



What's Going On

Micah 6:8

7 June 2020

Pastor Wayne Stapleton

With the events going on in our country, African Americans and others have been touched to the core. Blacks are not monolithic, but we share a collective history and present such that many of us felt like it was us, or our sons, or our fathers or nephews or cousins under Derek Chauvin's knee. And for many of us, there is a need to feel safe, relationally.

Church is one of those places where there should be safety. You know that one distinguishing factor of Renewal is that we are a church of difference but under Christ. There are Blacks and Whites and others here, folks who have differing political views, folks who have differing spiritual backgrounds and experiences. And we seek unity in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

But you don't find unity by ignoring what makes you different. Or pretending that there are no differences. You find unity in Christ by trusting that your bond in Christ is strong enough to help you wade into the waters of discussion and conversation and vulnerability. When we ignore what makes us different, we run the risk of believing that unity requires uniformity. It doesn't. Unity requires love and selflessness. Acceptance and understanding. Humility and honor.

As your pastor, I can tell you I love this church. I have seen so much of what I believed God was trying to do here actually come to pass. Not all, but so much. I see and feel love. I pray that I have earned the right for you to hear my heart this morning.

Race has not been something we have talked a lot about, for various reasons. Some might see it as divisive and we are seeking unity. Some might see it as political and we are spiritual. Some might see it as emotional and we want to remain theological. Some might see it as unsettling and we come to church to be settled, to find peace. Race is not the main thing, but it is not insignificant either. Which is why who we are and what we are doing matters.

If we are a loving community made up of some people who are really hurting, can we listen to one another? Can we hear each other's hearts and listen to each other's pain? We need to talk more about race, about our differences. We need to enable one another to express themselves. And we need to call out and recognize injustice. God is a God of justice. We are His people, called, as it is written in Micah 6:8 *"...to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with (our) God."*

What does justice, love and humility look like in a community? In the flesh? I do not believe that we have capitalized on what could be in a body of believers with the differences we have. We have not made space to talk about areas where there are real disagreements with love and selflessness. To be honest, my fear has been that we are not strong enough "in Christ" to handle deep discussions. So they only get touched upon when the issue is forced onto us. Now is one of those times. So I wonder:

How authentic can we become?

How real can we be about our hurts?

How much do we really love one another in Christ?

What kind of community can we really be?

God through the Apostle Paul casts a vision for the kind of community that honors God and actually values and blesses one another. In Romans 12 Paul encourages the church to live among one another with a set of



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standards. Please bear in mind that the church in Rome, as many New Testament churches, had racial challenges as there were deep and fundamental ethnic differences between Gentile and Jewish Christians. But God didn't expect them to separate, He called for them to deal with one another in the following ways:

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.

10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

If anyone here is faithful to anything other than these words, this is not the place. We seek faithfulness to Jesus Christ and His vision for His people, which cuts across human categories of left and right. God is much more concerned with up versus down.

So I ask you this morning to please bear in mind that many of us in the body here at Renewal, like so many in America, are hurting. Your brothers and sisters. When Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem, he did so after consulting with a Navy Seal who told him that it would be more respectful to kneel than to remain seated. He did so in an attempt to protest the lack of prosecution of police officers who had been killing unarmed African Americans. His stated goal was not to dishonor the flag but few seemed to listen to him. His critics were focused on their own interpretation of the story and not really what he was attempting to do. And he was blackballed by the NFL as a result.

I wonder now what if his protest was heeded? What if people listened to his concern, not being anti-American but wanting America to live up to its lofty self image of freedom and justice?

Many of us are hurting not only because of George Floyd, but because of the history that Blacks have in America. The heritage of African Americans in this nation is not exactly the same as other people groups. We bear the marks of that heritage, as did our mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, grandparents and ancestors.

America has had a very harsh and difficult relationship with its Black occupants. Lots of people like to go back to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, where my ancestors were bought and traded, bred and broken, by a system hungry for labor to generate cash. But to get a culture to buy into the notion of enslaving an ethnic group that culture needs to buy in to the inferiority of that ethnic group, it's deserving of enslavement.

In the book of Genesis, it is recorded that Noah got drunk and lay in his tent uncovered. He later cursed his grandson Canaan after Canaan's father Ham "saw the nakedness of his father and told his brothers (Genesis 9:22)." Dishonoring Noah. Historically, Christian church leaders justified Black inferiority saying that it came from that moment. They called it "the curse of Ham". Even though it wasn't Ham that was cursed, it was Canaan.

Why call it "the curse of Ham"?



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Ham is believed to be the forefather of people of African descent. But Canaan is the one who gave his name to the land that God promised to the people of Israel. A commentator named Ziegler is quoted in the Kiel and Delitzsch commentary as saying "there lies the great stain of the whole Hamitic race (Black people like me) whose chief characteristic is sexual sin." And it was believed the curse that Noah pronounced upon Ham rested upon the whole race.

The ESV Study Bible notes: "...this passage was wrongly appealed to in past centuries to justify the enslavement of African people, resulting in grievous abuse, injustice and inhumanity to people created in the image of God." Not just enslavement, inferiority. Once ingrained in people over centuries, these kinds of beliefs die hard.

What about today?

The responses to the murder of George Floyd have been varied. I have seen prayer rallies, peaceful marches and rioting and looting. Let me clear, I do not advocate rioting and looting and burning buildings nor any hate speech. None of that behavior achieves the purposes of God.

But the hurt that has been experienced is not just from the murder of George Floyd. It felt like another straw on the back of a weary tired camel. Floyd's murder at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer came after a host of events in the life of Black America that hurt. After slavery was made illegal it was legalized again through the practice of convict leasing. Southern states incarcerated free Black people on trumped up charges and were able to use their labor as if slavery had not been banished. Historian David Oshinsky says convict leasing was "worse than slavery." Our history includes Black codes in the south, oppressive rules that determined what formerly enslaved people could do for a living and for how much and where they could live.

There were Jim Crow regulations that legalized segregation and voting restrictions that were not abolished until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Consider this: it took until 1965, the year of my birth, for this country to abolish practices like requiring Blacks to recite the entire Constitution or pass literacy tests before they could vote.

Studies have shown that the practice of redlining in which loans were not given in communities of color have led to poverty stricken areas to this very day, 80 years later. In the North as well as the South. There was discrimination in provision of the GI Bill for soldiers coming back from WWII and there are still public school funding inequities. In The Equal Justice Initiative's 2015 report, *Lynching in America*, it is written that "...more than 4,000 black people were publicly murdered in the U.S. between 1877 and 1950." Its apex was in 1919 in the Red Summer, in which widespread "riots" broke out across the US when black veterans returned from World War I expecting equality in our nation after fighting for our nation. The History.com website records as follows "During the Red Summer, massive anxiety became mass violence. Between April and November of 1919, there would be approximately 25 riots and instances of mob violence, 97 recorded lynchings, and a three day long massacre in Elaine, Arkansas during which over 200 black men, women, and children were killed after black sharecroppers tried to organize for better working conditions."

There was the complete destruction of Black Wall Street in Tulsa, OK in which a thriving economy solely run by Blacks was completely destroyed after a Black man was accused of attempted sexual assault of a White woman. Angry Whites looted homes and burned down businesses and Black people were shot dead on the spot. Millions of dollars of property damage was done. In 1921.



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We cannot distance ourselves from this history any more than we can separate ourselves from the American Revolution or the writing of the US Constitution. This is our heritage. These realities as well as many of our own personal stories and the stories of our loved ones and friends create the kind of tension in us that gets brought to a higher level after watching George Floyd say "I can't breathe" and cry out for his mother before dying. After 14-year-old Emmett Till's murder in 1955. After the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 killing 4 young Black girls as they were putting on their choir robes preparing for service. After Alabama State Troopers joined by the Ku Klux Klan attacked 300 nonviolent protesters on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma Alabama on the day I was born, March 7, 1965.

After the deaths of Amadou Diallo, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sam DuBose, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Terrance Crutcher, Stephon Clark, and Breonna Taylor by officers with no one being charged with a crime, or acquittals.

This isn't just Black History, this is America's history, America's present. And there are many more stories, my stories, my son's stories. My wife's stories as a bi-racial woman who people see as White. Who has heard things she was not supposed to hear, by people who thought they were safe to share how they felt about Black people. Please hear me, the media doesn't have to tell us about our experiences, we have lived them. Don't let the media convince you of our lives – talk to us. As one of our elders recently told me "Relationship doesn't come from listening to others talk about me. It comes from having a conversation with me directly. God calls us to relationship."

When it comes to race, some might say "I don't see color." And see that as a good sentiment. I think you mean well but let me say this clearly to you: "It's okay to see me as Black." I have been shaped by my history and my heritage. I invite you to see me that way, not for the purpose of focusing on differences, but to express the beauty of the diversity that God has created. It is a wonderful thing for you to see me as I fully, really am and love me as I am. To have an open and honest relationship united in Christ across ethnic differences. To have to ignore a part of me feels like an admission that you cannot love me as I fully am. Recognizing my Blackness is an expression of reality, not necessarily division. I give thanks to God that I was raised by Albert and Lessie Stapleton, for my aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents, and for my difficult yet hopeful heritage in this country. To ignore that actually hurts. To think it would be an insult to acknowledge my heritage doesn't sound loving.

Who I am – all of my background – has been used by God to bring me to this moment, to this church, to attempt to bring glory to God through leading a church community that is not monolithic, but is trying to love God and love others made in His image, across many possible divides.

So Renewal, you have brothers and sisters in Christ that are tired and are hurting. And you have a gospel that says in Matthew 22 *"37 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."*

I am calling for your love. I am calling for your respect for us as persons who are hurting, and angry. I am calling for you to see us as people made in the image of God, not as political positions. I am asking for your care. I am pushing no agenda onto you, except what Scripture clearly calls you to. I am just giving you a real and honest perspective of what is going on inside the heart of a Black man, who happens to be your Pastor.



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Bishop Kenneth Ulmer tells the story of a female evangelist who was approached by a woman after a service. The woman was crying because her husband and son were killed and she asked of the evangelist could pray with her. The woman was distraught, saying "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do!" The evangelist said, "I don't know how to fix it. Can I cry with you?" She took her in her arms, didn't quote verses or try to reason with her, she just cried with her.

May I be so bold as to ask you to stand with us, to listen to us, to hear our hearts? To cry with us? Let's work on becoming the kind of community that we say we want to be. The kind of community in which love reigns because Jesus reigns in and among us. The kind of community where we show humility and selflessness, where we extend grace to one another.

In a statement I wrote for the North American Baptist Conference I asked any who are concerned to do the following. I ask each of us the same. Please

- Pray for eyes to see and ears to hear, asking God to show you what He wants you to see in yourself.
- Be led by the Lord and His love for all people.
- Be humble, resisting the idea that you know how those unlike yourself should feel.
- Be open to the notion that you have something to learn about yourself and your own biases, as well as others and how they see the world.
- Please do NOT look for a political angle; get your information about people different from you from the people themselves and not the media, and seek your guidance from the Lord.
- If you are White, truly love and respect somebody you know who is Black or of color; care about how they feel, care about their hurt, ask questions, and seek understanding and not just to be understood.
- If you are Black, develop a friendship with someone who is White; listen and share your heart, build an honest and open friendship in which you can discuss your perspectives, be a person of grace for their questions, and seek understanding and not just to be understood.

For all of us, may we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.