says in his sermon series entitled "Why Talk About Race:" The mission is not racial unity, but rather, racial unity is ESSENTIAL to the mission.

In David Jordan's comments three weeks ago, he mentioned that his son runs in his neighborhood yet David candidly said he's never had to think once of "will he be safe while jogging" like parents of African Americans do. Parents of African Americans have different conversations with their children, because they have to. My wife and I formed our family through adoption, and our two sons are African American. We worry when they jog in the neighborhood, especially if it is dark. We have had many talks with our sons about how to act in routine situations – situations that are "routine" if you are white, yet those same innocuous situations to us, are potential minefields for African Americans – minefields that may blow up and kill them.

Our older son passionately asked, “Do you know how TIRING it is to always have to think about how to make myself seem like less of a threat?” I hurt when he said that, but I could not understand and feel this as keenly as he does, because I am white. I am not a 6 foot 2 inch African American male with an afro like he is. You may not see him as a threat, because you watched him grow up at this church, but how does the rest of society see him? How do they see him if he is jogging in a hoodie at night? Would society look at him differently than David’s son jogging at night in a hoodie? For me, one possible answer to that question makes me sick in the pit of my stomach. I worry about my two sons’ safety.

My sons and other African Americans have to think when and whether it is okay to wear a hoodie. They have to think about having to have their hands out of their pockets and in plain sight in certain situations. They have to be extra cautious and respectful if and when they are pulled over by the police. The George Floyd death, and other similar deaths, surely do not make them trust all police personnel. Think about the woman calling the police on Christian Cooper, an African American man in Central Park in New York last week. Christian Cooper could have easily been the next Eric Garner if the situation had played out even slightly differently. My sons and some of your sons could be the next George Floyd. Situations like this easily can, and unfortunately do, happen to our African American citizens. This is wrong, unbiblical and ungodly. We have to do better as a society.

So please LISTEN, SPEAK UP, LEARN TO LOVE ALL PEOPLE.

Open the dialog. Continue to communicate and understand. Actively seek real relationships with people of different racial and ethnic groups. And, as Rick Atchley said, “if you have black friends who don’t talk to you about race, then you DON’T have black friends.”

We have a Racial Justice Committee presently here at White Station, and we hope to have this transition into a Racial Justice Ministry. If you want to be a part of that, let us know.

I will close with Revelation 5:9: *And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.*

May God bless our efforts. And may our nation, and may we individually, learn to do better.