Micah 6: 6-8

Our Mandate

Sunday January 28, 2018

Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell

Pilgrim Church, Harwich Port

Our sermon theme from New Years to Lent is Racism. Few topics could be more relevant today. Throughout the history of our country we have been wrestling with racism. Since the days slaves were brought on ships from the Caribbean and settlers were establishing the early colonies, slavery formed the backdrop of the trades that propelled the colonies economic engine. and concern among people of faith.

Our own Cape and islands were places where people of faith debated slavery. If these walls could talk they would tell of sermons against slavery, or prayers for emancipation, of people who organized to support union soldiers, and some who protected runaway slaves. Founded in 1854 by abolitionists our forefathers never forgot that the Bible affirms that all people- regardless of race or clan or tribe – all people are precious in God’s eyes. This is our legacy. Their faith and courage stands as a reminder and an example to us today.

These debates about racism in this country are not settled. They have taken on new platforms and issues but they rage on dominating our nation’s agenda. Debates about immigration are all about racism. Statements about Africa and Haiti are statements about the color of skin. Today’s reading comes from the prophet Micah. The Bible is clear that what we say is not as important as what we do. The Bible challenges us to put our faith into action. It challenges us to address the issues of injustice in our day. Let’s take a closer look at what we can learn from our faith about the issue of racism today.

In the first place, the Bible says that racial justice takes perseverance. I think it is easy for Americans to grow discouraged because when we elected a Black man to be president of the United states we imagined we had put racism behind us. Instead, something about those 8 years ignited our latent racism and exposed it. We grow discouraged. But fighting for justice takes decades and demands our patience and persistence.

In this series of sermons I have mentioned several times that Pilgrim Church was founded in 1854 by abolitionists. As I thought about that I grew curious about what would cause town leaders, merchants, and farm families to start a new congregation made up of abolitionists in the 1850’s? Could they be an anomaly? Was Harwich Port an outpost of extremists? Or did our forefathers and foremothers represent a movement of abolitionist fervor here on the Cape and Islands. It turns out that in 1854 abolitionists were strong here because the folks on the Cpae had been talking about this issue for over 20 years when they built Pilgrim Church.

It all started in 1831 when William Lloyd Garrison the founded the original Anti-Slavery Society in Boston. Then for the next 2 decades preachers flamed the fires of resistance with inspired sermons from many local pulpits. Anti- slavery speakers travelled the lecture circuit speaking in pulpits and meeting houses.

Conventions were held at times annually on Nantucket. In the center of the harbor inspired by Greek revivalists this columned edifice hosted many standing room crowds. Owned by fervent abolitionists in 1841 they invited William Lloyd Garrison to hold one of the first major anti-slavery conventions for three days starting August 11, 1941. Well over 500 men and women Caucasian and African American attended. By chance, that spring on of the organizers Nantucket banker William C. Coffin had attended a meeting in New Bedford at the Black Episcopal Methodist Zion Chapel. He heard a former slave address, Frederick Douglas address the crowd. Douglas described his experience as a slave in Maryland, before he escaped and fled North with such eloquence and clarity that Coffin prevailed upon the organizers of this convention to invite Frederick Douglas to speak at the upcoming convention on Nantucket at the Atheneum.

The convention that summer drew speakers from all over New England and New York to the first mixed-race anti slavery assemblies in the country. In the evening on the second day people urged Frederick Douglas to give a speech. When he took his seat the crowd marveled at this man’s intellect, his wit and his command of oratory. Douglas sat down that day so long ago William Lloyd Garrison went next to the podium and asked the crowd, “Have we been listening to a thing, a piece of property, or to a man? A crowd of 500 shouted, “A man, a man”. Shall such a man be held a slave in a Christian land? Again the audience burst with one voice- “No, no” until the rafters rang. Shouting above the audience, Garrison continued, “Shall such a man ever be sent back to bondage from the free soil of Massachusetts? With a tremendous roar the whole assembly sprang to its feet shouting “No, no,no” completely drowning Garrison’s voice. It was a decisive moment but it did not stand alone.

The movement built for the next nine years. You cannot found an abolitionist church in a vacuum. No one can. My suspicions were confirmed. It takes hard work week in week out. It takes hard prayer, earnest Bible study, lots of meetings before people move to such new territory as one. We would be naïve to think that we can change this country by voting for a Black man alone. It will also take us a great concerted effort to do more than symbolic change.

The prophet Micah says that God is not looking for good words or platitudes. Going through the motions won’t do it. Not really. God is looking for commitment, perseverance. What does the Lord require of us – to embrace faithful love (CEB).

In the second place, working for justice takes Humility. Humility is always the beginning of wisdom and the beginning of authentic faith. Frederick Douglas was a marvelous speaker for the anti-slavery cause because he was not seeking the limelight. He was not wanting to address crowds of people. Later in his autobiography Douglass described the request for him to speak as “a severe cross,” which he “took up reluctantly” (Douglass 119). He wrote, “The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down” (Douglass 119).While Douglass may have trembled with nerves over the course of his speech, one man who witnessed the event noted that Douglass spoke with “such intellectual power-wisdom as well as wit-that all present were astonished” (May 294).

It is the moment when we recognize that we are over our heads and they we cannot do this alone that we come to rely on God’s strength. Somehow God magnifies our weakness. If there is a silver lining in this moment of history when many people of faith are horrified at the way that some of the highest officials give voice to our most unexamined racial prejudice – if there is a silver lining, it is that we have been humbled as a people. Perhaps that will give us the grace to seek God’s guidance. It is only when you know you are lost that you can seek the guidance of a God who would help you find your way. Walk humbly with God.

Embrace God’s vision for our world. The Bible paints a picture of a human banquet. A place where all people can sit down together. God says in the 23rd Pslam He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Luke says that at the Last Supper Jesus hosts a meal for his followers and those who would betray him. Martin Luther King described this vision in his I Have A Dream speech – when he said that America is a place with the potential for children of all races to play together on the hills of Georgia and eat together in the lunch counters of Alabama. We have 36 million refugees in the world today – 12 times what there were 50 years ago. Some people see that as a problem but people of faith need to see that as an opportunity.

 Our world has changed a great deal, but we are all growing into Dr. King’s vision. On Frontline this week PBS aired the latest in a series called Exodus. Reporters have tracked the lives of refugee families from Syria and Iraq, from Afghanistan and Central Africa all trapped trying to get into Europe. These stories show families in transit, raising children in camps and small rooms, having babies and hoping for a better life because they cannot go home. It tells of an Iraqi man who was an interpreter for the American military in Iraq and now is targeted by Iraqi forces. He lives in a 2 room apartment with his wife and three children. It tells of African boys who have walked hundreds of miles to cross Gibralter into Spain some the lone survivors who have seen brutal civil wars. It shows an Uzbeki family, an ethnic minority from Afghanistan, targeted by the Taliban; a brother made it to Nebraska, but most of them are in a camp in Turkey.

Lincoln Ne was often called the middle of nowhere. But it has become home to a huge number of refugees They have formed a huge community in Lincoln NE. Over the years Lincoln welcomed more and more refugees. Afghani, Vietnamese, Bosnian, Mexican, Russian, Ukrainian, Tajikistan, Kurdish, Sudanese, Chinese have arrived by the hundreds and thousands. Mary Pipher says, *"We are becoming a richer curry of peoples."*

When Lincoln NE has become one of the refugee capitals of the world it is too late to turn back. The immigrants on Frontline speak of a world described in the Bible, a place without borders. They talk bravely from their tiny rooms and tents about how their children will by one day be freedom and grow up without fear. No matter how humble their habitat or how long their wait to enter Europe they are not turning back. The world has changed. Youth already believe that all people are welcome at the same table – the table of love and justice and human kindness. As people of faith we have a decision to make whether to work for this new world or get out of the way.

Super Saturday Sign up Join us March 17

1.

Morning Prayer

This day we pray for our community- the softness of this winter season, the land, and sand that remind us to look out. the breeze and the birds that remind us to look up.

We pray for our nation in these times of fierce debate and ask that your wisdom would pour down upon us.

We pray for our world changing- in flux. For 36 million refugees. For change in the air and children who are seeking justice in new ways – seeking access to information, a level of equality that reaches across borders and races and class.

Hear our prayers for those we love and know….

We pray for those burdened by too much, not too little:

 Those with so much power that they take advantage of others

 Those with so many things that they are never satisfied.

 Those who enjoy so much success that they are indifferent to the needs of those with less.

Those with such good health they have no compassion for the sick and never reckon with their own mortality.

Those who know so much they are proud and self-sufficient.

Those who enjoy being right and never taste the sweet wine of humility.

Those who trust in their own strength and never feel weak in ways that bring them to their knees. And so they never find their way into prayer.

Shape your grace around our inmost needs O God.

Do now give us over to ourselves.

Strive with us yet a little longer, for we love you and desire to serve you.

God sees our hearts. But the stories come again and again in every generation because we need to hear them over and over again.

These stories are repeated in each generation because God is hoping that we will hear them over and over in the Old and New Testaments. When the Hebrew children went to scholl they learned the Bible by heart. All the children in Hebrew schools were taught to memorize scripture, learn it by heart, hold the stories so close to your conscious mind that they make an imprint on your heart. They dance in your soul.

Just so, We cannot work for justice in our time and place in a vacuum. Change is something that comes slowly and incrementally. inch by inch and row by row the garden or progress grows. If we would tend this garden we need to begin by educating ourselves about the issues of our own time.

Story about - It should not have to be so hard….

Finally to fight racism we need fearless fervor. Justice requires fire in the belly. After Frederick

Let’s talk about immigration.

Figure 1. The Nantucket Atheneum as it looked when it was founded in 1834.