

2 Corinthians 13:11 Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

12 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

13 All the saints greet you.

14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

Matthew 28:16-20

16 But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated.

17 When they saw Him, they worshiped *Him*; but some were doubtful.

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Sermon: DWB

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I. Give me words that I may speak, give us ears that we may hear and through your Holy Spirit help us understand.

Rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

The United Church of Christ Collegium of Officers recently released a pastoral letter on race.

It begins:

Beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, on May 18, in United Church of Christ pulpits across the nation, pastors will be preaching on race in the hope of inaugurating a sacred conversation in the coming months that is urgently needed in our churches, in our homes and work places, and in the halls of power. Racism remains a wound at the heart of our nation, a wound that cannot be wished away or treated carelessly.

When Rev Martin Luther King Jr stood before the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963, I was a baby. In what has been called by some the most significant speech of the century, Dr. King called upon his country to follow a dream.

He said:

“And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”

There have been great strides made since Dr King spoke those words almost 45 years ago. People of color have seen the end of the institutional racism of segregation, many have found positions of authority and power. I recently heard a talking head on a news program say that racism was no longer an issue in America, his reason was that Barak Obama is a viable candidate for president.

It is a good thing that race is not an issue in the US of A, not any more.

When I was a seminary student there was a great deal to learn; there were classes in theology, Bible, and Christian history. Yes the class room was a wonderful place to learn. Perhaps as important was the learning that took place in another part of campus, no not the library, no not the student center, one of the places where I learned a great deal was the cafeteria.

Meal time at a seminary was unlike anything I had ever experienced. There are few places where people might be quoting Monty Python movies, with the accents and all, and then immediately begin talking about the ontological nature of God or Christian hermeneutics.

One day I was sitting with Trevor, who was from Jamaica and Valentine , who was from Nigeria. Valentine told us that he had been stopped on Route 128. “Were you speeding?” I asked. “No” he replied. Trevor said, “What were you doing?” to which Valentine replied “DWB.”

There were a few people who were curious when they saw this title for today’s sermon. Few people in white communities would know what DWB means, but people of color usually do.

When Valentine said this I replied, “Driving while black, don’t you know that can be dangerous?”

I must say that for many years I was blissfully ignorant about racism.

Racism was something that was in the cities, it was something we heard about down south, it was not something we faced in New Hampshire. Where I lived it was not

predominantly white, it was lily white. Since we had almost no people of color in the area there must not be racism either.

One day I was with a patient, while I was a nurses aide, and this woman was watching the news, and a story came on talking about some African American. When she started in about all those blankity blank N word deleted blankity blanks, I was shocked. I had not heard that word except in the media, never from a person I knew. It was not the only time I heard her lay her bigotry out in clear and visible form either, she did it often.

Not long after that, I was working at a nursing home. It was the end of a long night shift in the middle of winter. The parking lot was covered with the kind of packed snow and ice that looked more like a plowed field than pavement. As I was going out to my car, the maintenance man was pushing a cart of trash out to the dumpster.

I said something about it being a nasty day for such a chore and he looked at me and said, “Yea, there’s never an N word deleted around when you need one.” Again, I was shocked and dismayed.

And it was in that same timeframe that I went to the home of a man who collected antiques. He was showing me his collection when we came to what seemed to be a favorite of his. It was a small version of the lawn jockeys that are seen around frequently; he had several. He seemed very pleased and said , “Every needs a few N word deleted around.”

This was, as I said, in New Hampshire where the exposure to black folk is pretty minimal.

Experiences like this serve to show that we still have a long way to go in this country when it comes to race.

I was speaking with someone recently about this subject. When seeking to adopt a child, this family was confronted with attitudes of racism. When they met with an African American case worker about adopting a black child, the case worker seemed to be reluctant about the idea of a white family adopting a black child. She had pointed questions about the choice of adopting a child of a different race.

What they found over time was that their case was being ignored or at least put aside because of race.

It does seem that we have not yet reached the goal.

Recently it has been the reappearance of the noose that has brought attention to the issue.

Just think of the reactions to cases like the Rodney King beating or the OJ trial. In the case of OJ, blacks and whites had very different reactions to the verdict. Listening to the two sides, it was as if there were two completely different stories that people heard, blacks heard one story and whites heard another.

Perhaps there is a way to hear all the stories, to come to terms with the legacy that today seems to be under the surface, but is there.

What we need to do is find one story that may help us to come together. For me it is God's story, that is the story that may help us find a way through this difficult and lingering wound in American society.

Genesis 1:27 So the Lord created humankind in God's image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them.

In the image of God. We are all created in the image of God.

Our Declaration of Independence says it well: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Yes, I know it says men. I understand that many women also know about being judged unfairly and about being left out, but that will have to be to topic for another day.

It is true that we have come a long way from the days when men, women and children were sold as property. Even the move to make blacks three-fifths of a person in the Constitution was actually a step forward, after all, cows and horses and sheep got no such value.

In part, Congregationalists may have been responsible for that move; Congregationalists were some of the first abolitionists. Rev. Samuel Sewall wrote a pamphlet in 1700 against slavery called The Selling of Joseph.

In 1785 Lemuel Haynes is the first African American ordained by a Protestant denomination.

In 1835 when Enslaved Africans broke their chains and seize control of the schooner Amistad their case became a defining moment for the movement to abolish slavery. Congregationalists and other Christians organized a campaign to free the captives.

Old First Church in Springfield had a proud history as a part of the Underground Railroad.

We have a history in our denomination of standing up for what the Bible says is God's way, we were created In the image of God. We are all created in the image of God, black, white, brown, yellow and what ever color we might be, color does not matter to God, we are all God's children.

The trouble is that we do not all have the same stories. We do not talk about such things, sometimes for fear of being misunderstood or causing offense, I mean when I was a kid I

was taught that people of African descent should be called Negroes, after that it was blacks, then African American.

When I was at Andover Newton Theological School, we had what was called an African American fellowship. During my first year a dispute broke out between the members of this fellowship. Folk like Trevor, who was from Jamaica or Valentine, who was from Nigeria, or Charmaine who was from Trinidad were not, they said, African American, they were black.

At the end of a long conversation then name was changed to the Black Student Fellowship.

We don't want to offend, we don't want to share our fears, we don't want to open the wound and make it worse. But the wound does not heal because we ignore it.

The thing about our faith is that we are a people of light. The light shines in the darkness, and, when light shines, the truth comes out. It is true that the truth will set us free.

I mentioned the guy who had a collection of lawn jockeys. He saw them as a sign of black inferiority and of white pride. I had always seen them in the same way.

I just recently heard the true story of Jocko the jockey.

Jocko or the Lawn Jockey is seen in the South and in the Appalachian's of the United States.

Many have been destroyed because of the thinking that they are a racial slur to African-Americans. But is this true?

The River Road African American Museum in Louisiana tells us that lawn jockeys represent nothing of the sort, rather they show us a proud moment in U.S. history.

The story begins the icy night in December 1776 when General George Washington decided to cross the Delaware River to launch a surprise attack on the British forces at Trenton.

Jocko Graves, a twelve-year-old African-American, sought to fight the Redcoats, but Washington deemed him too young and ordered him to look after the horses, asking Jocko to keep a lantern blazing along the Delaware so the company would know where to return after battle.

Many hours later, Washington and his men returned to their horses who were tied up to Graves, he had frozen to death with the lantern still clenched in his fist. Washington was so moved by the young boy's devotion to the revolutionary cause he commissioned a statue of the "Faithful Groomsman" to stand in Graves's honor at the general's estate in Mount Vernon.

By the time of the Civil War, these "Jocko" statues could be found on plantations throughout the South: like the North Star that pointed fleeing slaves to their freedom, the Jocko statues pointed to the safe houses of the Underground Railroad.

Along the Mississippi River, a green ribbon tied to a statue's arm — whether clandestinely or with the owner's knowledge — indicated safety; a red ribbon meant danger. Thus these original lawn jockey statues today fetch thousands of dollars as true artifacts of the Underground Railroad that conducted so many African-American slaves to freedom.

We need the light of truth. We need to see the whole picture as a way to free ourselves from the prejudices which can keep us in the dark.

When I sat there with my friends in the cafeteria, they were surprised that I knew the meaning of their code for driving while black. In their experience the story of racism was not known to whites. The day to day reality of living as a black person in America is not part of the knowledge base of whites. It is as if there are two Americas, more actually when we take the stories of Asians or Latinos and others whose stories are not widely known.

This is a reality in this country today. It does not happen all the time and not in every place, but it happens. The stories of blacks who have been detained simply because of skin color are part of what shapes the black community in the United States today.

It is no wonder to me that many African Americans seem to be angry, I am angry about this too. We should all be angry. We should all be angry enough to dream, to dream of a day when all our children and grand children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

That day will not come, however if we only dream; we need conversation and conversion. We need conversation to shed light and we need conversion to change hearts.

Jesus tells us, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.

He does not say go and make disciples of people like you. He says all nations, all peoples, all the children of God.

We are not to judge except as God judges. We are to reach out with the love of Christ. We can dream of a day when all this comes to pass.

As Dr King said:

And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

*My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.*

*Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,*

*From every mountainside, let freedom ring!*

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

Perhaps we can have a conversation right here in Monson, in First Church. Perhaps we can open a much needed discussion and bring Dr King's dream a little closer.

Amen and AMEN.