

It was a very sad week indeed, a very challenging week, news of protest marches flooding the airwaves and video screens. I am well aware that as a white preacher I cannot do justice to the feelings and experiences of my black brothers and sisters. Perhaps the best thing I can do is consult the Scriptures and see if there is a word in holy scripture that can help. We heard the apostle Paul says to the Corinthians, “Live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.” We have a charge to live in peace! Yet there is so little peace in the world! Paul goes on to say, “greet one another with a holy kiss!” This sounds unrealistic, and actually in this pandemic, many people, social distancing, won’t even greet with a hug!

Moving on to the famous passage that Ben just read, Genesis Chapter 1 insists that we, human beings, are “made in God’s image!” It goes on to say male and female he created “them.” We can say that the plural speaks of ALL human beings. We could easily say it means: male and female he created them, black and white he created them, “multi-culturally” he created them. So if we are all God’s children, all “made in God’s image,” then we can begin to focus on the word that the United Church of Christ has emphasized for so many years, the word “justice.”

Many theologians and peacemakers insist that there can be no peace without justice (fairness to all in society). The United Church of Christ often speaks of true and lasting peace as a “just peace” and encourages all churches to work for justice. So the Bible calls us to justice right from the beginning (Genesis’ statement that we are all made in God’s image), and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. echoes this in his famous speech: “I have a dream... to speed up that day when “all of God’s children,” black men, white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands, and sing...free at last!”

We know that peace does not come easily, that we can't all stand in the same room and have a deep feeling of peace just by singing Kumbaya! A song alone can’t create peace. No, we have to add justice, and justice takes lots of work! I think our African-American brothers and sisters are getting a little tired of singing “We Shall Overcome” someday. Because the next thought is often WHEN will that “someday” come? Hopefully we have

made some progress in the last few decades, but we need to keep working for reform.

The obvious first step in working for Justice is to put a STOP to any form of oppression or brutality; you put a stop to whatever is wrong. The second step is then to work on how people can get together and truly respect each other and treat each other well (The Golden Rule). These steps are difficult because we're dealing with governments our police forces, the very people that we have charged keep us safe, to whom we have given authority and power. To ask for reform in an authority is to “speak truth to power.” The truth is that there often has been excessive force, and the power that we give for law enforcement has been misused in many instances. I heard a very simple word of reform this week; our police need to be trained in “de-escalation.” Yes, officers need to have a certain amount of force at times, obviously, but their first goal should be to “de-escalate” if at all possible, to use appropriate force, and only if absolutely needed. We hear progress in actual legislation; apparently the Minneapolis police force did just pass a new law saying there will be no choke holds since we have seen so vividly that pressure to the neck can easily kill a person. What is so hard to understand about “I can't breathe,” the words we first heard from Eric Garner, and just recently from George Floyd??? If it was audible through a video camera, it was certainly audible to the officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck: “I cannot breathe, I'm through,” pleading with the officer, and finally crying out, “Mama Mama” with his last breaths, a gut wrenching scene, recorded on video.

So stopping brutality with better police training is step number one, then of course step number two is fair, respectful treatment for all people, which can involve anti-bias training. All of us have bias, prejudice in a subconscious way, when we are put with people from other cultures and other races.

Paul's words to live in peace take on a deeper meaning when he says “greet one another with a holy kiss!” Maybe that could be a clue for us: the emphasis on GREETING one another with the “holy kiss.” This could mean “without prejudice” or with the attitude “to give the benefit of the doubt,” or

“innocent unless proven guilty.” To greet with a holy kiss, or perhaps just a loving smile or handshake, is to show respect, an instant respect for our brothers and sisters, an acknowledgment that they too are made in the image of God, just like ourselves.

I hear black commentators nowadays saying that a white person cannot possibly walk a mile in my shoes; it's impossible to leave bias behind. I'm sure I have a subconscious bias, a subconscious sense of the “other.” (I feel it instinctually: He or She is so different from me!) But we can do our best to listen to our black brothers and sisters, to try to understand what is their experience of life. One of the sermons I sent it out in an email was by Otis Moss III. He's one of the leading preachers in the United Church of Christ. Over and over he referred to people of dark complexion as a people “kissed by the sun.” (This is the title of several books with that theme). What a phrase, “kissed by the sun!”... a phrase of respect and sacredness for peoples whom God created (in God's own image!) with more pigment in their skin.

I heard a commentator say this week, why is it that black lives just “matter?” ... it could be seen as small step up from “not mattering!” No, the reality is that all our human brothers and sisters are made in God's image, and therefore beautiful: so black lives more than “matter,” they are beautiful and precious. And the reason we have to actively affirm black lives, “in particular,” is obvious to me: For centuries, black people, “in particular,” have been seen by the dominant white culture as inferior... and treated as such, by enslaving, oppressing and discriminating unjustly against them!

Think of people from Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu to Dr. Martin Luther King, to jazz musicians and sports heroes! People amazingly gifted! When I went to Princeton seminary, the one that was voted to be the best class preacher was a young black man, only about 25 years old. I was amazed at his giftedness and passion as a preacher. His name is Floyd Thomkins, and I now follow him on Facebook. I'm mightily impressed by not only by what I remember of his oratorical skills, but now by his written words, so many truths and noble ideals that he proclaims in

his Facebook messages. I see him as a trustworthy source for both information and commentary, following in the Way of our Lord.

We need to listen closely to the voices of our black brothers and sisters if we will ever be able to understand them better. I was exploring yard sales last summer, and I was drawn to biographies or autobiographies. I happened to pick up one on Oprah Winfrey, one on Robin Roberts, and one on Dr. Ben Carson, yes, all African American. I picked up these 3 books, thinking I would like to know more about their stories of climbing to new heights in life, in the face of racial discrimination. Recently I've been reading the story of Dr. Ben Carson which is entitled, “Gifted Hands.” He had a similar experience to so many African-Americans; he grew up in a very poor neighborhood in Detroit. His mother was a single mother left by the father. That single mother made her two boys read more and more, sent them to the library, and had them do book reports every week! We know that Dr. Ben Carson went on to medical school, and that as an intern, he had white people who requested to not be treated by him .... Thank God, thank Goodness that the hospital gave such prejudiced patients an ultimatum; see Dr. Carson or leave. Dr. Carson became the leading pediatric neurosurgeon you may recall at Johns Hopkins, and became very famous you may know by separating Siamese twins that were joined at the head. He became quite the specialist, sought by physicians around the world. Now he has foundations, giving millions of dollars for reading programs and scholarships. So I harken back to the reality of the beauty of our black brothers and sisters, yes the amazing intelligence, skills, and potential of all God’s children.

Yet, we know there is still so much justice work to be done, as there are so many things that “systemically” are still prejudiced and discriminatory. We know there is racial injustice with regards to bank loans, housing, education and healthcare, just to mention a few things. We know there is so much work that has to be done for more equal treatment and equal opportunity.

I want to return to the personal level, even the unconscious level, where we have difficulty being able to truly embrace all races and cultures

as our brothers and sisters. One commentator put it this way; He asked, “when was the last time that you had a person of a different race or culture to your house for dinner? Or vice versa. I think many of us may have to scratch our heads to remember such a time. I know in Princeton seminary I got to know my friend Floyd fairly well; I was intentional about sitting at dining room tables that had students from other countries. I enjoyed cross cultural experience and relationships. Perhaps in my older years I haven't known as many people as I would like from different cultures. These current protest marches may be important for resisting systemic racial discrimination, but at the personal level, we will always have work to do. We all have prejudice, subconscious fears and aversions at the very least.

I'll conclude by saying, hear the words of our final hymn from Saint Francis of Assisi. In his song entitled “Make Me a Channel of Your Peace,” he talks about understanding. If we're truly going to be peacemakers, we have to seek more to understand than to be understood. In these days of heightened racial tension everywhere, we have to deeply listen to the voices of our black brothers and sisters. Saint Francis would agree with the phrase “Peace Through Understanding,” as the starting place of peace making. This must then be joined by direct actions for justice, of course. Let's keep listening to black brothers and sisters and leaders in the UCC. In the daily devotionals, there's one writer that I always turn to, and listen to what he has to say. His name is Kenneth Samuel, pastor of a church in Atlanta Georgia. I hope we will always listen to people like the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, great spiritual leaders from different cultures.

May we always be open to those who are different, to other cultures especially the black African-American culture here and across the world. Dear God, Creator of such diverse peoples, open our minds and hearts to new understandings, to new ways of understanding people that have been “kissed by the sun,” and also to new ways of understanding ourselves and our subconscious biases, for the sake of the reign of your love and justice in this world.