

The Past We Step Into Mark 1:21-28

Rev. Dorothy L. Boulton, Catonsville Presbyterian Church, Jan 31, 2021

Last summer, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. --- the national gathering of our denomination – was held virtually. It was originally designed to be hosted locally – here in Baltimore. Last summer, as you recall, was a summer of protest. The summer of George Floyd – an African American man who was killed by a white police officer who knelt on his neck for over 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

Acknowledging the significance of this moment in time --- this *kairos* moment --- this time of possibility and transformation -- the theme of the gathering was changed. The General Assembly proclaimed this moment: *From Lament to Hope*. It was marked as *kairos* time. A time of significance. A time that marks a turning. A time for change. A time when the Spirit breaks in. *Kairos*. During that online gathering, commissioners passed a resolution entitled: *On the Church in This Moment in History: Responding to the Sin of Racism and a Call to Action*.

The beginning of it reads:

This 224th General Assembly (2020) of the PC(USA) declares that “Black lives matter, that our country’s most important institutions have been built to sustain white privilege, to protect white lives and white property at the expense of our siblings of color; and that the church, through ignorance, denial, and in some cases deliberate action, has participated in this injustice.

Let’s take a moment here, to acknowledge how we might be processing those words. What feelings do those words evoke? Let’s sit with that a while.

Defensiveness. Discomfort. Denial. A spark of recognition? Acknowledgement?

I suspect that many of us do not like to hear this. I don’t like to hear it.

I feel it. Deep in my gut. It’s churning. It hurts. It’s uncomfortable. I want to turn away.

The church... through ignorance, denial, and in some cases deliberate action, has participated in this injustice.

I noted in my preparations this week that I preached on this very text from Mark three years ago. (It comes up every three years in the lectionary.) In that sermon, I shared with this congregation a story of the Little Rock Nine – the Black teenagers who integrated a white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. Through the words of Melba Pattillo Beals, one of those African American students, I shared her testimony of the demonic hostility of the mob that blocked their entrance to the school, and to the anger and threats from the white students as the months continued.

She wrote:

*The students remained violent and unwelcoming, with few exceptions. Of the nineteen-hundred-plus students, some seemed willing to step forward and speak up against the primitive behavior. Those who did also suffered at the hands of their fellow students. Where were the adults, Christians, ministers from their community meant to civilize them? Their uncivilized behavior was true one week later and one month later. I felt their violent wrath grow bigger and bigger, energized by even more hatred each and every day.*ⁱ

These words strike my heart: “Where were the Christians? The ministers from their community meant to civilize them?”

When I preached this, three years ago, we acknowledged together the role the church needs to have in confronting racism: confession, repentance, acknowledging our complicity, the need to turn and live into a new reality. Our need to understand that we are “Waking Up White.” And in this congregation, our Dismantling Racism Team was being formed. What I have learned in the past three years, what we have all seen played out on the national stage – indeed in our nation’s Capitol – is that the church’s complicity goes deeper than we had known in the fundamental formation and support of white supremacy. We pointed fingers at others, but we had not seen or owned up to the depth of the church’s sin.

I am indebted to the work of Robert P. Jones in his 2020 book, [*White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in America*](#),ⁱⁱ for starkly revealing the painful and vivid truth that “White supremacy ... is embedded in the DNA of American Christianity.”

He writes:

*White Christian churches have not just been complacent; they have not only been complicit; rather, as the dominant cultural power in America, they have been responsible for constructing and sustaining a project to protect white supremacy and resist black equality. This project, he continues, has framed the entire American story.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Jones’ book is uncomfortable and disturbing and painful to read. There are horrifying stories throughout the history of this country, detailing the church’s role in forming these racist attitudes and encoding them in our systems. This begins in the earliest years of our nation. Jones recounts the incidences of slave owners inflicting brutal wounds to enslaved persons – beating them, flogging them -- whose actions became even more savage upon returning from a service of Christian worship, because they found sanction there for their barbarous behavior. American Christianity, he discovers, not only supports but deepens inhumanity and cruelty.

An illustration of this is a Frederick Douglass quote that says, “Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a

religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly of all others.” ^{iv}

The church and the propagation of slavery and white supremacy have gone hand in hand, each one building upon the other. These words, also from Frederick Douglass are from the appendix of his first autobiography, [*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*](#)^v.

I am filled with utter loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. ... We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the poor heathen! All for the glory of God and the good of souls!... The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. ... The (slave) dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other --- devils dressed in angel's robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.

Jones' book is filled with the stark and painful truths of our intertwining of theology and racism. There are chilling accounts of churchgoers singing hymns to God and lifting their voices in prayer, and heading out following the service to a lynching.

Jones illustrates how, through the use of Scripture, preachers of the gospel not only defended slavery --- they instituted entire denominations based on the right to be slaveholders.

Continuing through American history, Jones documents the ways in which “white churches, religious leaders, and members aggressively defended segregation, and ‘worked with same enthusiasm for white supremacy inside the sanctuary as out.’” ^{vi}

He tells the stories of the building of Confederate monuments with the support of local churches, -- including Presbyterian churches --- that raced to build sanctuaries in their shadows.

And lest we feel somewhat removed from Jones' work and observations, that it is -- surely! -- not all churches that participated in such cruel constructions, he informs us that it is not only white evangelicals, but white Catholics and white mainline Protestants, who have created and developed and sustained these idolatrous, unjust practices and principles.

In the late 1940's, for example, Reverend W. Clarence Wright, the pastor of Wilshire Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, headed the fight to keep the well-to-do Wilshire district all white. When an African American war veteran moved into the elite, WASP neighborhood, the clergyman personally sued to evict him. I am glad to say Wright lost the case.

Racially restrictive housing covenants were common practice in this country until they were struck down by the Supreme Court in *Shelley v. Kraemer* in 1948. It was an attempt by whites to prevent a black couple from buying a house in their St. Louis neighborhood. The case is a turning point in dismantling segregationist practices and is widely studied by law students. But Jones points out that few law students are taught that the restrictive covenants in the neighborhood had been organized by a white home owner's association that was sponsored by the Cote Brillante Presbyterian Church. The legal attempt to evict the Shelleys was funded by the church's coffers, the action was officially approved by the congregation's trustees. ^{vii}

Stories upon stories. Right up till today.

In sum, Jones' book is a compelling and convincing account of how "Christian theology and institutions have been **the central and cultural tent pole holding up the very idea of white supremacy.**" ^{viii}

Let me tell you the fact that disturbed me most from this book. Let me get there this way. First, Jones is a researcher. He is the CEO and founder of the Public Research Institute (PRI), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that conducts research on issues at the intersection of religion, culture, and politics. In the latter part of the book are the results of recent surveys about the way Christian theology impacts and shapes current attitudes on race, racism, and white supremacy. Opinion survey data was collected from several groups including white evangelical Christians, white Catholics, black evangelicals, mainline Protestants, non-religious whites. What he has discovered is that the data reveal that this historical legacy of white supremacy lives on in white Christianity today. White Christian identity is an important driver of racist attitudes. In short, the more one identifies as a white Christian, the more one is likely to hold racist views.

Here it is --- here's what it comes down to: "If you were recruiting," he says, "for a white supremacist cause on a Sunday morning, you'd likely have more success hanging out in the parking lot of an average white Christian church - evangelical, mainline Protestant, or Catholic - than approaching whites sitting out services at the local coffee shop." ^{ix}

Hear that: if you were recruiting for a white supremacist cause, you'd have more success in the parking lot of white churches here on Frederick Road, than with a non-Christian who was out at Starbucks.

Who is racist? We are. Who are the white supremacists? We are. Who has developed and shaped and encoded these attitudes into law and practice so deep and pervasive, that we don't even see it or recognize it?

That brings us to the text today, doesn't it?

The demon --- the evil --- the unclean spirit is within us -the religious community. We have bowed to sin --- the sin of idolatry - making our broken ideals, our fears, our prejudices, greater and more worthy of worship than the worship of God. Our very institution has codified and preserved and still propagates beliefs that are antithetical to the realm of God.

Can there be good news for the church?
Mark tells us yes.

As the first public act in his ministry in the gospel of Mark, Jesus enters the synagogue and affirms his authority to cast out what is evil. Right in the midst of the religious community Jesus shows the people the power of God, the desire of God, to redeem them and save them and make them whole. This exorcism, one commentary says, is the very indication of "what it means for the kingdom of God to draw near." ^x

Jesus comes to save us. Jesus, our Lord, can save us.

As we sang in our opening hymn:
Sing for justice that will be. Sing for grace that sets us free. ^{xi}

We can no longer hide from the truth. It is time for honesty. It is a time to step into the discomfort -- and the inevitable shame and anxiety -- and confront the past. As the words of Amanda Gorman, our amazing inaugural poet said:
It is the past we step into and how we repair it. ^{xii}

James Baldwin expressed, "White Americans are stuck in a form of madness that prevent(s) them from coming into full human maturity." He's right. We've been "White Too Long." ^{xiii}

Jesus comes in love to claim us, to reshape us, reform us, like the potter with the clay.

I attended a webinar from our Presbyterian Church's Office of Public Witness on Thursday (Jan 28, 2020) – Where Do We Go From Here: White Supremacy and Gender Equality -- and heard our former moderator, Denise Anderson, speak about this. "This is a turning point," she said. "It's an opportunity to be different, to be more just, to lean into the things that make us most scared and despite how scared we might be...we're going to try to get it right this time." She shared this image of the potter: "First the potter beats the crap out of the clay. It shatters the air bubbles. Otherwise it will explode when goes into the kiln. We can be made into something of use to the Potter."

We need to live into this discomfort and the Presbyterian Church has been challenged to do so, for the sake of our own healing, for the exorcising of our own demons.

The declaration from the 224th General Assembly that I quoted at the beginning continues on:

Regarding the need to address institutional racism and oppression within the church, and to call the church to do the hard work of repair necessary for reconciliation, we direct.... for the 225th General Assembly a report deconstructing white privilege within our denominations history (of involvement in the colonization, enslavement, oppression, and genocide of Black, Indigenous and People of Color, including theological support and benefits to our institutions.) The report will also make recommendations towards proposed amends, reparations, and reconciliation. (On the Church)

This is not easy work by any means, and white congregations are afraid. We feel threatened and we feel angry. Churches in our Presbytery are in crisis over this right now. Pastors hear from church members who say: "If you talk about anti-racism, I'm leaving," and they hear from others: "If you don't talk about Black Lives Matter, I'm leaving."

I pray that we will respond like the people who heard Jesus that day in Capernaum. They heard his teaching, saw his response to the unclean spirit, recognized his power to cast out evil, uncleanness, brokenness. They were amazed at his authority, and his fame spread. Remember what I told you earlier, that this miracle comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the gospel of Mark. We know how the gospel story ends...we know the good news of the empty tomb: there is no power in life, or death, nothing that can overcome the love and power of God in Jesus Christ. Though I suggest you take a look and re-read the ending of Mark: the disciples were afraid. But they were sent back. Back to the beginning. Back to Galilee. Back to start over... because the story is our story. It is for our time. *Kairos*.

It is said that "Love is an action, never simply a feeling." *(On the Church)*

And so, here at CPC, I commend to you the work of the Dismantling Racism team. They have been offering us ways to become anti-racists. There have been book studies, videos and discussions with the wider Catonsville community, greater partnership and sharing/learning with the members of Grace AME, an African American congregation who we work with as mission partners. I encourage us to continue in these small steps forward – and large steps too, as the Spirit leads us -- as we become re-shaped and re-formed by the love and the power of a healing God.

We'll sing the words of a new hymn in a few moments:

*When the road ahead is steep and our courage is so small,
When we stumble at the start and are certain we will fall.
Let us brave the wilderness, dare to walk where few have trod,
Leaving safety's easy path, risking doubt, and finding God.*

(When Our Lives are Ruled by Fear, David Bjorlin, 2020, GIA Publications)

“We know we must change. Will we, church?
Kairos.” *(On the Church)*

Affirmation of faith (from A Brief Statement of Faith, PCUSA, 1983)

In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

ⁱ Melba Pattillo Beals, *I Will Not Fear: My Story of a Lifetime of Building Faith Under Fire*, 2018, Revell, Grand Rapids, MI, pg 52.

ⁱⁱ Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in America*, 2020, Simon and Schuster, NY, 320 pp.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jones, pg 5.

^{iv} Jones, pg 88.

^v Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, 1845, p 86., <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23>

^{vi} Jones, pg. 32

^{vii} Jones, pg. 63

^{viii} Jones, pg. 6

^{ix} Jones, pg. 184

^x *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol III. Abington Press, Nashville, 1995, pg. 541

^{xi} *When the Gifts of God Surprise Us*, David Bjorlin, b. 1984 2018, GIA Publications

^{xii} *The Hill We Climb*, January 20, 2021

^{xiii} Jones, pg. 232