**Eyes Wide Open**

**Acts 9:1-9; 17-19**

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August 30, 2020

Last Sunday afternoon around 5:00, another black man was shot by white police officers - this time in Kenosha, Wisconsin.  Twenty-nine-year-old Jacob Blake was in an altercation with the police when he walked around the SUV where his young children were watching.   He leaned into the car and as he did, one of the police officers grabbed him by the tank top he was wearing and began to shoot.  In total, police shot Blake seven times at close range.  One arm, his kidney, stomach, and liver were all damaged, and he required surgery to remove almost all of his colon and small intestine.  At least one bullet cut through his spinal cord leaving him paralyzed, possibly for life.

Police have not released any information about the shooting, what happened or why.  They are asking the public to reserve judgment until the investigation is complete. Yet, in a video of the incident taken by a neighbor, there is no visible reason why police would need to use lethal force, let alone shoot seven times.  Protests have broken out in Kenosha at which two people have been shot to death.

Since the killing of George Floyd by a white police officer on May 25, since we heard him cry out “I can’t breathe” and call for his mama, our country has finally started to face our police brutality and systemic racism.  We are having a grand reckoning - one that is long overdue.  Slowly, many white Americans are beginning to see what has been right in front of our noses; our picture of how our society functions relative to race is coming into focus.  The scales are falling from our eyes.

Like Paul, we are on the road to Damascus - as a country, as a denomination, as a church, and for many of us, as individuals. So, what can we learn from Paul’s eye-opening conversion on his journey to Damascus that day?

This is the last in a three-part sermon series about what we, both the church and each of us as individuals, can learn from the stories of the early church.  We have been looking at scripture passages from the book of Acts, a history of the church in its earliest days.  The first week we explored the importance of small groups for the first Christ-followers as well as for the Wesleyan bands and classes.  Last week, we talked about radical generosity and how it was practiced in the first Christian community.  This week, we will journey ahead in Acts a little bit, to a time before Christians were called Christians. Instead, the movement which grew out of Jesus’ teachings was called The Way and had spread out of Jerusalem into the surrounding area including at least as far as the city of Damascus, 135 miles away.  Followers of The Way were growing in number and increasingly seen as a threat to the established Jewish order.  A man named Saul, a Pharisee, was leading the way - at least until God intervened.

PART TWO

 We first hear about Saul during the stoning of Stephen in Acts chapter 6.  Stephen had been brought before the Sanhedrin, the court, falsely accused of threatening Jewish law and tradition.  At the end of an impassioned speech, Stephen points a finger at the Sanhedrin and other devout Jews saying they killed the Messiah.  Infuriated, they rush at him and take him to be stoned to death.  This is where Saul is introduced and the scripture says only, “He approved of their killing him.”  After this, persecution of the church in Jerusalem became widespread, and Saul set out to destroy the church.  Acts tells us, “Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”

After he had done as much damage to Christ-followers in Jerusalem as he could, he set out for Damascus, which had a large community of followers of The Way.  On his way, a bright light suddenly surrounded him and he heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”  Saul asks who is speaking to him, and the answer is “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”  When he stood up and opened his eyes, he was completely blind.  Three days later, God sends Ananias to Saul to lay hands on him, bring back his sight, and fill him with the Holy Spirit.  Scales fall from Paul’s eyes and he can see again. With his sight restored, he is able to see with clarity that the followers of The Way should not be judged, imprisoned, or killed.  Rather, he will learn their way. He is baptized and begins his journeys as the greatest missionary the world has ever known.  We know him as the apostle Paul.

So, here in the midst of a global pandemic we as a country have arrived on the road to Damascus.  Like Paul opening his eyes to the immorality of his persecution of followers of The Way, we are finally grappling with the power of racism that has shaped our nation since the first white-skinned people arrived on our shores.

This great reckoning has started in many different parts of our lives including in our denomination.  United Methodists are coming to terms with our checkered past around race.  The first Methodists were staunchly opposed to slavery and any other form of social injustice.  This helped to define the movement John Wesley started.  Yet, by the time the east coast was being settled, there were Methodists who claimed white superiority and owned slaves.  Ultimately, in 1865, the denomination split over slavery forming the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church South.  They also formed a special organizational unit of the denomination specifically for African American Methodists called the Central Jurisdiction, our own version of segregation.

Methodists didn’t reunite until the United Methodist Church was formed in 1968.  At that point, the denomination reclaimed much of its heritage as a church focused on social justice.  Through the sixties and seventies United Methodists were active in attempting to use the voice of the church to confront racism, teach others about it, and become a more diversified church.

Now, the call has come from our bishops for United Methodists to actively work toward dismantling racism in our individual churches, our denomination, and our society.  What will that take?  First of all, it means hearing the words the risen Christ spoke to Saul, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”  Jesus would have us know that just like Saul persecuting the new Christian church, when we persecute any group, then we are persecuting him.  Even if we didn’t mean to.

Which leads to the other necessary step - those of us who are white must each do the work to open our eyes and recognize what systemic racism is and the privilege we have because of it.   This is not something from which any white person is exempt.  If you are a white person who grew up in the United States, you have benefited from it simply because our society was built by white people to protect and promote white people’s interests.  Even if you have always lived in diverse communities.  Even if your best friend is black.  Even if your every intention is to be completely open to everyone and express concern for every person’s well-being.  You have benefited from systemic racism in ways you haven’t even thought of.

That’s why understanding your personal story with racism is not something you do one day and then it’s done. It’s a process that I believe is lifelong.  We all have more scales to fall from our eyes.  We all have more to learn about the experiences of people of color, about police violence, about mass incarceration, about economic inequality and infant mortality, about the difficulty of getting health care, a decent education, and healthy food.  Even if we have experienced some of these things ourselves, we haven’t experienced them because of the color of our skin.

I understand that we are all in different places on this journey, and that’s okay.  Some are just beginning to question what they learned growing up or what they hear on the news.  Others are working to catch themselves when they make assumptions based on their privilege.  Some struggle with the phrase “Black Lives Matter” seeing it as propaganda while others embrace it for recognizing that the black experience in this country is unique.  I consider myself just part way down the road.  I know that I am still learning and always will be.  I also know that the learning is changing me for the good.  If you’re interested in exploring your relationship with our culture, I recommend Debby Irving’s book “Waking Up White, and Finding Myself In The Story of Race”.  Irving shares her own journey but also offers prompts to help the reader think about their own.

A couple of weeks ago, I was talking with a few folks after one of the outdoor worship services.  We were talking about how hard this time is - how so much seems to be happening and it can get overwhelming.  One of them said, “I just wonder if God is doing something we just don’t see.”  I have no doubt that is true. Now, I don’t believe God has sent us Covid-19 as some sort of punishment, but I do believe that God’s work is always about love and transformation.

PART THREE - VIDEO

Right now, I think God sees an open door.  God sees us struggling with these issues of injustice and recognizes the potential to use us to create change. Because, you see, God never transforms us just to make us different. God always transforms us so that we can participate more fully in God’s work. God transforms us so we can love more completely.  And with that love, we can help in the transformation of others.  We can help as our church works to reach all God’s people.  We can help as our denomination works to dismantle racism.  We can help as we carry God’s love out into the world and share what we see of God’s kingdom as we let the scales fall from our eyes.

Welcome to Damascus - we’ve got work to do. May it be so.  Amen.