

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

Today has been designated “Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism Sunday” by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Our Presiding Bishop, the Right Reverend Katherine Jefforts Schori, and the Rev. Gay Jennings, President of our Church’s House of Deputies, have called on Episcopalians across our country to stand in solidarity with the A.M.E. Church and other denominations through prayer and action. None of us has to be told that the precipitating event for this day was the horrific shooting in June that killed nine members of Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, who were shot during their weekly bible study. As we all know, the shooter was a young white man, an admitted racist. Was he mentally ill? Maybe so, but we cannot deny that somewhere during his formative years, perhaps throughout those years, he was taught to accept the evils of prejudice and they became the driving force of his life.

“Racism will not end with the passage of legislation alone; it will also require a change of heart and thinking,” writes AME Bishop Reginald T. Jackson. “This is an effort which the faith community must lead, and be the conscience of the nation. We will call upon every church, temple, mosque and faith communion to make their worship service on this Sunday a time to confess and repent for the sin and evil of racism, this includes ignoring, tolerating and accepting racism, and to make a commitment to end racism by the example of our lives and actions.”

As a whole, The Episcopal Church has always been at the forefront of social justice issues, and civil rights is no exception. When the Civil War began in 1861, Episcopal dioceses in the South formed the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Confederate States of America. At the General Convention held during the war years, the northern dioceses never officially recognized the separation, and even held seats open for their southern counterparts. By 1866 the southern dioceses rejoined the national church, which welcomed them back with joy. Other denominations experienced splits that lasted more than a hundred years; some of them never reconciled, instead forming distinctively different southern and northern denominations.

There were many devoted Episcopal churchmen who owned slaves, who participated in slave trading, and who didn’t change their minds once the war was over and both the church and the country were somewhat reunited—somewhat, at least for a time. Our beloved church has never, and will never, dictate what its members must believe about social issues as a requirement for membership, and that includes issues of race and ethnicity, gender equality, the rights of those whose sexuality is different from our own—whatever makes another different from us. God knows what is in our hearts and minds; and if we are honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that most of us carry some sort of prejudice; it is ingrained in us through our humanity, and through our families of origin, sometimes going back many generations.

Look at what happens between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman in today’s gospel lesson from Mark. When the woman begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter, he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” That comment was pretty harsh, ugly in fact, especially when we hear it from the perspective of people who lived then and had heard it before. The children Jesus refers to are the Jewish people, members of the House of Israel to whom he has come to bring the New Covenant. This woman was a Gentile, and he calls her a “dog,” using a common slur of that time—a racial slur! Dogs in those days were not pampered pets like our own. They were unclean animals, unclean being the key word. Remember those Jewish rites and traditions of cleanliness and purity? Unclean was never a good thing, and hearing herself called a dog must have been disheartening for this woman. But in her desperation, she stands up to Jesus and he pronounces her daughter healed.

In Matthew's version of this story, which we heard last year, the exchange ends on a high note. After healing the woman's daughter, Jesus says to her, "Woman, great is your faith." In Mark's gospel, the story ends with the healing, and we're left wondering how our Lord, who teaches us to respect the dignity of every human being, could be so unkind. Of course, there are two sides to every story, and in our study of scripture we're called to remember the point being made, the lesson being taught. Here that lesson is not about a heated exchange of words, or even about the miracle of healing, but about breaking down the barriers of geography, gender, ethnicity, and religious purity to extend the Kingdom of God to all who seek it. It's exactly what we're called to do as the Church and its members, and our Outline of Faith makes that clear: "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." Often our mission involves reconciliation.

Reconciliation can take two forms. The passive form of reconciliation means accepting things the way they are, with no intent to change them or hope of doing so. The other is active, and as we understand it in the Church, is a process that involves recognizing our sins, confessing them with the desire to change our ways, being forgiven for them, and then returning to right relationship with God and others. This is not easy work. After all, none of us wants to admit even to ourselves that we're wrong, and we really don't want to admit it to anyone else. We are often quick to accept forgiveness, but slow to offer it. We get all tied up with emotions and pride and being right, just as the first man and woman did when they met God in the garden. God's help is our only hope for change, especially when our beliefs and perspectives about others are deeply ingrained in us.

Best-selling Christian author Philip Yancey tells a story about his first visit to Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park. When he and his wife arrived at the geyser, it was surrounded by tourists from Japan and Germany, all waiting for the next eruption, many of them with video cameras trained like weapons on the famous hole in the ground. The digital clock there predicted the next eruption would take place in twenty-four minutes, so the Yanceys decided to wait it out in the dining room of the Old Faithful Inn, which offers an excellent view of the geyser. When the clock reached one minute, they—and every other diner in the restaurant—left their tables and rushed to the windows to be ready for the big event they had traveled to see.

Yancey noticed that immediately—as if on signal—a crew of busboys and waiters descended on the tables, removing dirty dishes and filling empty water glasses. When the geyser went off, the diners oohed and aahed and took pictures. But none of the busboys and waiters, not even the ones who had finished the work they were doing, looked out the windows to see the eruption.

Why the difference? Why was one group so fascinated by this geological phenomenon while the other group was disinterested and unresponsive? The difference is based in perspective and expectations. For the tourists, the eruption of Old Faithful was fresh, new, and exciting. For the employees of the restaurant it had become commonplace and familiar. Even when they watched it, it no longer impressed them. Its power and beauty didn't move them because it had been commonplace. Sometimes we cannot see, what is right in front of us, good or bad.

When we read about the second miracle in our gospel lesson today, how Jesus restored the ability to hear and speak to a man who was brought to him, we focus on this man's healing. Today I call your attention to the words of our Lord said as he looked up to heaven. Sighing, he said to the man, "Ephphatha," "be opened." Perhaps our Lord is sighing those words to us as well on this day, calling us to hear and see what is going on around us and releasing our tongues to speak out for justice for all God's children.

Only God can give us the will and the way to see things through the eyes of Christ. But we can begin the work ourselves; by examining our perspectives and the way we think, speak and act because of them; replacing our criticism and judgment of others with praise and thanksgiving; by saying *about* someone only what we would say *to* them. In order to accomplish change in others,

we must first ask God's grace to accomplish change in ourselves. That is the easiest place to begin, because we cannot ask of others what we are unable to do for ourselves.

Let us pray.

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart, especially our own hearts and the hearts of the people of this land, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*