

RENEWED RESOLVE TO RESIST RACISM

Psalm 139:1-14

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17 January 2021

I've been interested in politics for as long as I can remember. I was ten the year Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon ran for President; we had a mock debate in our 5th grade classroom and the teacher assigned me to play Humphrey. I thought I was well-prepared; I had my stack of notecards, but the day of the debate, my classmate, the one assigned to play Nixon, showed up with posters, hats, all kinds of campaign paraphernalia. Turns out her parents had actually attended the Republican convention that year. I don't remember if one of us was declared the debate winner or not, but she clearly had the best props!

Four years later, Richard Nixon soundly defeated George McGovern and was re-elected. In 1974, Nixon was forced to resign after the Watergate scandal and I remember seeing bumperstickers and buttons that said, "Don't blame me, I voted for McGovern."

I don't know when that line began to appear in politics; I know I've seen it many times since. "Don't blame me, I voted for ____" (Fill in the blank).

Any time the country is in trouble, we blame the other side. Yes, it's human nature. It's also an aspect, an example of sin.

I've been thinking hard about what I feel called to say in this sermon, on this Sunday of Martin Luther King Weekend, on this Sunday a week and a half after the attack on the United States capital, not by foreign powers but by our own citizens. Where are the intersections between the faith that we profess and the events of this

moment in our nation? I have been praying. I have been reading what some of my colleagues in other churches are saying. There are many valid directions, but the spirit is leading me to make three points this morning.

The first is this. Blaming others is sinful. It is causing further divisions in our nation. And it is an easy way out. Our nation is in trouble, and the roots of the problems are deep. The roots of our disease are 400 years old. And I am part of the problem. Note that I'm not saying "we"; I'm not saying "you." I am trying not to blame. But I am holding myself accountable. I will tell you what part I have played in the creation of a nation that at this moment is fractured to the point of breaking apart completely.

I have not done everything in my power to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in this country, a gap which is growing wider. Instead, I have thought a lot about my own financial security and I have enjoyed many material pleasures. The biblical word for this is **greed**. I have not done everything in my power to understand what life is like for people who are different than I am. I have not always acknowledged the privileges I did nothing to earn, the privileges that come from being born into an upper middle class family, the privileges that come from being born with white skin.

I'm not blaming myself for all of our nation's problems; I'm certainly not **shaming** myself. Our Christian tradition gives us language for what I am feeling called to do. I am feeling called to **repent**, to **confess**. I am acknowledging and saying I am sorry. And to be truly sorry is to make an inner decision to behave differently in the future. Repentance is not beating ourselves up. Repentance is a conversation with God in which we deeply reflect on our lives, noticing those things about ourselves we'd like to

change, and asking for God's help in that work of transformation. When we repent, when we confess, we are able to receive the gift of God's forgiveness, and the spiritual energy that change requires.

The more I look at current news events and our reactions to them, the more aware I am of how much time and effort we are spending on blaming. "It's the fault of the liberal news media"; "It's all Trump's fault". We create clever memes, we banter on Twitter, we watch the same reporting over and over again. And one result is that we are so full of fury at people who voted differently than we that we can't even speak to relatives, to neighbors, to coworkers.

I wonder what would happen if we devoted half of that time and effort to self-reflection, to honestly asking ourselves, "How can I be a better citizen?" "Who in my sphere of influence is suffering because of the inequities in our system and what can I do to help?" "What is my role in making this country a place where people of all races are treated justly and fairly?" The biblical word for this practice is **humility**. My first reflection for this morning is this: "Blaming others is sinful."

My second reflection comes from our scripture reading for today. Psalm 139 is beautiful - it starts with the psalmist's affirmation that God is everywhere. There's nowhere we can go to escape from God's presence, and **this God who is everywhere knows us completely**. Verse 3 says, "You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways."

And this is verse 13: "You are the one who created my innermost parts; you knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb."

God created each one of us. No matter what color we are, what religion we profess - or none at all, no matter what political party we belong to...**God created each one of us.**

So why are we not treating each other as children of God, as human beings? I consider Brene Brown to be a wise teacher for our time. She has studied the process of dehumanization and is finding examples of it among people of both political parties right now. Dehumanization is “the psychological process of demonizing the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment.” As the process continues, people considered the enemy begin to be depicted in less than human terms.

“Dehumanization has fueled innumerable acts of violence, human rights violations, war crimes, and genocides. It makes slavery, torture, and human trafficking possible. Dehumanizing others is the process by which we become accepting of violations against human nature, the human spirit, and, for many of us, violations against the central tenets of our faith.”

So, for example, during the Holocaust, Nazis described Jews as subhuman. They called Jews rats and depicted them as disease-carrying rodents in everything from military pamphlets to children’s books. Hutus involved in the Rwanda genocide called Tutsis cockroaches. Indigenous people are often referred to as savages. Serbs called Bosnians aliens. Slave owners throughout history considered slaves subhuman animals. Once people are dehumanized all violence against them is acceptable.

Look on social media today and you will see people on both ends of the political spectrum dehumanizing people on the other. When people on one side do something

particularly outrageous, people on the other side feel justified in their dehumanizing memes or name-calling. But we reduce our own dignity, our own humanity, our own integrity when we engage. My second reflection is this. No matter how strongly we disagree with someone's position or disapprove of their behavior, we will not dehumanize them. We will hold them accountable but we will not shame them.

And finally, let's reflect on these pictures and the sickening events of January 6.

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If the riot, the insurrection on January 6 had been clearly political without religious symbolism, I wouldn't feel so compelled to comment. We would perhaps mention it briefly, praying for an end to violence, as we have done after so many other incidents of mass shootings in recent years.

But some of the people who stormed the Capitol were motivated by **their own version** of the Christian faith. They barged into the halls of government, terrorizing all who were working there that day, **carrying with them some of the most sacred symbols of Christianity**. And so we have to address it.

Think of this. It's easy for us to distance ourselves from these rioters, but there are people who look at these pictures and conclude, "I guess that's what Christians are like." Maybe some will give us a second chance, tuning in to see what we have to say. If we are silent, their opinion remains unchanged.

So we need to say it clearly and boldly. **We who bear the name of Jesus the Christ condemn this act of terrorism and violence. We abhor the use of Jesus' name to support acts of hatred and destruction.**

<https://images.app.goo.gl/UwpU47fhszxNpFH98>.

We will not be silent when we see symbols of racism, like the Confederate flag. <https://images.app.goo.gl/6s53VBeWFcgCbqmr8> We profess that racism is a sin. It must be confronted, understood and resisted.

We are people who follow Jesus. Jesus confronted the evils of his day with **extreme courage**, but also with **humility** and **without resorting to dehumanization**. Jesus' purpose was to show us an alternative, a whole different way of life. A quick look around our world today tells us that we've forgotten him, and we're forgotten his vision.

We have bought into a story that goes like this. See if it sounds as familiar to you as it does to me: "the purpose of life is for individuals or nations to accumulate an abundance of possessions and to experience the maximum amount of pleasure during the maximum number of minutes of our short lives, so we have little reason to manage our consumption. We are in life-and-death competition with each other . . . there's not enough to go around. If we give up even a tiny bit of power and privilege then someone else will win. So we have little reason to seek reconciliation and collaboration and nonviolent resolutions to our conflicts."

The alternative story Jesus gives us sounds like this. It could not be more of a contrast: "we are free and responsible creatures in a creation made by a good, wise, and loving God. Our Creator wants us to pursue virtue, collaboration, peace, and

mutual care for one another and all living creatures. Our lives can have profound meaning if we align ourselves with God's wisdom, character, and dreams for us."

If we follow the vision of Jesus, our society will take a radically different direction, and our world will become a very different place. I don't know about you, but it's a place I want to live. I don't want to live one second longer in the world I saw on January 6. I'm ready for a change. I'm ready to recommit to following Jesus, to resisting racism and violence; I'm ready for repentance and forgiveness and transformation.

Let us pray. You are the God who gives us a vision and a dream of a world where all living things flourish; to you today we pledge our allegiance. We confess our sins of greed, selfishness, racism; we want to do away with our tendency towards blame and dehumanization. Sign us up, today, God, for your great project of making your dream a reality, making your kingdom, your reign come into being on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of Jesus who modeled this all for us, we pray, Amen.

*Sources used in this sermon:

Podcast and articles by Brene Brown on dehumanization

The two visions for the world are from the writings of Brian McLaren, as quoted by Richard Rohr.