

We are always trying to make more peace, make the world a kinder place, and grow communities of peace and love. Paul, a leading follower of Jesus, came up with a strategy: He said, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, in order to win Jews. To the weak, I became weak, in order to win the weak," etc. In Athens, Greece, he became like the Athenians, quoting their poets, in order to win some Athenians. Jesus used a similar strategy when calling fishermen to be his disciples. He said, "Follow me, and I will make you become *fishers of men!*"

For followers of Jesus, the goal of speaking another's language is always good, to move everyone to closer communion, to better understanding. These days, how beautiful to learn the language of others at "interfaith" gatherings, to show that deepening peace and love for God can be found in all spiritual paths. The language of the Bible is not well known by so much of the world, so we do well to find ways to speak truths of Christianity in a variety of words, speaking spiritual truths in the language of others.

One of the words I love in this era is "interdependence." Deepening in spirit can never be done with total independence, nor with one-sided dependence, but we do well to find that harmonious balance of interdependence. We do truly all need one another; no one has all the gifts or skills to live well alone. We know that Paul's letters to churches often speak of diverse gifts, how we share them, and how we depend on one another.

One of the foremost gifts of the United Church of Christ is its emphasis and language about social justice. We hear words, that may sound new to some ears, about Jesus as a "radical" teacher, as a "revolutionary," as a "prophet," and perhaps to use a more modern word: Jesus as a "disrupter" (remember the famous story about him tipping over tables at the entrance of the temple?). He challenges and even "disrupts" some of the ways in his culture. So it is no accident that many followers of Jesus believe that actions faithful to Christ are actions that challenge and disrupt unjust systems, what Rep. John Lewis used to call "good trouble or necessary trouble." Those exact words may not be in the Bible, but they are surely

Christian language; Jesus told his followers that they too would be persecuted for his sake, for his cause.

Eugene Peterson translates Paul as saying: "I entered the world of others and tried to experience things from *their* point of view. This being "black history month," we do well to hear the voices of those who still seek to be liberated. We have spoken a lot about freedom in recent months, so it is a good time to be reminded of this language in the Bible. It is the language of the ancient Israelites, especially with regard to the Exodus from Egypt, the work of Moses to set his people free. We do well to learn the language in order to make more peace and work for justice with people who are still oppressed. We can learn the language not only from Moses, but of course from our black brothers and sisters in this country. Public television will have many specials this month, we might read a book by a black author, and surely in church we can re-familiarize ourselves with some of the great spirituals, like our closing song, Precious Lord, by Tommy Dorsey.

We hope and trust that we have made some progress in 50 years since the civil rights movements and Martin Luther King's time, but change comes slowly and there are still modern day lynchings and attitudes that have not changed much. I was just listening to Jim Wallis being interviewed. Jim is now probably about 70 years old and writes extensively on Christianity and Social Justice. One of the turning points in his life, was a memory from childhood, probably from the early 60's. He had a friend Butch, a black friend, and they were talking about the police one day. Jim Wallis had always been told by his mother, "If you get lost, look for a policeman; he'll help you find your way back home, maybe even give you a ride." Well, you might guess what Butch's mother had told her children.... "If you get lost, and you see a policeman, quickly go and hide under some stairs. Then when the policeman is gone, come out and start looking again for the way home." Two entirely different worlds, based on entirely different experiences. Have we come very far??? Here's a more recent story from a black mother interviewed on a news channel ... Her boy in elementary school, in a mostly white community, comes out from a theater audition crying, and tells his mother: "they say I

have to play the part of the bad guy, because I'm black. I want to play a good guy part!"

We all still have a lot to learn about ongoing racism. I was watching a UCC webinar recently, and a white pastor from Clackamas Oregon was speaking about their church's work toward greater social justice. A tab on their church website says "anti-racism." I admit that it is still a new word in my vocabulary. I have been comfortable saying things like: let's treat everyone the same, let's not be prejudiced, etc, and I do not think of myself as superior to non-whites, so I must not be racist. But because the roots of racism and segregation are deep in all of our bones, because prejudice is at a subconscious level, the best way to follow Jesus in this era is actually to be ANTI-racist, meaning that we actively learn stories of discrimination and injustice, and actively speak out against them. Since blacks have a history in this country that started with slavery until the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and then had another hundred years of ongoing slavery or segregation, we need to pay *special attention* to their voices, their stories, their language, especially since many of us come from rather "lily-white" suburbs. Prejudice and discrimination are still real, starting in the subconscious.

Hard to admit, but it *surprised* me to hear the pastor from Oregon say that Portland, though known as a very progressive city, is often called the "whitest big city" in the United States, and it once had a law on the books that said it was illegal for black people to own property there! The state of Oregon is still reportedly 87%white and only 2%black. Why should any of this surprise me? If I knew all about segregated bathrooms and restaurants in the south, surely there would be laws of segregation in the north also! Is it any surprise that Portland Oregon has white supremacists living there? Is it any surprise that there has been a history of police brutality towards blacks? Is it any surprise that Portland was a place of protests and unfortunate violence recently? What could we say about northern New England? Old habits and attitudes don't die easily; we need the "disruptive" and revolutionary attitude of the prophet Jesus, to change some things, nonviolently. We need to stand up and say "Stop!" to prejudice, hate, and killing.

God bless the Clackamas UCC church, close to Portland, Oregon, as they try to speak the language of Christ in “anti-racist” work. God bless us all as we try to speak the language of peace, *with justice*, for all. It is very hard work. We need to learn the language of the oppressed and beaten down. We also need to learn the language of the oppressors, and also the language of those, perhaps like ourselves, who may be bystanders, watching and not speaking up. Only with understanding, with knowing and understanding each other's language, can we dialogue about the truth, which Jesus says will set us free.

For deeper listening and understanding, we recall the prayer of St. Francis, paraphrased as: “O master, may I seek more to understand than to be understood.” This means deep listening, quiet listening. So we recall that Jesus often went out early in the morning, to a quiet place, a deserted place, to pray, to renew himself, in solitude. This is one meaning of “Wait upon the Lord to renew your strength, to rise up with wings like eagles.” Could we say that these days of pandemic give us more opportunity for solitude, quietness and prayer? Henri Nouwen, great spiritual teacher, used to suggest choosing a special room or place in our house for quiet meditation... perhaps at a special time of day as well. He said that over time, that place or time would actually begin to call to us! Or perhaps we can find our quiet focus in a prayer song, or attentive listening by taking a long walk in the woods. Time for listening to voice of divine Spirit will help us to listen with more patience attentiveness and understanding to the voices and language of our earthly companions. Amen (May it be so).

Now I'd like to sing a song, “Dream God's Dream,” by a Christian songwriter, Bryan Sirchio, who has learned the language of social justice, and has done much mission work in Jamaica. The chorus says: *Dream God's dream! Holy Spirit help us dream, of a world where there is justice, and where everyone is free, to build and grow and love, and to simply have enough. The world will change, when we dream God's dream.*