

Reflection: As Heard on The Mall
Date: April 15, 2018

On April 4 I ventured to The National Mall in Washington, D.C. to participate in what was billed as a Rally to End Racism, scheduled to coincide with the anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. While we periodically hear of protests, and marches these days in response to various injustices, this was unique in that it was entirely faith-based. As people of faith, then, what is the status of the cause that Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his life for? As people of faith, then, what are we called to do moving forward?

This rally was sponsored by The National Council of Churches, of which our denomination is a member, in part to launch a new Truth and Racial Justice Initiative. Other supporters included The National African American Clergy Network, the Mennonite Central Committee, Franciscan Action Network, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Conference of National Black Churches, World Council of Churches, Religions for Peace, Sojourners, Parliament of The World's Religions, Islamic Society of North America, Repairers of the Breach, and The Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice, to name a few. There were numerous speakers (mostly Christian), well-known gospel singers that I never heard of, and some activist-oriented celebrities.

Now in the spirit of "know your audience," I wanted to pause even in this introduction, and address those who are thinking, "I am tired of hearing about racism. I am not racist." Now I am sure you are all very nice people, so I am not going to speak to you in shrill tones. You may indeed smile warmly at the person of color you pass in the supermarket aisle. God bless you. What we are not speaking about here are your individual attitudes. We are speaking about are the systems that we are all apart of.

While we might be prone to avert our eyes, we are speaking of *systems* that have resulted in greater wealth disparity between whites and blacks now, than there was 50 years ago. We are speaking about *systems* that - despite The Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the 1968 Supreme Court order to dismantle segregated schools - we have drifted back to a situation where our schools are as segregated as ever. We are talking about *systems* that lead to a prison population that is 35% African-American, while only 12 - 13% of the overall population is African-American. I could go on, but do you get the idea? I know you are all very nice people, but something very strange is going on that categorically does not reflect Kingdom values.

With that backdrop then, the tag line of the rally was A.C.T. NOW! The "A" stands for Awaken. The "C" stands for Confront. The "T" stands for Transform.

- **AWAKEN** ourselves to the truth that racism is ever-present, deeply rooted in American culture, and profoundly damaging to our communities.
- **CONFRONT** racism, speak truth to ourselves, our communities and institutions, and stand against injustice.
- **TRANSFORM** the hearts, minds, and behaviors of people and structures that shape society.

Theologian Rev Dr W. Franklyn Richardson, who is also chair of the Conference of National Black Churches, said at the rally, "**When black and brown people seeking a better life in our country are cast as drug dealers and rapists, that stain [on our country] is made visible. . . . We cannot continue business as usual. We cannot wait any longer. We must move beyond our guilt.**"

Eradicating racism means more than just changing personal attitudes, said speakers at the rally, it also means challenging and changing the racism woven into theology, systems and structures of society and, most of all, into the church.

Jim Wallis, author and founder of Sojourners, said it is time for white Christians to tell the truth to God. **"Without confession to the sin of white racism, people who call themselves white Christians will never be free. Today, we confess that the sins of white colonialism, and white racism helped nail Jesus Christ to the cross. This is our confession during this holy season. . . . White Christians, since the founding of America, have been living a lie. We reject the resurgence of white nationalism - including in the highest level of power in this capital city."**

Our own Rev. Dr J. Herbert Nelson II, stated clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), contended that Christianity is complicit in oppression against African Americans. He said, **"I'm tired of talk. I'm tired of all the promises . . . I'm here because the church that I serve has been complicit in the history of racism. It is time for us to start truly carrying the strength of a community against racism."** He continued, **"Public schools have failed minority students, who find themselves with 'an absence of possibility,' after years being neglected by teachers and poor school districts."**

In a video message, Rev. Dr William J. Barber II said the USA must deal with the *real* Dr Martin Luther King - **"the Dr King who came here not just for the *kumbaya*, but for jobs and justice."**

Rally-goers emphasized the importance of churches in helping people and communities develop the moral capacity to not just fight racism, but to go further and build a society that honors the dignity of every person.

Rev. Dr Jennifer Harvey, professor at Drake University urged people to explore the difference between reconciliation and repair. She said, **"Our own history makes clear that that's not the question our brothers and sisters of color have been asking,"** referencing a number of incidents since 1960 in which white churches failed to fight for equality. She said, **"They've not been asking for more togetherness. They've been organizing and insisting on justice,"** Harvey asked white people how they were fighting to end oppression, and criticized the Trump administration for continued attacks on minorities. She asks, **"Dear white Christians: now what? It feels right to stand in this place just minutes away from a very, very White House. Muslims are being banned. Latino families are being terrorized . . . It feels good to be here because the gospel calls us here."**

The National Council of Churches was very active in mobilizing white Christians to support The Voting Rights Act of 1965. After that, however, energy for such things seemed to be on the wane. It seems that nice white Christians then figured, "Our work here is done now that African Americans are guaranteed the right to vote."

Seriously? There is enormous evidence to the contrary. Can we start by acknowledging that?

Let me now move from the National Mall to our own denomination. In 2016 our denomination published a 26 page document entitled **Facing Racism**. I'll conclude by quoting directly from a section that reads, "CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH: What Is God Calling Us to Be and Do?"

"What is the moral-ethical imperative for the PC(USA)? As a covenant community seeking to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst, is there a word from God that speaks loudly in and to the present sinful conditions of racism and racial violence? Are there grounds for hope that can inform us about what can and ought to be done

despite the serious levels of brokenness? While we each bear the indelible stamp of God's image, we recognize ourselves as fallen creatures who relate to others personally, socially, and institutionally in ways that deny that image in experience in both church and society.

We are reminded that it is the corporate church that must strain to hear God's word and discern how to respond to individual and institutional judgments and behaviors that operate at cross-purposes with God's will for the human family. The corporate church exists in a covenantal relationship with God: a covenant offered by God, sealed in Jesus Christ and mediated through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Our call to a covenantal relationship with God is both descriptive and prescriptive. The call is descriptive in that it defines who we are and whose we are. It is prescriptive in that it informs what we must do. Our call to stand against racism and for justice emerges out of our identity as faithful servants of God. Our identity compels us to oppose the forces of injustice. Antiracism, therefore, is prescriptive for what a faithful community must do in the quest to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The church must actively oppose the forces of racism in concrete and strategic ways. Justice cannot be determined or achieved in the abstract. If racism is to be eliminated, it must be defined contextually and concretely so that its personal, institutional expressions and structures can be seen, understood, and countered. An antiracism church is one whose institutional behavior and commitment are informed by God's covenant to establish justice, love, and peace in relationships, and whose identity is visibly expressed in the context of active, antiracism engagement.

The PC(USA), operating today in a culture of brokenness, must speak clearly about what it means to embrace antiracism as a major part of its corporate identity."

Amen!

https://facing-racism.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/facing_racism/resources/facing-racism-policy.pdf