

## Facing Racism: A Vision of the Intercultural Community Antiracism Study Guides

### Biblical Imperative to Antiracism

#### **Introduction**

The Bible provides a firm foundation and compelling imperative to engage in antiracist work. There are at least four different biblical themes that can ground and motivate antiracism. While we will read some selected texts, it is important to recognize that these themes are not confined to isolated verses. Rather, they are woven throughout the biblical witness.

#### **Creation**

Read: Genesis 1:1-31 see also Psalm 104

We are all part of God's intricate and amazing creation. We did not bring ourselves into being, rather we receive our existence as a gift from God. Our lives are interwoven with all of creation, including the stars, planets, oceans, animals, trees, and plants around us. We are all part of creation that God has made and declared good. God created all the cosmos in an intricate interwoven system of life. When humanity elevates one group over another, or falsely declares particular groups less good than others, we usurp God's place as creator of all that is. We deny our interrelation and proclaim our judgment more powerful than God's.

#### **Image of God**

Read: Genesis 1:26 "Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."

Humanity is made in the image of God. The image of God in all human persons is fundamental to the rejection of racism. While humans have many differences, we are all children of God, made in the image of God, and therefore of equal worth, value, and dignity. We are called to a vision of humanity without racism that is "grounded in our common origin as children of God from which we derive our inalienable worth, dignity, and sanctity."

All humans are made in the image of God. It is therefore falsehood and deception to deny the full humanity of any group of people.

#### **God loves diversity**

Read: Acts 10:9-23

While focusing on the image of God emphasizes how all human persons are fundamentally the same, the differences between persons are also valuable. The Bible portrays God as delighting in the variety in creation (see Job 38-41). In the New Testament, the God of Jesus Christ offers grace to all people, regardless of their social group or status. Jesus spoke with and honored all those he encountered, including respectable Jewish men, women, tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans, and Canaanites. The book of Acts recounts the momentous decision to proclaim the gospel to the gentiles, who were at the time considered unclean by the Jewish followers of Jesus. Peter's initial hesitation to have anything to do with gentiles is overcome by a series of visions in which God tells him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Once convinced, Peter tells others, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34). People do not have to all be the same in order to be loved by God. There is room in God's grace for vast differences. And the grace of God does not erase differences, but rather invites unity among them. When the Spirit came upon the people at Pentecost, each person present could hear the believers speaking in his or her native language (Acts 2:1-11). God did not provide a new language that erased all native tongues. Rather, God created understanding within the diversity of languages present.

God loves variety and diversity. The grace of God is not contained within particular human groups, nor does God's grace erase our differences. Racism falsely proclaims that difference is negative, rather than evidence of God's abundant creativity.

### **God loves justice**

Read: Jeremiah 9:23-24

Another Biblical theme that compels us to anti-racism work is God's delight in justice. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible continually proclaim God's care for those who are oppressed and God's demand for just action. Jeremiah says that God "delights" in justice (Jer. 9:24). In Amos, the LORD calls for the people to "establish justice in the gate" and "let justice roll down like waters" (Amos 5:15, 5:24). The prophet Micah states that what the LORD requires is "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

God delights in justice. Racism, as systemic inequality, is fundamentally unjust and therefore against the will of God.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. Which of these four biblical foundations for anti-racism work (creation, image of God, diversity, and justice) speaks most powerfully to you? Why?
2. The Bible has often been used to support racism. What are some ways you have heard or seen this happen?

### 3. How can our church community counter racist interpretations of the Bible?

#### Envisioning a New Way of Life Together

##### **Introduction**

As we strive to create a world that more closely reflects God's love of justice and diversity, it can be helpful to have a shared image to evoke our common hope. Two such images are the Beloved Community and the New Creation.

##### **Beloved Community**

Read: 1 John 4:7-8 see also Ephesians 2:19

Many verses in the Bible speak about the importance of community building. But what exactly does the term "Beloved Community" mean, and where does it come from? The phrase "Beloved Community" was first coined by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce. However, it was Martin Luther King, Jr. who popularized the term during the Civil Rights Movement. For Dr. King, agape love-- the type of love revealed in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross--is at the core of the Beloved Community. It is a love directed towards the neighbor (1 Corinthians 10:24), which "does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess" (Washington 2003, 19). It is a vision of community where "Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood" (The King Center 2014).

##### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Is the term "beloved community" familiar to you? If so, who taught you this phrase?
2. What is the closest experience of community you have had to this vision? What made that community possible? Was it a diverse group? Why or why not?
3. How might our church community move one small step closer to beloved community?

##### **New Creation**

Read Isaiah 65:17-25

Another way to imagine a new way of life together is to envision the New Creation, also called the Kingdom of God. Letty Russell, a 20th century Presbyterian theologian, begins with

an eschatological (end of time) vision of what God intends for the fulfillment of creation. We see something of what God intends for us in the biblical accounts of God's love for us. Looking back to what God has done, particularly in Jesus, we see what the future ought to look like. This "eschatological future" of the New Creation is "the goal or purpose of life that is prefigured in the coming of Christ and opened up by the promise and actions of God" (Russell 1979, 164). This vision of the New Creation gives us guidance and courage to act for justice here and now, as we are called to live towards and anticipate the future God intends for us. Russell claims we must "begin from the point of view of New Creation and of what God intends us to become in Jesus Christ" (1979, 15). Beginning with the future, as we know it in the memory of God's love for us, we can act with justice and hospitality now.

These two images, Beloved Community and New Creation, give shape to our hope for more faithful life together. While they are quite similar in envisioning right relationships, they also have some differences. Although the image of the beloved community has always been a vision for the future, for many it is also associated with the past, that is, with the Civil Rights Movement. This can be an empowering association or a painful reminder of the limitations of our progress. Similarly, the image of New Creation can seem either impersonal or prophetically inclusive of environmental concerns. These images are not definitions of the future we seek, but rather gestures towards the promises of God.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What associations or feelings does "New Creation" evoke for you?
2. How might issues of ecology be related to issues of racism?
3. How could our church community move a bit closer to New Creation?

### **Resources**

The King Center, "The King Philosophy: The Beloved Community," 2014, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4> (20 August 2015).

King, Jr., Martin Luther. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by James M. Washington. New York: HarperOne, 2003.

Russell, Letty M. The Future of Partnership, [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1979].

### **Racial Reconciliation**

Read Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, and to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? Introduction Most local churches adapt a unique mission statement that summarizes in clear and simple language what

the church sees as its primary aim in the community in which it worships and serves and in the broader world. These statements appear in bulletins, newsletters, pamphlets, and handouts and are periodically recited by the congregation. Mission statements help us to remember who we are and what we are about.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. The Micah passage gives a straightforward formula for what the Lord requires. How many elements of this formula are apparent in the mission statement of your organization?
2. Can you think of instances where the church has been successful in promoting social righteousness?
3. Examples of where it has been less successful in recognizing and promoting social righteousness?
4. What kind of divisive issues have you experienced in the church and what are some of the common elements they share with issues of race and racial justice?
5. What are some of the most effective ways of advocating Christian values? Are there points at which the line should be drawn?
6. When have you been required to take a stand for Christian principles and values? What was the outcome?

### Racism 101

#### **Introduction**

Having conversations about racial injustice is hard work. One of the difficulties is unspecific terminology. Words like “racism” and “racist” are used very loosely in common parlance. This creates a lot of opportunity for confusion, defensiveness, and unintended offense. In order to make conversation easier and more productive, let’s begin with some shared definitions. Race People come in different colors, shapes, sizes, and body types. They always have. Yet it was not until the era of Western colonialism that the concept of race was constructed. When European colonizers arrived on a new continent, they did not understand the subtleties of tribes, family groups, religious groups, or geographical regions that the current inhabitants of that land used to identify themselves. The colonizers lumped whole continents of people together into one new category, with skin color as its marker. That is how race was invented. It is a made-up category from the beginning. Also, the colonizers’ labeling of people according to skin color was not neutral observation. It served the economic and material interests of the colonizers to disregard the distinct cultures they encountered. The colonizers got

to be the ones who named and identified whole peoples, while the self-identification of groups was erased. For example, before European colonizers arrived, the Americas were populated by several distinct groups, each with their own language and traditions. After colonization, the rich variety of societies within this large swath of land were all called Indians--a name that reflects the (mistaken) perspective of the colonizers, rather than the perspective of the people themselves. In a similar fashion, during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, people from a wide variety of cultures within the enormous continent of Africa were kidnapped, brought to a foreign land, and all lumped together as Negroes. While the words we used have changed--we now say Native American and African American--for the most part we retain a classification system based on the self-interested perspective of European colonizers from centuries ago.

The notion that all dark-skinned people were of one category simply did not exist before this time, when this classification system was created to enable and justify the subjugation of other peoples by European colonizers. The various racial categories (races or colors) that were invented at this time were placed in a hierarchy, with Europeans (whites) at the top. The categories evolved over time through now-defunct regulations that classified different Asian ethnic groups as either black or white, and several U.S. Supreme Court decisions that further defined who is considered white and who is not considered white. For example, *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923<sup>13</sup> further defined white persons as not inclusive of Caucasians of Indian descent (or those who do not fit the "common understanding" of Caucasian). This system of racial categorization is called white supremacy.

## **White Supremacy**

While individual people might believe in the supremacy of white people as an ideal, the term white supremacy really refers to the system itself and its effects. Historically, the economic, social, and legal systems of the U.S. have been constructed with the assumption (spoken or unspoken) that white people are the normal citizens with which they are concerned.

Let's consider an analogy. Louisville, KY is a city built with the assumption that people have cars. It is car-centered, car-dominant, and car-identified. The public transportation system is not well-developed; we have buses that run limited routes on limited schedules. There are no subways. There are large sections of town with no sidewalks. There are bike paths for recreation, but cycling to work requires trying to find space beside the cars on the road. Driver's licenses are required for a whole variety of noncar-related activities, including opening a bank account. A person may get an alternate form of identification, but this requires going to the Department of Motor Vehicles. This structural feature of Louisville makes daily life much harder for people who do not have cars. Getting to work takes longer, getting to the doctor or the dentist can be tricky, and so on. White supremacy is like this. It is a structural feature of the U.S.: white-centered, white-dominant, and white-identified (Doucot 2010, see also Johnson 1997). White supremacy has been an unfortunate reality in this country since early in its inception. Indeed, from the moment race based (black) slavery became a dominant economic factor in the country's development, white supremacy became more and more intrinsic to the

culture. History was distorted to substantiate it, laws were instituted to sustain it, and rationalizations were created to support it. Increasingly benefits, services, and opportunities were assumed to belong to white people. Freedom, citizenship, education, voting rights, and so forth were for white people. Very slowly, over the years, this has been challenged and some changes have been made. Yet these have been limited. By analogy, adding sidewalks everywhere in Louisville would help, but the basic services of the city are still so spread out that having a car is far easier than walking.

## **Racism**

Racism is the term for the ongoing effects of white supremacy. It refers to the systemic and structural ways that our society is still white-centered, white-dominant, and white-identified. It is an ongoing structure of society that gives advantage to whites at the expense of people of other racial groups. Racism is ingrained in almost every aspect of our culture and society. It affects us all--positively or negatively, directly or indirectly-- on a daily basis.

This definition of racism is structural and systemic. It does not apply to individuals and it is not concerned with personal feelings or attitudes. There are persons who believe that white people are better than others, who harbor ill feelings towards people of other racial groups, and who perceive others through the lens of racial stereotypes. These persons are prejudiced and bigoted.

Of course, bigotry and prejudice contribute to systemic racism. But the tendency to frame racism in terms of personal attitudes does, too. Focusing on the feelings of individuals prevents us from recognizing and addressing the economic, legal, and societal structures that benefit white people and disadvantage others. It can also lead us too quickly to absolve ourselves of responsibility to change these larger structures. To return to the car analogy, if one person perceives the problem and chooses to walk, bike, or ride the bus, this does not change the reality of Louisville's car-centered structure. Likewise, if one or even many people do not harbor racial prejudice or bigotry, this does not change the inherited structures of our society that are white-centered.

Note also that this definition precludes so-called "reverse racism" or racism among different racial groups. When blacks harbor prejudice against whites, or Latinas/Latinos are bigoted towards Asian Americans, this cannot be accurately called racism because it is not structural. There is no structure in the United States that gives power and advantage to blacks over whites, or to Latinas/Latinos over Asian Americans.

Finally, it is important to recognize racism as one of a number of structural hierarchies of power. Sexism refers to the ways in which our culture is male-centered, male-dominated, and male-identified (Johnson 1997). Historically, the economic, educational, legal, and social structures of the U.S. have been built for men. The ongoing effects of these structures grant power and advantage to men over women and transgender people. These various structures of

racism, sexism, classism, and so forth connect and overlap. The term “intersectionality” is used to describe this. For example, a black woman occupies the space where racism and sexism intersect. The way racism disadvantages her will be influenced by the structures of sexism, and vice versa.

Biblically, we consider racism as a sin against God and against humanity. It is helpful to recall that Reformed theology includes an account of original sin (a state we find ourselves in regardless of our own choosing) and actual sin (particular ways of being in the world that make original sin concrete and break relationship with God and neighbor). Racism is the original sin of the United States. No one alive today created the system of white supremacy. Although we are neither responsible nor guilty for creating this system, we recognize it as part of our fallen state and as a violation of who we are meant to be together. Trusting in the grace of God, we confess the brokenness that we inhabit. We can also confess that it inhabits us. Born and raised in a wider culture of racism, some of the prejudice and bigotry has seeped into our minds and hearts. For those who are white, the temptation simply not to see the advantages that we reap from a sinful system is often too great to resist. And we have not done enough to change the structures of our society together. For these actual sins, we also confess. All confession takes place within the sure knowledge of the grace of God, who is eager not only to forgive us, but to empower us to repent and change our ways.

### **Discussion questions**

1. In what ways have you experienced racism directly or indirectly in your life?
2. Through your observation and/or experience, how do you think the church has handled such issue of racism in society and also in the church?
3. What are some obstacles and stumbling blocks that we must overcome in order for us to move toward the Beloved Community, the New Creation?
4. If you overheard a discriminating comments or racially insensitive jokes being made by one of your friends or someone from your church or at work, what actions would you take towards those who make those remarks?
5. What one small step can our church take in order to eradicate racism in our society and in our church?

### **Resources**

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- Johnson, Allan G. The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997.
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## Enduring Legacy of Racism in the US

### **Introduction**

While significant strides towards racial equality were made as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, the legacy of racism continues in the United States and has, in many ways, worsened in recent decades. Some historical societal structures that granted white people privileges and hindered people of color have diminished over time. Others, however, have had snowball effects that are difficult to stop and sometimes hard to recognize.

One of the toughest tasks in struggling for justice is to have the strength to look injustice squarely in the face. Although it is painful, acknowledging the ongoing realities of structural racism in the U.S. is a necessary step in moving towards the Beloved Community, the New Creation.

### **Economics**

The fact that wealth can be passed down from parent to child means that the economic situation of our ancestors has a significant influence on our own. While this is most apparent in the very rich, even modest economic stability can benefit future generations. When parents are able to help with a sudden expense, such as a car repair, this can make the difference between keeping or losing a job. When parents or grandparents contribute towards a down payment for a first home, this has lifelong effects, as home ownership has been a primary form of investment in the United States. This means that the economic wrongs done to Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and others continue to have ongoing effects. There is enormous economic inequality along racial lines in the United States today, often referred to as the racial wealth gap. One study reports that in 1963, the average wealth of white families was \$117,000 more than the average wealth of nonwhite families. In 2015, the average wealth of white families is \$500,000 higher than both black and Hispanic families (Urban Institute 2015). If we look at median, rather than average, the problem persists. In 2013 the median wealth of white households was 13 times higher than that of black households and 10 times higher than that of Hispanic households (Kochhar and Fry 2014).

### **Education**

The Supreme Court ruled against segregation in 1954. Many communities, primarily in the South, resisted integration in the early years. However, by “1972, due to a strong federal enforcement, only about 25 percent of black students in the South attended 17 schools” that were strongly segregated, meaning “in which at least 9 out of 10 students were racial minorities” (Hannah-Jones 2014). However, in the 1990s the Supreme Court greatly diminished efforts at desegregation and segregation is increasing. Today “some 43 percent of Latino and 38 percent of black students are in ‘intensely segregated’ schools” (Zalan 2014). A 2014 report notes that

“Latino students have become more segregated every year since they began collecting data in the late 1960s” (ibid.). Such segregation is profoundly linked to inequality. A recent report from the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights “found that racial minorities are more likely than white students to be suspended from school, to have less access to rigorous math and science classes, and to be taught by lower-paid teachers with less experience” (Rich 2014).

## **Policing**

After the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, the Black Lives Matter movement has brought a renewed focus on how police interact with different racial and ethnic groups. The reality of racial profiling--when particular groups are suspected of criminal activity based on race alone--was brought to national attention in the 1990s. Communities across the country had enacted “stop-and-frisk” or “broken-windows” policing policies that resulted in African Americans and Latinos/Latinas being disproportionately stopped and questioned by police. Racial profiling of Arab Americans increased after September 11, 2001. People of color are disproportionately subjected to traffic stops, searches, and arrests for traffic violations. These strategies have proven counterproductive in reducing crime and have caused deep rifts between community members and police (Badger 2014).

Police misconduct, excessive force, and death within police custody also appear to be disproportionately concentrated on people of color. Although the United States does not yet keep track of these incidents, estimates publicly available put the number of people killed by police in the United States in 2014 at 1,149 (“The Counted” 2015). African Americans and Latino/Latinas are significantly more likely to experience violence at the hands of police than white people. Native Americans are killed by law enforcement at a higher rate than any other racial group (Vicens 2015).

## **Mass Incarceration**

The 1980s and 1990s saw a shift towards “tough on crime” politics, which led to policies such as harsh minimum sentences, “three strikes and you’re out” laws, and the war on drugs (ACLU). These policies increased the number of people incarcerated in the United States. The privatization of the justice system, including the development of for-profit prisons, exacerbated this problem by creating financial incentives for imprisoning 18 people. While the United States is home to only 5% of the world’s population, we house 25% of the world’s prisoners (ibid.)

The harm of mass incarceration falls primarily on people of color. For example, “despite the fact that white and black people use drugs at similar rates, black people are jailed on drug charges 10 times more often than white people” (ibid.). The consequences of this disparity in incarceration rates are enormous. “Incarceration pushes you out of the job market. Incarceration disqualifies you from feeding your family with food stamps. Incarceration allows for housing discrimination based on a criminal-background check. Incarceration increases your risk of homelessness. Incarceration increases your chances of being incarcerated again” (Coates

2015). In many states convicted felons cannot vote after release from prison, so racially biased incarceration also removes large numbers of people of color from participation in the democratic process. Mass incarceration has sustained racial inequality in the United States and severely impedes movement towards racial justice (ibid.).

Immigrants are often “detained” in centers not unlike prisons. A number of laws, including the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) of 1996, have encouraged long-term detainment of unauthorized immigrants for even minor offenses. The United States now has “the largest immigration detention system in the world,” filled with “undocumented immigrants, unaccompanied minors, and asylum seekers” (Global Detention Project 2009). The detention centers in the United States, many of which have also been privatized for profit, have been widely criticized for human rights abuses and inadequate care.

## **Immigration**

Throughout the history of the U.S., immigration has been a racially charged issue. At different points in U.S. history, immigration policies have been used to exclude people of certain racial groups and encourage people of specific national origins. While the 1965 Immigration Act eliminated the most restrictive and racially oriented immigration policies, immigration into the United States is still limited and regulated based on country of origin. This legislation also introduced a preference for highly skilled people and those with relations in the U.S. This has skewed immigration towards people who are well-educated and elite within their own countries, a marked departure from prior generations of immigrants to the U.S.

Wait times to enter the country vary based on the country of origin; those who seek a family visa as siblings of U.S. citizens from Mexico, India, and the Philippines, for instance, have wait times of over 20 years. Over 4.4 million people are waiting for visas. People from Europe experience a much shorter wait (VISANOW, Inc. 2015). 19 For those immigrants coming from Latin America, entry into the U.S. has become very dangerous. Immigration policies and processes as they currently stand leave little room to fill low-wage labor needs during economic upswings through legal immigration. The supply of low-wage jobs (and active recruitment south of the border by U.S. meatpacking and processing companies and U.S.-based agriculture) draws a stream of migrants looking for work, many of whom lack the proper permits. The building of the wall between the U.S. and Mexico forces unauthorized immigrants to use longer, more dangerous routes through the desert. Immigrants coming from southern Asia are seeking to enter the U.S. through Latin America, as well.

The language around immigration is highly charged and racialized, creating an atmosphere in which people from certain racial groups (particularly Hispanic/Latinos/Latinas and Asian) are seen by law enforcement and immigration enforcement as potentially undocumented, regardless of how long their families have been in the U.S. People from these immigrant groups are disproportionately impacted by negative cultural bias, regulations and changing laws around

immigrants and the rights of immigrants to access services and housing. Despite evidence to the contrary, immigrants (especially those from Latin America and Asia) are accused of taking advantage of the U.S. instead of being important contributors.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Does any of this information surprise you? Why or why not?
2. How has the enduring legacy of racism affected you and your family? What does it mean if the answer to that question is not readily apparent?
3. How does racism play a role in the structures of our community, including business, education, and policing?
4. Do you see the realities of mass incarceration and immigration in our community? How?
5. How might our church take one small step towards justice in one of these areas?

### **Resources**

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- "Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996," (20 August 2015).
- Badger, Emily, "The Long Halting Still Unfinished Fight to End Racial Profiling in America," <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2014/12/05/the-longhalting-still-unfinished-fight-to-end-racial-profiling-in-america> (23 September 2015).
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VISANOW, Inc., "U.S. visa wait times: Who waits and for how long?" 2015 (20 August 2015).

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### Responding as a Community of Faith

Read Mark 7: 27-28

He (Jesus) said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

### **Introduction**

The church, as a community of faith, constantly strives to achieve the kind of unity and fellowship that allows it to worship God in Jesus Christ as one – one in adoration, trust and love. Jesus' triumph over oppression and death gives us the keys to this unity through grace, confession, and repentance.

In the Mark 7 text quoted above Jesus is asked by a Syrophenician woman to save her possessed daughter. She is not Jewish and knows she may be repelled but she is desperate and believes fervently in Jesus' power. She begs Jesus to free her daughter from the demonic spirit but Jesus tells her his immediate responsibility is to save the Jews. She reminds him that God's grace is both ample and abundant for all who truly believe. Jesus relents and, because of her faith, her daughter is healed.

One of the reasons this passage grabs our attention is because of the incendiary language used. Name calling reminds us of the kind of language used by bigots and supremacists. Jesus understands his call to be one of ministry to the Jews but others believe in him and seek his grace. Jesus comes to appreciate this expanded call. Does God show partiality with God's grace? Certainly not.

God gives all of humanity the tools and spirit it needs to be one in Christ Jesus. No obstacles, no matter how ingrained or deep-seated, are strong enough to deny this unity indefinitely, and no force, no matter how pervasive or deceptive, is powerful enough to permanently eradicate this bond. Despite the apparent persistence and legacy of racism there is hope. If we have the courage to face the challenge we can choose to change current realities and achieve the kind of unity and fellowship that Christ demands, but it takes work and persistence. Grace is God's contribution but we have responsibilities as well. These responsibilities include confession, which is perceiving and acknowledging the realities of our being, and repentance, which is changing our ways. Indeed, hope abounds!

## Discussion Questions

1. Unity and diversity seem to be opposing concepts; what are some ways in which unity and diversity show themselves as complementary?
2. Are there ways in which those with power are slow to share it in your community?

## Grace

Issues of racism and racial justice are not limited to the United States. Racism is a worldwide phenomenon, as evidenced by South African apartheid. While Christians have undeniably supported racism in many contexts, there have also been many times when Christians advocated for justice and unity. The Presbyterian Church was active and effective in helping to bring about the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa through its participation in the ecumenical efforts led by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational), the World Council of Churches, and the National Council of Churches in Christ. These groups perceived the racist system of South African apartheid as not only a threat to the social and economic structures of South Africa and to its people but also to the unity of the Christian church, a church deeply divided in South Africa along racial lines. In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared apartheid to be a sin and a theological heresy.

In 1985, a group of mainly black South African theologians created the Kairos Document, which challenged the vicious policies of the Apartheid state, the complicity of many Christian communities, and the inadequate response of churches. The Kairos Document is a clear declaration that Christian unity—which is rooted in recognition of God’s free grace—demands rejection of all racist policies and practices. In the document’s opening chapter, “The Moment of Truth,” it summarizes the racial turbulence that rocked South Africa and the divided state of the church by stating, “Both oppressor and oppressed claim loyalty to the same Church. They are both baptized in the same baptism and participate together in the breaking of the same bread, the same body and blood of Christ. There we sit in the same Church while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace. The Church is divided and its day of judgment has come” (Kairos Document 1985). The document garnered worldwide attention and challenged the church to re-examine its understanding of unity and oneness in Christ Jesus. “The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.”

Unity is a central theme of another document written in the context of apartheid South Africa, the Confession of Belhar, which is anticipated to be the newest addition to the Presbyterian Book of Confessions. Written in 1982, the Belhar Confession admonishes the church to reject segregation and struggle for justice, stating, “unity is...both a gift and an

obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought" (Belhar 1986).

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How does God's grace create unity and oneness in a world of such expansive diversity?
2. How do divisions in the church challenge the power of God's grace and love?

### **Confession**

The term confession has two meanings in Christian theology. One is the acknowledgment of sin before God and one another. We tell the truth about all the ways that we break relationship, turn away from what is good, and fall short of the glory of God. The oft-quoted expression, "confession is good for the soul" refers to the fact that for humans there is a therapeutic quality to recognizing and admitting failings and shortcomings. You cannot overcome what you fail to recognize as damaging and hurtful. Seeing the problem is the first step in solving the problem. The second meaning of confession is a communal statement of belief.

These two meanings are related. Confessions in the second sense, statements of belief, help us recognize our complicity and unfaithfulness. They help us know where we have turned away and need to confess in the first sense, to acknowledge our sin. Both forms of confession remind us of the power of God's grace. It is only because we know the grace of God that we can be honest about our fallenness. We confess in trust, hope, and faith. And it is only because we know the grace of God that we have a community of belief that can give an account of our hope in a formal Confession.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why is confession therapeutic?
2. Is reconciliation possible without confession?
3. How does your church confess what we believe?
4. How does your church confess regarding the sinfulness of racism?

### **Repentance**

Confession is recognition; repentance is change. Repentance means turning and walking in the other direction. It's one thing to understand something intellectually but something else altogether to live that new reality. Repentance is the gift and task of living a new reality.

Racism is sin. One of the simplest, most straightforward ways of defining sin is to see it as anything that creates estrangement or separation from God. Racism's divisiveness is abhorrent to our God of love. The truth is racism often cloaks itself in myths and laws that make it difficult to detect by those who benefit from its existence. That's why it is important for God's church to be sensitive to the cries of victims and the oppressed and, when appropriate, to repent. When asked why he associated with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5: 31). Repentance, as an act of accepting and living a new reality, is very much an ongoing responsibility of the church today. The unity we seek as a community rooted and grounded in Christ Jesus depends on our ability to repent.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What does repentance look like? Can you think of an example in your community?
2. What is one small step your church can take to repent of racism and live into the New Creation?
3. Does your church offer antiracism training? Would it benefit from the training?

### **References**

Kairos Document, 1985, (20 August 2015).