

## **“The Reckoning of a White Pastor”**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

**August 16, 2020**

When I titled this sermon a few weeks ago, in the midst of racial unrest in our nation, the word “reckoning” was a popular description of what individuals and society should be about. So I adopted it. But Webster defines “reckoning” as “the balancing or settlement of an account”. I would better have chosen the word “confessions”, for which Webster lists among its definitions: “a story of one’s life experiences, revealing faults and confidential personal details.” So please consider what follows as “The Confessions of a White Pastor”, and kindly indulge my reliance on various personal details. I have felt the need, even the responsibility, in an era characterized by the new phrase “Black Lives Matter”, to offer public perspective as a white minister. This is a humble contribution to the current national conversation on race.

My hope is that “The Confessions of a White Pastor” may inspire your own.

I was born a white male. I cannot escape membership in that most privileged of clubs, though the membership was acquired through no fault or effort of my own. My white ancestors emigrated from Europe in the 1880’s, seeking the American dream. Though other white people are now uncomfortably discovering that their ancestors owned slaves, to my knowledge, that could not have been true of mine. Yet my German great-grandparents, and my grandparents, and my parents, in their white privilege, were most certainly aware in their time that black people in America, who also had dreams, were sometimes victimized by the American nightmare of discrimination, injustice, inequality, insult, even lynching. I have no knowledge of the behavior or opinions of my German ancestors when it comes to race. I do know that my parents were not racist. And I know that I am not racist.

But that is not enough.

Ponder this from Ibram X. Kendi, in his bestseller titled “How to Be an Antiracist”: *“What is the problem with being ‘not racist’? It is a claim that signifies neutrality: ‘I am not a racist, but neither am I aggressively against racism.’ But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist’. It is ‘anti-racist’...The difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy, as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of ‘not-racist’. The claim of ‘not racist’ neutrality is a mask for racism.”*

80 years ago last April, Marian Anderson was disallowed to sing at Constitution Hall, the largest indoor stage in Washington DC, because she was black. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt intervened, and Anderson’s concert was given from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

But that was not enough.

The names of political and military icons are being removed from buildings on campuses and streets across America because their more sinister, racist views of white supremacy have been revealed.

But that is not enough.

Maryland State legislators seem ready to revisit the long-standing effort to repeal the state’s official song, “Maryland, My Maryland”, composed in 1861 by an avowed advocate of slavery.

But that would not be enough.

For three seasons in the late 1960’s, I coached a championship basketball team of black teenagers, driving the YMCA van for games throughout New England and even in New York City and Washington, DC. I was often the only white person in the gymnasiums. I counseled the boys in their schoolwork, their love lives, their troubles with the law, their religious beliefs. I advised their families.

But that was not enough.

A few years later, I befriended the inmates playing pick-up basketball games at the Grafton honor farm near my Ohio church. I entered them as a team in the church league I had organized, and they quickly became league champions. The inmates were the only black people in the gym, and they were the only black people at the church on one snowy Christmas Eve, greeting my white congregation and handing out bulletins at the sanctuary entrances. For months thereafter, some church members ended up welcoming the guys to Sunday dinners at their homes.

But that was not enough.

A few years later, I learned that the Kentucky marriage license application required applicants to list their races as either “white” or “other”, and that the applicants had to register together as either one or the other. The application form made no exception for a mixed marriage, nor for any specific racial category other than white. The County Clerk told me that the wording was established by statute, and could be changed only by the State Legislature in session. I enlisted the advocacy of the Kentucky Council of Churches, and legislation ultimately changed the language of the application.

But that was not enough.

A few years later, I adopted a bi-racial baby girl, born of a white mother and black father. Over time, she has given me four grandchildren, necessarily bi-racial themselves, but who experience life as black people in our society, just as does the baby girl who grew up to be their mother. By means of marriages and adoptions, my family is a kaleidoscope of colors, including white, brown, and black.

But that is not enough.

A few years later, I drove a van full of black kids and adults through the South visiting the sites, museums, and institutions of the civil rights movement. We visited the same churches, we sat at the

same lunch counters, we crossed the same bridges of that era.

But that was not enough.

A few years later, I befriended a young black, homeless woman on a street in Washington DC, and subsequently introduced her and her children to two majority white congregations that have offered assistance to the family, which is no longer homeless.

But that is not enough.

And now I learn, from journalist and author Isabel Wilkerson, that our current obsession with race is misplaced. There is an even more nefarious system, that race covers up, and that is what Wilkerson calls "American caste". So there are layers of impenetrable systems that the proverbial American dream does not want revealed.

David Axelrod, former senior adviser to President Barack Obama, penned an op-ed entitled "I thought I understood issues of race. I was wrong". That's me, too. Axelrod says that "the underlying legacy of racism remains. The laws that were passed were hard-won and important, but they didn't eliminate deeply ingrained biases and layers of discriminatory practices and policies that mock the ideal of equality. .. (George Floyd's death) might have begun a long overdue reconciliation with our racist past and all of its ugly manifestations that remain a grim reality for Americans of color every day."

A black man once refused to shake my hand. Another black man once called me a racist.

Remember that Ibram Kendi admonishes that *"One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not-racist.'" But hark! He goes on to say: "The basic struggle we're all in (is) the struggle to be fully human, and to see that others are fully human".*

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