

When Necessity Calls: Bishop Violet Fisher's sermon preached at General Conference, April 30

John 4:1-15

"But he had to go through Samaria." (NRSV)

"It was necessary for him to go through Samaria." (Amplified)

From the Seven Action Pathways of The United Methodist Church:
2 - Eliminate Racism as We Expand Authentic Racial/Ethnic Ministries

Greetings my brothers and sisters in the Name of the One who calls each of us the Beloved in Christ Jesus.

In our Gospel lesson today, we see that Jesus has left Judea and is headed in the direction of Galilee. In verse 4 we read, Jesus "... had to go through Samaria." This is no small detail. Most Jewish citizens avoided the country and citizens of Samaria at all cost. For over seven hundred years, racial hostilities existed between these parts of God's human family. Despite their differences and difficulties, both groups claim Jacob as a common ancestor. Jacob's well is still there. The trip around Samaria took five days. The route Jesus takes would take only two and a half days ... and yet, Jewish travelers refused to go through Samaria.

The Samaritans were "the others," the marginalized people, living on the fringes of society. Some probably referred to them as "half breed" or "mixed breed" of a people. In 21st century lingo, the Samaritans would be referred to as a "mixed" racial group and maybe even multicultural. Their ethnic diversity was not appreciated or valued.

Again we note, the text from John tells us, Jesus had to go through Samaria (NRSV); or as the Amplified Version tells us, "...it was necessary to go through Samaria."

Jesus didn't take the easy way out! He could have avoided Samaria altogether. But Jesus indicated that he must go through Samaria for he had a mission: It was time that the Gentiles would hear the Good News of the Kingdom! Jesus deliberately and unabashedly modeled for his disciples, not just gender inclusiveness by talking with the Samaritan woman at the well, but also, diversity inclusiveness.

Jesus was on an anti-racism campaign -- one that would snatch privilege from the lofty and replace it with equal access to the realm of God through worship and true brotherhood and sisterhood.

This is the Jesus who prayed, "... for them whom thou has given me, for they are yours. And all mine are thine. I pray that they will be one, as you and I are one and that the world may believe that you have sent me and have loved them." (John 17: 9, 10, 21)

The transforming grace of God's love

goes beyond one's race, one's status or social standing, one's creed or dogma, or one's religious affiliations. Jesus extends the universal invitation again and again.

Hey there! All who are thirsty, come to the water! Are you penniless? Come anyway -- buy and eat! ... Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest. Pay attention, come close now, listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words. I'm making a lasting covenant commitment with you ... (Isaiah 55:1, 3 The Message by Eugene Peterson)

As the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman takes place Jesus invites the sister to claim a new life, a new direction, a new identity as a child of God. He never once discounts her worth. He does not condemn or ridicule her. This sets the stage for transformation for her, as well as, for her Samaritan community. I believe she became the founding pastor of the First Christian United Methodist Church of Samaria. Praise the Lord!!

There are times in life when necessity calls. The Holy Spirit has sent me to proclaim to this General Conference: "Necessity is calling to us this day!"

We are called to make it a necessity to take the more challenging route of ending racism in The United Methodist Church by sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all peoples through diverse ministries, pastors, and laity; modeling for the world that all God's people are part of the Beloved Community, just as Jesus modeled when he went through Samaria.

We cannot rest on self-prescribed laurels and pretend that we have already done all we can do to eliminate racism, white privilege, discrimination, and clever tactics of subterfuge that leave our racial and ethnic ministries and pastors of color under-funded, under-appreciated, and misunderstood -- be they our Asian, Hispanic, Latino, Native American, or African and African-American sisters and brothers!

Like Jesus, we must choose the more difficult route, and challenge ourselves to open the doors of diversity in The United Methodist Church, beginning with an examination of self in terms of equality, justice, privilege, true brotherhood, and

true sisterhood -- not just in name, but just on paper, but through sincere and repentive acts of restorative justice.

We must make stronger the tie that binds and live out what that great hymn calls us, out of necessity, to do: "We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear..." (From 'Blest Be the Tie that Binds')

In "The Ministry of All Christians," The 2004 Book of Discipline asserts:

We are called to be faithful to the example of Jesus' ministry to all persons. Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enables all persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world. Thus, inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination. (§138).

The Council of Bishops, in partnership with the General Agencies of our Church, has covenanted to "End racism as we authentically expand racial/ethnic ministry. We understand this must happen if we, as a denomination, are committed to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World." (The Seven Pathways)

We do understand that "Racism plagues and cripples our growth in Christ, inasmuch as it is antithetical to the Gospel itself. Therefore, we recognize racism as a sin and affirm the ultimate and temporal worth of all persons." (UMC 2004 Book of Discipline)

We understand that when necessity calls, we must not limit or marginalize gifts that are to be used to the glory of God as we build the Church. Rather, we must seek out and utilize the gifts of all our brothers and sisters, regardless of race or ethnicity, thus valuing the distinctive diversity that makes up the Body of Christ, creating and building ministries that are culturally congruent with God's children, some of whom may not look like you or like me; some of whom may not speak as you do or I do. This is what Bishop Robert Schnase calls "radical hospitality."

As United Methodists we are called to confront the institutional racism that infects the structures of the church and perpetuates the forces of oppression in the world.

The 2004 Book of Resolutions chal-

lenges, "... local churches, districts, annual conferences, jurisdictional structures, seminaries, general agencies, institutions, and the Council of Bishops to make the eradication of racism a priority in all of their agendas and to commit themselves to the eradication of racism -- attitudinal, behavioral, cultural, and institutional."

The Book of Resolutions also states "... that each annual conference be urged, through its commission, to design programs specifically aimed at eradicating racism and achieving equality and inclusiveness" and it also recommends that "... every annual conference conduct anti-racism training programs."

Church -- when necessity calls -- we must act!

When necessity calls -- we cannot stay paralyzed, frozen in a time warp!

When necessity calls, as Ephesians 4 tells us, we must be humble and gentle and patient, bearing with one another in love ... for, There is one body and one Spirit ... One God and Parent of all ...

As I prepare to take my seat, hear these words from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered in "The American Dream" speech he gave in June 1961. His prophetic voice reaches all the way into the 21st century as we consider why we must respond to challenges of racism and embrace the racial and ethnic diversity that make up this nation and world. Dr. King proclaimed:

"All life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality; tied to a single garment of destiny."

Sisters and brothers, the future majority culture is standing at the door of the church. They are red and yellow, black and white. They are marginalized; they are oppressed; they are immigrants and sojourners. They are the multi-cultural/multi-ethnic persons.

Are we committed to the ministry of transformation?

Are we ready to open our hearts, our doors, and our minds?

Are we willing to journey thru Samaria?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?

I have heard you calling in the night.

I will go, Lord, if you lead me.

I will hold your people in my heart.