

## **Sermon for October 14, 2018**

### **Reject Racism**

#### **Mark 10:17-31**

#### **The Reverend Roger Pancost**

UCC pastor and church growth consultant, Michael Piazza recently shared reflections on a trip that he made this past summer to visit his parents in South Georgia. He writes, “I am a native Southerner and, until just a year ago, had lived most of my life in the South... Perhaps it is native pride, but I have always considered Georgia to be less racist-ly conservative than, say, Alabama, South Carolina, or Mississippi. Well, if that is true, then God have mercy on us all.”

Reverend Piazza goes on to share that as he made his way from Atlanta to Savannah he saw a number of Confederate flags flying, and signs encouraging people to join the “Sons of the Confederacy,” also known as the Ku Klux Klan. During his two day stay in Georgia he heard the “n” word more times than he had heard in two years. He also saw racist ads against Stacey Adams, who is running for governor of Georgia.

As I read Reverend Piazza’s post I thought to myself, “You don’t have to go to South Georgia to witness blatant racism.” While driving along route 20 between Midland and Mt. Pleasant I have seen a number of Confederate flags. The Ku Klux Klan, and other White Supremacist groups, continue to be active throughout Michigan. In recent years a young woman in one of our Midland schools was the victim of a racist post on social media. And the list goes on and on...

Like Michael Piazza, and countless others, I find it easy to call out the extreme forms of racism that I see. What I find much more difficult is acknowledging my personal racism. Allow me to explain:

On September 15<sup>th</sup> I had the opportunity to speak at the church where I grew up in Lansing. In my talk I shared some of the memories I had from my time at Pilgrim Church, as well as my hopes for their future.

Before leaving for home that evening I was approached by a man who I have known most of my life. The Reverend Herman Haller came to Michigan in the 1970’s to serve as an Associate Conference Minister for our denomination. At that time he was the only African American on the Conference Staff. Reverend Haller is a warm and wise individual who has supported me throughout my life journey.

In our conversation that evening, Reverend Haller told me about a book on racism that he was recommending to the pastor of Pilgrim Church. He thought that I would benefit from reading this book as well. A few days after that conversation I ordered a copy of [White Fragility: Why it’s so hard for white people to talk about racism](#).

The author of this book, Robin Diangelo, has been a consultant and trainer on issues of racial and social justice for over twenty years. She begins this book, saying,

“This book is intended for white progressives who so often – despite our conscious intentions – make life so difficult for people of color. I believe that white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color. I define a white progressive as any white person who thinks he or she is not racist, or less racist, or in the “choir” or already “gets it.” White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree we think we have arrived, we will put all of our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives: engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual antiracist practice.” (p. 5)

Robin Diangelo has come to this conclusion after her many years of running training sessions. She has found time and again that white people get defensive when challenged about their own racism. This is due in part to the fact that in our nation we think of racists as only being the people who are extremists, and therefore bad people. This prevents us from recognizing that all people have been influenced by a culture that maintains white supremacy. Diangelo writes,

“Most of us would not choose to be socialized into racism and white supremacy. Unfortunately, we didn’t have a choice. While there is variation in how these messages are conveyed and how much we internalize them, nothing could have exempted us from these messages completely.” (p. 69) Robin Diangelo contends that even though many white people understand that race is a social construct that is used unfairly against people of color, they haven’t been taught to see the problem as their responsibility. She states,

“...white people raised in Western society are conditioned into a white supremacist worldview because it is the bedrock of our society and its institutions. Regardless of whether a parent told you that everyone is equal, or the poster in the hall of your white suburban school proclaimed the value of diversity, or you have traveled abroad, or you have people of color in your workplace or family, the ubiquitous socializing power of white supremacy cannot be avoided... stopping our racist patterns must be more important than working to convince others that we don’t have them.” (p. 129)

What I read in Robin Diangelo’s book is a call not only to awareness, but to personal responsibility. This morning’s scripture lesson from Mark has something to say about personal responsibility. When a rich man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells him that he is to sell all of his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. This instruction suggests that this individual has not been

cognoscente of the needs of the people in his community. To develop a better relationship with God, he is instructed to be in a better relationship with his neighbors by sharing his resources with them.

This same lesson applies to the issue of racism. If we go through life not recognizing our own racism, or the effects that racism has on others, we are demonstrating a lack of concern for our neighbor. To be in a right relationship with God involves loving our neighbor. This involves personal responsibility.

At the end of her book Robin Diangelo speaks about what personal responsibility involves regarding racism. She writes,

“When white people ask me what to do about racism and white fragility, the first thing I ask is, ‘What has enabled you to be a full, educated, professional adult and not know what to do about racism?’ It is a sincere question. How have we managed to not know, when the information is all around us? When people of color have been telling us for years? If we take that question seriously and map out all the ways we have come to not know what to do, we will have our guide before us. For example, if my answer is that I was not educated about racism, I know that I will have to get educated. If my answer is that I don’t know people of color, I will need to build relationships. If it is because there are no people of color in my environment, I will need to get out of my comfort zone and change my environment; addressing racism is not without effort.” (p. 144)

Thanks to my dear friend, Herman Haller, I have been reminded that rejecting racism isn’t just about speaking out against the blatant examples of racism that we witness; it involves acknowledging our own racism.

The rich man who spoke with Jesus was encouraged to let go of his attachment to wealth in order to be a better neighbor to the people around him. Robin Diangelo is challenging white people to let go of their belief that they are not racist, and become more open to helping solve the issues surrounding racism.

When we acknowledge our own racism, we are better able to make a positive difference. We can become better educated about the complex issues surrounding racism. We can work at building relationships with others, and we can engage more fully in antiracist practices.

I am so very glad that Reverend Haller encouraged me to read the book [White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism](#). Because I have only touched the surface of this book I encourage you to read it as well.

(White Fragility: Why it’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism, Beacon Press, Boston, 2018)



