

Called to Amplify and Shine Light

Today, several thousand United Church of Christ congregations across this land continue a tradition of recognizing Racial Justice Sunday at the beginning of Black History Month – lifting up the dignity and power of ongoing efforts for equity and liberation.

Several days ago, the sitting President of the United States published revolting racist content in an apparent attempt to smear the dignity of a former first family while continuing to terrorize our Black and Brown immigrant neighbors here in Minnesota. Every day, Americans are confronted with the choice of whether to be complicit in creating hell on Earth or to courageously, nonviolently resist that attempt.

Today, in light of those sharply contradictory realities, I felt we needed our opening words from neighbors. From Rachel Plattus: *“We tell stories about reality. But we also tell stories to change reality. Those two things are in a dynamic conversation. Reality, story, reality... in such a way that you're able to shape reality toward getting your people free.”* And from Lilla Watson: *“If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”*

I invite you to join your spirits with mine in a moment of prayer, closing your eyes if that helps open your awareness to our liberating God’s steady presence. Holy Loving Spirit, as we hit the pause button for this hour, we feel your presence ready to stir up sacred discomfort and nudge us toward our next steps forward. We are grateful for freedom to gather – by live stream and on this land loved by First Nations and others across time and where we are now weaving our way of community. Stay close to us now as we explore how to amplify your truth that all of our lives are sacred. Help us find our way toward telling stories that will liberate your people. Guide us to shine forth the possibility of your beloved community. We pray this as students of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

Friends, whose voices do we need to amplify? The voices from within marginalized and oppressed communities who are articulating the truth that all of our lives are sacred and that dignity and power need to be shared.

In what specific spaces does each of us need to shine light of God's love? In spaces where neighbors are co-creating beloved community even now by upholding mutual dignity.

In a moment, I will share a specific example and invite you to also share examples you are witnessing of voices being amplified and communities upholding dignity.

In this reflective moment, I draw on the concept of being called because the writers of the prophetic work of Isaiah and the gospel of Matthew as well as Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia A. Thompson are beckoning and urging us toward courageous work.

Let's begin by looking at a few verses from the prophetic work of Isaiah. And let's consider the original audience. Isaiah was writing to an ancient, nomadic, Hebrew-speaking people.

*"Shout out; do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins."*

Sure, Isaiah was speaking to a particular community – urging them to recognize their actions and inactions as they failed to uphold mutual dignity. But the story carries through to us today – to also be urged to shout out and let our voices be like trumpets.

I've always loved these questions in the middle of the passage:

"Why do we fast, but you do not see [God]?"

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

Within our piety of wishing to follow the way of love in our sacred Christian tradition, we sometimes fall into the trap of wanting to be seen, needing credit for the efforts we make. I love the point-blank questions posed there to remind us that that is not the purpose of our work – to be seen.

Instead, we hear through the prophet Isaiah the voice and love of God challenging us. There are such great action words in this passage:

*"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to **loose** the bonds of injustice,
to **undo** the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to **break** every yoke?
Is it not to **share** your bread with the hungry
and **bring** the homeless poor **into your house**;
when you see the naked, to **cover** them
and **not to hide yourself** from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;"*

Isaiah is inviting us into the interdependence that Lilla Watson also speaks to – that our liberation is bound up in one another. We need to recognize who needs a loosened strap. Who needs a yoke to be lifted from their shoulders? Who needs shelter? Who needs cover? Are we hiding parts of ourselves from our kin and our neighbors with whom we think we're most comfortable?

And then there's Jesus. His original audience were his fellow Palestinian Jews. And they were listening – they had their ears open for a new insight that he was offering to them within their sacred tradition of faith.

He says, *“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?... You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others.”*

Jesus was encouraging his followers to go from their individual strengths to shine forth the light of God’s love that he was highlighting for them.

I’m struck on this day – our Racial Justice Sunday – by how our ancestors in faith in our Congregational and UCC tradition opened the doors for us. They have shown us some ways to be salty and to shine light. Part of our peculiarity within the Christian faith is our openness and our ability to believe that God is still speaking and to look for messages of love and justice beyond old, old, old understandings only of scripture verses.

Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia A. Thompson asks us, *“how long before you speak?”* So I invite us to practice speaking – amplifying and shining light. What I would like to shine light on this morning is the powerful demonstration yesterday – an Indigenous-led rally for human rights at the Whipple Building, a rally whose cry was: this terror shall not happen on this stolen sacred land. This was a shining example of justice in our land, because it was Indigenous leaders and the front. They were leading the rally and those others of us were welcome to support and build the power of that moment. I wonder, is there anything that you would like to raise aloud this morning – an example of shining light on the dignity of everyone. Can you, right now, amplify someone’s voice who is speaking out in dangerous, courageous ways about how the beloved community is possible if we are building equity, justice, and mutual dignity. Would anyone like to add to that story of the Indigenous-led rally?

“I want to raise the voices of the teachers who are in the midst of all of this and the courage it takes to show up every day and be with your students. We have a daughter who is a teacher in Brooklyn Park.

Every day she needs to get out of bed earlier and get to school earlier. Every day, they stand in the parking lot in below zero weather and hold their walkie-talkies and whistles on their wrists. You look up and there are men standing on the roof – they were teachers, not security guards. And that says something about our life right now. The people we depend on are the people who are willing to do things maybe they have never done before. And I just want to heighten those responses. And we’ve gotten involved with taking a young man after school. We drive 35 miles, then drive 5 miles back and forth to the school, and then we go home. And we’ve learned that time is different now. And being very practical, that would not have seemed practical before but now it seems very practical.... We need to continue to open doors to see what we can do in the midst of the struggle. There is beauty in the struggle.”

Your example highlights our God who is a God of life. So those teachers are stationed to protect life. And when you’re in incessant arguments with neighbors or friends who would wonder why we say ‘Black Lives Matter’ or Brown lives matter... yes, all lives matter, but some of our lives are more under attack right now.

Would someone else like to shine light on a way in which mutual dignity is being upheld – that the beloved community might be possible.

“I’ve just been struck by some of the words of 27-year old poet Amanda Gorman, who wrote a poem for Renee Good and then she wrote one for Alex Pretti. A couple lines from it: ‘Yet our greatest threat isn’t the outsiders among us but those among us who never look within. Fear not those without papers but those without conscience. Know that to care intensely united is to carry both pain, dark horror for today and a profound, daring hope for tomorrow.’”

“Profound, daring hope.” Any other word of amplification or shining light in this moment?

I'd like to bring us to a close with a few more words to echo from Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia A. Thompson. She is not the first person of color to be the main supportive leader of our United Church of Christ. She is the first Black woman to be our General Minister and President. You may wish to close your eyes to hear and be convicted by her words:

*"the world needs your voice
to speak while others weep
silence is for those who sleep...
...silence is for those who don't care...
...silence is for those spewing bile...
...silence is for those who won't hear...
...silence is for those who are living dead"*

"How long before you speak"

Friends, may we answer the call to amplify and shine light on the voices of those who are working toward building the beloved community shaped by dignity and shared power. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Isa. 58:1-9a, Matt. 5:13-16 "Complicit"