

When I did my worship planning months ago, my vacation fell right in the middle of the Old Testament series I wanted to do, so I planned on coming back and preaching a really great sermon about giants.

We were going to talk about how there are giants in our midst and we have to face them with courage, with God as our rearguard and a refusal to give into our fears. I wanted to leave you feeling good about yourself and your faith, ready to face whatever you encountered when you walked out that door today. I wanted to preach a nice, comfortable, easy sermon, because, you know, I just got back from vacation and I wanted to have a week that wouldn't be too tough.

But in the last few days of my vacation, my Facebook newsfeed blew up with the horrific events that took place in Charlottesville Virginia, events where a young woman named Heather Heyer, a woman who was just a few years young than me, lost her life speaking out against hate, fascism, racism, and violence.

I was reminded this week by a colleague that prophetic preachers approach both sermon-writing and ministries with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper, or in my case, the smartphone, in the other. I mean, otherwise, we are too tempted to preach feel-good messages in a vacuum, sermons that have no ability to prepare you think theologically about the world's problems, sermons that leave you ill equipped to see God in the midst of pain or to be encouraged by the deep truth that love does eventually conquer all. Sermons aren't meant to make us feel good about ourselves. They are supposed to fuel us up and fire us up and send us out into the world, ready to do the hard and painful work of kingdom building as children of God and followers of Christ.

The truth is, we as children of God and followers of Christ should be seeking always in every situation to find God in our midst. We should be looking into both the light and the darkness and asking, where is God now? Who is God in light of this? And who are we supposed to be in light of who God is? To ask these questions is to think theologically. Sometimes in order to do this we have to dive into situations that have become deeply politicized. We must understand that though issues seem political, they are first at heart theological issues, no matter what our elected officials or governmental leaders would have us think. It is difficult to look through the eyes of faith first, especially when the rhetoric of politics screams at us to pay attention.

So with Bible and newspaper in hand, I have wrestled with those theological questions myself this week. Where is God now? Who is God and who are we supposed to be in light of who God is? And I thought about the Israelites. They were on the brink of the promised land. They saw it spread out before them. They could see all of the things God promised them, milk & honey, which represented the finer things in life, fruit so large it took more than one person to haul, land that was perfect for growing food and raising families. Everything was within their grasp.

But there was a problem. The Israelites were afraid of giants. And unfortunately, their fear of the giants was greater than their trust in God, and it was such an overwhelming fear that

the people turned away from the Promised land and would spend the rest of their earthly days wandering the desert, miserable, grumbling and lost.

Friends, I can think of no greater giant in our midst than the giant of racism. It has been woven into the fabric of our cultural identity since the very beginning, when the European settlers washed up on these beautiful shores to find people who looked different and spoke a different language, which sadly led the white people to assume the natives couldn't possibly be worth as much as them and their own families.

Since then we have wrestled with issues of equality and justice. People have stood for freedom and paid for it with their lives. Every advancement along the way for people whose skin was a different color has been incremental, up-hill and hard won. And though many people this week have been shocked that this kind of racial violence and discrimination could still be present in our nation, the truth is, it has always been here.

But those of us who by the accident of our birth have white skin have had the privilege of turning a blind eye to racism, because it doesn't impact our lives. It has been easy for us to pretend that we live in a nation where justice and equality are already realized for all people, but if the events of last weekend teach us anything it is that the giant of racism still threatens to destroy us.

The fact is that we absolutely do live in a culture permeated with racial bias, but we do NOT have to accept it. If God's kingdom is to come, and God's will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven, things need to change, and we must be agents of that change. For far too long we have been content simply to not be overtly racist. We don't tell racist jokes. We say we believe that everyone is equal in God's eyes. We even hold the door open to our neighbors of all skin colors and smile in a gesture of peace. But it's not enough. The only way we can overcome the loud voices of racism, white supremacy, and prejudice is to speak with the voices of peace, equality and justice even more loudly. Even if the United States president and other people in power refuses to take a bold and committed stand against racism and white supremacy, we must! Friends, it really is up to us.

And NOT being racist is not the same as being ANTI-racism. Anytime we have stayed silent when a friend told a racist joke. Anytime we have failed to help someone whose skin color is darker than our own because we were afraid of what might happen. Anytime we have excused the racist comments or actions of people we know with statements like—well, they come from a different time and place, or it's just the way they were raised. Anytime we have taken advantage of our whiteness at the expense of someone's blackness. Anytime we have failed to actively resist racism, we have contributed to racism, giving the giant of racism in our country the right-of-way, and we, each of us, bears responsibility.

This has to change. Today must be our turning point. Our United Methodist baptismal vows are powerful reminders of what it means to be filled with the light of Christ and called according to his purpose. When we claimed the name United Methodist for ourselves, we accepted a call us to resist injustice and evil in whatever forms they present themselves. One of those evils, one of those deep cultural injustices, is racism, and God demands that we oppose it, that we speak against it, that we fight until it has been overcome and eradicated once and for all. I hope we agree on this issue, because it's an important one. There is no room for racism in the church, and there is no room for it in our country. There is no way we can interpret scripture that justifies hate, especially hate based on the color of someone's skin.

But the question I've been asking myself all week is, how? What does it mean to really be an ally? How can I put my white privilege to use in speaking out, standing up, and changing things? An article published by United Methodist Communications this week was challenging and gave some tangible places to start. I'll send the entire article out to you in an email tomorrow, but here are a few suggestions.

The first is to acknowledge the part we have played in perpetuation a racist system. If we insist on saying, it's not me and I'm not at fault, then we cannot become a part of a radical movement to topple the giant of racism forever.

The second is to pray. Changing our beliefs as well as our systems begins with prayer. It is the way we learn the heart of our creator and the way we sustain our own hearts in the battle.

The third is to seek out new relationships. There is no substitute for sharing consistent, ongoing, authentic relationships with people of color. Developing those relationships may mean moving out of your comfort zone. In fact, it's probably the hardest of all the suggestions to put into practice. But it's vitally important. We will never understand racism or internalize how horrifically wrong it really is until we walk a mile with someone who lives under the shadow of this giant every day.

I have friend in California. She is African American. We've met through a mutual friend, my cousin actually, and we have never actually met face to face, but we've bonded over our faith, common political preferences, and a commitment to justice for all. I emailed her this week asking what she needs from me, her white friend. What can I do to be an ally, to use my privilege to speak out and stand up for her? And though there were no quick easy answers, what we did share was dialogue, grief, hope, and a commitment to love and prayer. It was a conversation I could not have had with my white friends because none of us have walked the same road she does.

Most of us here have not experienced racial slurs, been the butt of someone's prejudiced jokes, or experienced discrimination at work or school or greater society because of the color of our skin. If we are going to change the world, then we have to live fully in it, and building relationships with people who don't look like us is a wonderful place to start.

Beyond that, we can advocate through protests and letter writing. We can vote with our dollars by refusing to support corporations or businesses that discriminate or that make money for racist people in power. We can educate ourselves to better understand racist practices and systems.

Above all, we must be willing to take big risks. Facing giants like racism can put our reputations, our financial security, even our lives at risk. But imagine how much worse we would be if our world war II heroes had never stood up to the Nazis or our Civil Rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had never stood up to southern bigotry and segregation. Change involves risk, and unless we are willing to risk everything, then we haven't truly committed to radical discipleship, or to making the world a better place for all people.

Scripture is clear that the gospel is intended to be a message of hope to all people, gentile and Jew, man and woman, all people, all tribes, all over the world. Skin color, race, ethnicity... none of those are meant to be segregating qualities. Jesus came to offer healing, hope, and salvation to all people, not just some.

And while we're talking about Jesus, by the way, let me just remind all of us that Jesus was not a white guy. He was Middle Eastern. He had olive skin, dark hair, dark eyes. He did not speak English. He did not hail from a pure, European bloodline. For one to claim white supremacy is Biblically justified is pure madness, and very, very wrong. Racism is a sin, a blot on society and on our own hearts. Period.

Seven decades ago, thousands of people died on the CORRECT side of history defending justice and equality and giving their lives to say fascism, Nazism, and white supremacy have no place in our world. People in my family. People in yours. Some of you in this room have fought against tyranny and oppression under a flag that is supposed to mean liberty, justice, equality, and opportunity for all people, regardless of skin color. The question is, are we willing to take a similar stand today?

Evil is real. Hate is real. Racism is real. But so is hope, grace, and, above all else, love is real. We are the instruments of love in a broken world. Though the legacy of brokenness goes all the way back to Adam, so does the promise of peace and the assurance that love will, indeed, have the final say.