

Elaine Boyd  
II Cor. 5:16-21  
Amos 5:18-24  
November 6, 2011

Thus says the Lord:

I hate, I despise your worship services, and I take no delight in your Sunday school classes. Even though you offer me your time in session meetings and committee meetings, I will not accept them. And the money in the offering plate, I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your hymns and your choir and your music team.

I will not listen to the melody of your organ music.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

Imagine if these words were delivered by someone not from our congregation—someone with no theological training or credentials. Someone with mud on his boots and smelling of who knows what.

That was Amos. He was not from the kingdom of Israel where he delivered his harsh message. He wasn't even a real prophet. He had been a shepherd and farm laborer from the Judean hills far to the south, when God called him to preach to a kingdom that, at the time was in relative prosperity. They could not see any disaster on the horizon.

What could this outside agitator have to say to God's chosen people?

Amos announces to the people of Israel that God has pronounced judgment, not on their enemies as they might expect, but on them. They are God's covenant people. They are his. Yet they have not followed the ways of their God.

"I hate, I despise your festivals." The correct religion of the powerful and their fine houses of worship are offensive to God. It was not the religious practices as such that were offensive. It was that their religious practices were separated from the way they behaved toward other people. Their religion was not supported by actions of justice, fairness, and mercy toward other human beings. Unjust treatment of society's marginalized and vulnerable brought judgment on the kingdom of Israel. God is not willing to tolerate oppression for long and will actively work to overturn it. God does not look favorably on our beautiful sanctuary and energetic programs, if we use them only to wall ourselves off from voices beyond these walls. Voices silenced by prejudice and racism.

“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

It is hard to read these words from Amos without also hearing the prophetic voice of Dr Martin Luther King in his famous “mountaintop speech” in 1968. At that time, Dr. King was also considered an outside agitator. He spoke out eloquently against injustice toward people of color and for the need for change on their behalf.

And the world has changed since that time. We no longer see signs saying “whites only.” We see people of color acting in the movies and on television. Oprah Winfrey is said to be the richest woman in the United States. With no blatant signs that tell us that racism is still an active and destructive force in society, we might think that it is gone. We may think that injustice against people of color is a thing of the past.

But racism is not gone. It is not gone in our country. It is not gone in our community. It is a cancer that eats at the heart of our community, but now it is obscured with added issues of immigration, language, and religion. We may not even be aware that it is there. It is like the snake of judgment that Amos pronounced, a snake that hides in the dark and strikes when we are most unprepared.

I speak today as a white woman who is a racist. Consequently, I know that anything I have to say on this subject will be tainted by that fact. I don’t mean that I am cruel to any person of color. I try not to be prejudiced against people that I meet, although I am aware that I, too, have my prejudices. I call myself a racist because my whiteness makes me a member of a privileged class. It gives me privileges of daily experience that I have not earned. Privileges that are an advantage for me. Privileges that I don’t even think about; that I don’t have to think about because I am white.

In her article: “White Privilege, Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” Peggy McIntosh lists just some of the advantages that are attached, simply to having a white skin color in this country, privileges that others cannot count on. Here are just a few of them:<sup>1</sup>

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area, which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Peggy McIntosh. “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” 1988

6. When I am told about civilization or about our national heritage, I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can go to my church and see images of people and of God that represent my race
8. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
9. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
10. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider or a terrorist.
12. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
13. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

“I did not see myself as a racist,” McIntosh writes, “because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in the invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.”<sup>2</sup>

Like Peggy McIntosh, we can't see racism just like a fish can't see the water that it swims in. If you are white, you are a racist because you benefit, directly and indirectly, from the privilege and power deeply embedded in the system.

That is not an easy thing to hear. To hear it requires that we listen carefully to the voices of those different from ourselves, outside voices that, like Amos, proclaim both judgment and warning.

To hear requires honesty about the sins of our society and our own personal participation in it. We have been born into a sinful situation. We must acknowledge that we are helplessly imbedded in a system of privilege for a few and injustice, oppression, and violence for others. The sin of racism breaks our connection with creation. It breaks our communion with our brothers and sisters around the world and by breaking our connection with them, our communion with God is also broken. We cannot free ourselves.

But there is good news.

---

<sup>2</sup> Peggy McIntosh. “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” 1988.3

The rolling waters of God's justice and righteousness bring not only judgment, but mercy.

On the cross, Christ took the cruelty and violence of humanity on himself. Christ identified, not only with those who suffered injustice, but also those who were only doing their job.

To free us from the bondage of our sin, Christ took on the sin of both oppressed and oppressor, victim and criminal, perpetrator and spectator. He exchanged them for his own life and truth and forgiveness.

In the words of Paul, "for our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

What? *Did you realize that you are the righteousness of God?*

Because God loves and accepts us, we are given the courage to name our sin for what it is. We are free to admit our failings, including our racism, and we are given power to overcome.

God loves us so much that God gives us God's own authority to act. Paul calls us ambassadors for Christ, representatives of Christ's love for the world. We are empowered as a community of faith by the Holy Spirit in an ever flowing stream of God's righteousness. That stream of mercy assures us of God's forgiveness and love. It continually creates us anew.

Make no mistake, breaking the silence of racism and being self aware is not enough. But God promises to help us face the truth and begin to participate in the struggle. Because God loves us and accepts us, we can forgive ourselves and love others. We can be representatives of Jesus Christ and his gospel of reconciliation to all people.

So, in practical terms, what does that mean?

How might God be calling us, as individuals and as a congregation, to act as reconcilers for the issue of racism in our community?

Three ways in which we can begin are: look, listen, and speak.<sup>3</sup>

1. Look. Recognize that racism is everywhere, every day. Learn to see its effects. Notice who speaks and who is silent in community affairs. Notice code words that really mean race. Consider implications of policies. Here at church, notice how our building, activities, or communications may include or exclude persons of color. You already notice the skin color of everyone around you—now notice its implications.
2. Listen. Don't assume you know what someone else wants or needs. Listen to the stories of people that have experienced racism. Ask questions. Don't take over; be a

---

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Paul Kivel. "Guidelines for Being Strong White Allies." 2006. [www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com)

partner in respecting and supporting other community members of color. In the words of Lila Watson, an Australian aboriginal woman, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us walk together.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Speak. Take a stand against injustice. Interrupt hurtful jokes and comments. Be respectful but honest. Teach children about racism and respect for all people.

It will not happen all at once. Change is difficult. We will still struggle with conflict, prejudice, and our own unwillingness. But we can have confidence that, through Christ, the flood of righteousness has been released. God’s justice is sure.

Let the waters roll.

---

<sup>4</sup> [karenhousecw.org/documents/ReflectionManual.pdf](http://karenhousecw.org/documents/ReflectionManual.pdf). 11/5/2011