

Sermon TUMC - What is being Revealed? September 20, 2020

*Prayer of illumination: God of justice, whom we aim to serve,  
Open our ears to hear your call  
and to hear the call of those who seek justice.  
Amen.*

**What is being revealed? It's time to get uncomfortable**

Matthew 20: 1 – 6 and Jonah 3:10 – 4:11  
Michele Rae Rizoli

Following our theme of "What is being revealed?" This morning I'd like to share some thoughts about racial justice. I'm constrained to a tiny sermon, with a huge topic.

I begin with a **personal confession** that I need to make before I speak on this topic: While I may have been dismissed by the *gender* I carry in my skin and judged for the generous *shape* of my skin, as a person considered white, I have never been mistreated because of the *colour* of my skin.

I have never been followed around in a store on the suspicion of shoplifting, never been asked to open my bags, never been spat on and called names, never not been able to rent an apartment as soon as people saw who I really was. I have not feared for my white son's lives when they left home.

These are not privileges that I have earned, it's just the way things are in our society and I benefit from them.

I carry in me the sins of generations of white Christians who thought that they were better than others. Not at all because they were bad people — and that’s what makes this so hard — but because they saw their way of thinking about God as better; *their* way of doing things as the right way. For example, their version of punctuality as per *their* clocks, as “real” time and other people as late or lazy.

I carry deep-seated learned behaviours that have been vilified (*that means turned into villains*) or “othered” the physical and spiritual expressions of people who are not white; called them exotic or demonic, or “lovely for you people but certainly not for me.”

I have participated in countless micro aggressions, condescensions and misunderstandings. I am ashamed and I wish to repent.

And while my brain and my heart no longer want to believe these things, and live in this way; and I try hard to get past and eliminate these biases, they run deep. Our culture, our systems make it difficult to do things differently. This, my friends, is what is called “white privilege.”

A friend told me this week that she did a test online to see how racist she was, and it came back with a result of “slightly racist.” She was devastated.

Each of us have our own experience, this is mine and I don’t want to speak for others. We don’t want to be implicated, but we are, there is no getting around this.

*So, take a moment, maybe now or after the sermon — or during, if you need to, to be honest with yourself and consider what your confession about racism would sound like.*

I preached last Sunday about us not judging, and so this morning especially, I do not wish to pass judgement on anyone here or to make you own an experience that is not yours.

**I do, however, have an unusual goal this morning, a Jonah goal, if you will: I hope that the thoughts that follow make us all uncomfortable.**

If we are, like Jonah, watching from a distance and staying uninvolved in other people's despair, may God's words to us this morning be a worm that is appointed to eat up our shady bystander bush.

I am not going to talk about the parable that we heard earlier, I invite you to revisit it, if you wish you will find it here (<https://tumc.ca/?p=4134>). What is interesting about that parable is that it creates this deep sense of discomfort. That is what I'm trying to explore this morning.

Before turning to Jonah, a few considerations on this Black Lives Matter moment in history.

Back in May of 2020 George Floyd was murdered by white policemen, while calling for his mother and saying "I can't breathe." It breaks my heart even to mention it, and that is why I must. This event made the issue of racial injustice and police violence flare.

And there have been more killings of black people before this and since, even here in Toronto. I learned yesterday in a book that there is actually a museum in Louisiana dedicated to the history of lynchings of black people in that area. This is a horrifying and real history.<sup>1</sup> Another book, the *Skin We're In*, by Desmond Cole, documents just one recent

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<sup>1</sup> *I'm still here; Black Dignity in a World made for Whiteness*, by Austin Channing Brown

year of systemic racism in Canada and sadly he had no difficulty finding many examples.

Our black and indigenous siblings are crying out that their pain is intolerable, unbearable. They have suffered too long in a racist system that is so so so stacked against them. Will we listen?

There is a roar, and uproar. Riots and protests. Calls for deep change in the systems we live by. Black lives matter is a cry for justice, not for the supremacy of one race over another.

Yet many people think they need to monitor this, tone it down, to protect property and respectability.

Someone said on social media this week something to the effect of: What if instead of saying, it's so sad that black people are being killed, but I wish there wasn't so much looting, people said I'm so sad that there is so much looting, but I wish black people weren't being killed?

What is being revealed is that it is high time that people not be oppressed because of the colour of their skin. The depth of the protests reveals the depth of the pain and of the injustice.

There are other things being revealed as well, for one, outright hate. Of course our black siblings have known all along that it was there. They have been repeatedly traumatized by that hate. And this is not all out there in the distance somewhere, it is very close to home.

A few weeks ago I went to visit our friends Marilyn and Svinda, near Bancroft, Ontario. Their church had put up a Black Lives Matter sign, in solidarity with this cause. It seemed harmless enough, it was a gesture of support. But overnight the sign was vandalized with homophobic, antisemitic and racist symbols. The reality of the nearness of this kind

of active hate was quite sobering for them, and for me. And it was frightening. And it has plunged their church into anti-racist advocacy in their small town.

For my part, besides making sure this issue of racial justice stays alive in our congregation, I am in a concerted effort of trying to listen and learn. Aya has shared some resources with me, she might be willing to share them with you and have a conversation with you as well. And I'll post a few links with my sermon later this week so you can explore further.

So, on to Jonah. One thing I'm learning from liberation theologians is how they are drawn to the story of Jonah as a biblical source of hope. It is clearly not a factual story, a lot of you were chuckling as John was telling the story because I think it is meant to be kind of ridiculous, kind of over the top. About a self-important prophet and about God's overwhelming mercy, and, graciousness and hope. It's a humorous way to sum up a deep truth about God and about the nature of a prophetic calling.

Liberation theologians see this book as a summary of the Old Testament "which dismantles the theology of exclusivism and racism of [Jonah's] day. The theology of the book of Jonah discloses a) an inclusive God, a God of all nations; b) an inclusive people of God, a people that includes those on both sides of nationalist conflicts, the Ninevites, as well as the people of Israel."<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Anthony Bailey, who was a speaker last year at the MCEC School for Ministers, outlined the creation of white supremacy within Christianity and its implications. Now if you're like me, when I hear that term "white supremacy" I picture skinheads with swastikas being

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<sup>2</sup> (<https://www.fosna.org/content/liberation-theology>)

mean to people. But what it means is the idea that the white “race” is supreme, superior to other races. It is not always about extreme manifestations, it is an ideology of putting things in an order of importance. Setting up people based on the colour of their skin as being better than others.

Dr. Bailey also told us all about the creation of the concept of “race” and how it was made to attribute things to other people in order to subjugate them. He outlined how theology has been used to undergird this process. In his presentation he traced a thread from Genesis through the New Testament showing God’s commitment to all nations from the very beginning, not as an afterthought.

You’ll remember that we talked about the story of Hagar, for instance, earlier this year. God speaks directly to Hagar and gives her a promise very similar to the promise that Abraham received. Abraham’s blessing was also that he was to be a blessing to all the nations. (If you’d like a link to Dr. Bailey’s slides I can provide it for you). It’s a different way of reading the Bible, of seeing all the nations present and blessed by God.

You see, Jonah’s problem was that he thought he was special, chosen by God, not like “those people.”

He wanted God’s love and mercy to be only for him and his own— as though God’s mercy were not infinite and for *all* people.

When God called him to minister to others in distress, first Jonah claimed *ignorance*, Nineveh? Oh, I thought you said Tarshish, my bad.

Next he tried *escape and denial*. He thought that he could hunker down in the lower deck of the ship and sleep through the storm.

He slept while others fought for their lives and struggled to make sense of things on a sinking ship. Jonah closed his eyes to the chaos, the destruction of property and the despair of the sailors.

And then, when he finally owned up to being the originator of the problem, they threw him overboard — with God’s permission.

The big sea monster came and swallowed him up, and he had three days of quarantine isolation to try to get his priorities straight. He did not use that time in the belly of the sea monster to write a good long sermon, I’ll tell you that much.

All he got was a reluctant “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” A slogan. And he delivered it half heartedly and then he went and sat on a hill outside Nineveh to watch all hell break loose.

Except it didn’t. No thanks to Jonah, God’s mercy prevailed in the city. Respectability went out the door — even cows were in mourning — and the systems of the city of Nineveh changed! A miracle happened, despite Jonah, and a king repented! People, this does not get nearly enough air time in the Bible. What a source of hope, a king repenting with his people! And a system of a whole city changing.

And after all that all Jonah could see was his own petty discomfort.

Friends, don’t be like Jonah. Don’t get all caught up in your own specialness and preciousness and tiredness and reluctance. The cause of justice, the cause of God, is bigger than your discomfort and does not require your agreement or permission. It could maybe use your help.

So what do we do next?

This week I had the opportunity to watch a forum that included pastor Jordan Thoms of the Warden Underground church in Warden Woods, and a few other Christian people of colour in Toronto. Many truths were spoken that were very hard to listen to. It was eye-opening and heartbreaking.

White listeners were reminded that we can no longer claim ignorance on the issues of racial justice. "Just google it" said one exasperated young woman. There is no excuse.

Their sense is that white people have let this injustice happen without saying anything: "silence is not an option, make sure you are being vocal even if you get it wrong," Jordan said. "Don't be afraid to take on a negative reputation if it is about justice."

Ashley said "We're uncomfortable our whole lives because of the colour of our skin." And more poignantly, Enrico "The comfort of white people is killing black people." He repeated that we must choose to be uncomfortable.

Our Jewish siblings in the faith are at a time of holy holidays, Rosh Hoshana and Yom Kipur. Those holidays entail a period of introspection and repentance that culminates in the Day of Atonement. I think that's a good invitation to all of us for a time of reflection, introspection, repentance, confession and coming before God to take away those sins. God's mercy includes us.

At this time, as you enter this week, let us examine our own racial sins and ask God: How do you want me to bring healing? And also, stay uncomfortable.

If you want to engage with me on this topic please feel free to contact me at [mrizoli@tumc.ca](mailto:mrizoli@tumc.ca)