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Date: January 15, 2017
Sermon Title: Race
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Scripture: Scripture Litany

Scripture Litany

Deacon: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)*

Congregation: *For Christ himself is our peace; he has made the two into one; and he has broken down the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. (Ephesians 2:14)*

Deacon: *Jesus prayed that we all may be one just as He and God are one . . . so that the world may believe that God sent Jesus. (John 17:21, abridged)*

Congregation: *I appeal to you, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Corinthians 1:10)*

Deacon: *So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Romans 12:5)*

Congregation: *Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:17)*

Deacon: *Love your neighbor as you love yourself. (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19)*

Congregation: *Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our father? (Malachi 2:10)*

Deacon: *These are the sayings of the wise. Partiality in judging is not good. (Proverbs 24:23)*

Christianity is so special, can either one, or both together, lead us beyond racial conflicts, hostilities, prejudices, divisions?

Once upon a time, long before boats and ox carts, horsepower, travel, and globalism and tourism, long before people moved about much, people mostly stayed in their own little corner like "Little Jack Horner," who sat in a corner, eating his Christmas pie. But in my experience around the world, even folks in their little corner figured out pretty quickly whom to exclude, whom to denigrate, whom to blame, persecute, dominate, enslave.

India, thousands of years ago, was a fairly homogeneous group, but they came up with a caste system to define clearly who's up, who's down, and who doesn't count at all. It didn't take long to have nobles and serfs.

In my years with Habitat for Humanity, building houses with the poor, in the Congo I had to stop Bantus from excluding the Pygmies; in Haiti it was like-skinned blacks versus dark-skinned; in Guatemala it was Spanish-descended versus indigenous; in Nicaragua it was leftists versus rightists. It almost seems human nature for everybody to want somebody to look down at, to keep at arm's length, to put in their place.

So I'm asking if America is so great, and if Christianity is so true, are we able to put racism behind us in our little corner? Maybe we can't solve the caste system of India or the color code of Haiti or the tribalism of Africa or the Sunni/Shiite Muslim saber rattling of the Middle East. But around here, our little "this land is your land, this land is my land," our little "America the Beautiful," our little "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," around here, can't we figure it out?

All those Scriptures we read before are telling, aren't they? And they tell us to get over it, that we are made for greater things than pettiness and arbitrary distinctions of no merit. Our Scripture started innocent enough, always sweetly naïve and hopeful. "We are all love in Christ!" St. Paul declares. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." (Galatians 3:28) St. Paul wrote those words, and he hit the major distinctions of his age: gender, religion, culture, status—all the ways folks said, "You're in, you're out; you're good, you're bad; you count, you don't."

There is nothing about race in there, per se: Jews and Greeks are the same race, male and female can be the same race, even slave and free can be the same race. Paul was referring to the divisions of the day in his little corner of the world. Each age, each society has its own. We have our own, taught to us by tradition and culture and family and friends and, yes, religion.

Paul was saying, "Hey, all those things that matter so much in the marketplace, in the workplace, in the halls of government or society? They

mean nothing if you are a Christian. Nothing. Quite a thought. Paul was just echoing Jesus's prayer at the Last Supper, when, speaking about us, his followers, the Church, Jesus said, "I pray that all of them may be One." How can that happen? Is it even possible for human beings to ever function as One? To look or act or sound like One in anything? Do we even want to?

Partisan politics. Competitive sports. Unbridled capitalism. Us versus them. Top down. Everything designed to choose winners and losers. Even the very idea of "Kumbaya" moments is openly mocked! As if, who would ever want such togetherness? But since we're in Church, we're stuck with the Bible telling us, "In Christ, we who are many from one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:5) And Paul says, "There is only one loaf. We who are many, we all partake of one loaf." (1 Corinthians 10:17) And Paul also says, "I appeal to you in the name of Jesus Christ that there be no divisions among you, that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." (1 Corinthians 1:10) "*Perfectly united in mind and thought.*" How? Well . . . Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Paul says, "Jesus is our peace, he has broken down the barrier, broken down the dividing wall of hostility." That's the key. We are not against differences. We're against hostility, hostile division. Differences are fine.

I don't care how much you love Jesus. I not rooting for the Dallas Cowboys, I'm not eating hummus, I'm not drinking white wine, I'm not watching Adam Sandler's "Hangover" Part I, II, III, or IV, I'm not going to Disney World or Las Vegas. And I could pick a thousand more serious things that I'm not going to fight you over. They're not worth the hostility. Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. It's the hostility of thought, word, and deed that hurts.

As we look at our American history, it's the hostility of racism that feels never ending. It started with whips and chains and branding irons, the treatment of people as property, counting them as three-fifths of a person, 60 percent human, the other 40 percent, what? The breakup of families, the forced conversions, the endless and daily violence. Backed up by the U.S. Constitution, backed up by the Supreme Court, backed up by force of law, and the local police.

And am I talking about 1680, 1780, 1880? And when America changed course, how much of America changed course with it? How enthusiastically? How quickly? How smoothly? The Jim Crow era for another 100 years, segregation, the KKK, bad schools, redlining, coded language, welfare queens, dog whistles, a black man in Boston stabbed with an American flag during the school busing days.

Bull Connor and his snarling dogs, water cannons on little kids, the humiliation of voting registration, lunch counter violence at Woolworth's. The bridge in Selma, the Montgomery bus boycott, Mississippi burning. Civil rights workers killed. Blacks can't swim, we were told, blacks can't play quarterback. "Black lives don't matter." Not quite as much. *Not quite as much.*

Being a New York City kid, I still read the *New York Post* every day. Rupert Murdoch's newspaper. I've been fascinated for years about their coverage of police behavior. Every time there is a police encounter that ends with a young black man killed, the *New York Post* is undyingly pro-cop, 100 percent. It is always what's called "a good kill, justified." However, including Friday's paper and yesterday's, when a New York cop is caught in a scandal, double-dipping, abusing overtime, drunk on the job, some immorality, caught sleeping at work, the *New York Post* is all over it, relentlessly attacking the police and any cover-up. It seems obvious: waste tax dollars, bad cop; waste a black life, good cop. Don't take my word for it. Check it out for yourself.

I mention that because this is a *now* story. When I started working on this sermon, I reviewed in my head all the racial stories of my life that I could use (and I have a lot, good and bad), but they're all from 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990. And the truth is, the honest-to-goodness truth is, much has changed. Much has improved.

The America of 2017 is *not* the America of my childhood. Or even my young adulthood, or yours. Our concern now must be the racism of *now*, and it is still alive. I'm not the first person to call racism "America's original sin," or "the wound that won't heal." It bedevils us, torments us, even now, as we head deeper into the 21st century, 200 years of slavery have left a stain that is hard to clean up.

There is not a single problem I can think of that can be solved without first admitting there is a problem. Car problems, health problems, marital problems, societal problems—the road to recovery for all of them begins with admitting there is a problem. That's the key to A.A. That's the key to Weight Watchers. That's the key to a healthy marriage. That's the key to cancer detection. You see something that's not right. You see something that's not the way it should be. That's your wake-up call.

I see signs from time to time at political rallies, signs like "Don't Blame Me: I Never Owned a Plantation" or "We Never Had Slaves." So what? That's like being told you have cancer or heart disease and you shout, "But I never smoked!" So what? There is still a problem, even if you didn't cause it.

And we still have a problem. In our schools, in our politics, in our hearts, we still have a problem. We are not yet what we aim to be as Americans. We are not yet what we aim to be as Christians.

One year when I was in India, there was a crisis brewing in a village near where I was. A young man and woman had fallen in love, wanted to marry, but they were from different castes. Tradition, religion, and family all agreed they could not intermarry. It wasn't proper. It wasn't done. It wasn't right. To prevent the marriage, the parents of the youngsters agreed to kill both of them. The kids ran away, to us, to the Mission House where I was staying. Our Indian colleagues, our FOCI Indian friends, got in the middle of it, sat down with the village elders and the parents, and negotiated a deal. If the bride and groom became Christians, the parents wouldn't kill them. They would no longer be bound by caste restrictions.

In the minds of the villagers, to the parents' way of thinking, if their kids became Christian, they entered into a new way of being. They were beyond the restrictions of caste. They were free from the prejudices of centuries. Ancient hatreds were erased by being baptized. And so, one morning, I baptized the couple, and that afternoon, I married them. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it really were that simple? Well, it really is supposed to be that simple!

Do you remember how our Scripture litany ended, the final verses? Pretty blunt. Let's at those last verses again:

Love your neighbor as you love yourself. (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19)

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another . . . ? (Malachi 2:10)

. . . Partiality in judging is not good. (Proverbs 24:23)

God does not show favoritism. (Romans 2:11)

But if you show partiality, you are committing sin . . . (James 2:9)

And now let us read together God's dream for us, from the Prophet Micah (4:1-4):

But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it.

And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more.

But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken it.

To close, let's sing together "In Christ There Is No East or West," Hymn No. 687

*In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one community of love
throughout the whole wide earth.*

*In Christ shall true hearts ev'rywhere
their high communion find;
his service is the golden cord,
close binding humankind.*

*Join hands, disciples of the faith,
whate'er your race may be;
all children of the living God
are surely kin to me.*

*In Christ now meet both east and west,
in him meet south and north:
all loving hearts are one in him
throughout the whole wide earth.*