

“The Hard Work”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday
June 7, 2020

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 1:10, 16-20

¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord...

¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. ¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. ¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.



Sermon: *“The Hard Work”*

I want to start by telling you a story. It’s not one of which I’m particularly proud, but I think it is important to share given the narrative of our nation at this particular time in this particular place.

It was the end of September, 2012. Will Grey was 3 months shy of his eighth birthday. He and I and Mary were riding on a bus back to our hotel in Boston, MA sometime on a Saturday evening. It was after dark. At one of the stops, a group of four or five young black men got on and came to sit down across the aisle from where we were seated near the back row. The bus pulled away from the curb and returned to its route as we all rode along in the dark in silence. On the face of it there was nothing over which to be concerned. But I found myself getting nervous. I would like to say that I don’t know why, but that wouldn’t be honest. I found myself hoping that if we just sat quietly, we could complete our ride and get off at our stop without any problem. I kept telling myself “There is no reason to be nervous,” and yet, I was. Years of informal training, socialization, exposure to cultural stereotypes had left me with unintentional biases. I knew better. But I was still nervous. I don’t even know exactly what I was worried might happen. Violence? No, I wasn’t worried about that. But I was on edge, nonetheless.

At one point one of the young men said something to Will Grey. I don’t even remember what it was, something like “How are you doing, little man?” And of course, Will Grey replied and that began a back and forth between my eldest child and this group of young men. It was friendly and they seemed genuinely interested in his stories about the places we had gone and the things we had done in Boston. And then at one point, Will Grey said something like “Are you guys rappers?” It was the kind of question a child would ask, unaware of the assumptions and racial bias it portrayed. I tensed. My heart leapt into my throat. I remember whispering something to him: “Don’t ask questions like that.” But all of the young men burst out laughing and the fella’ to whom Will Grey had addressed the question told him that “No” they were just a group of friends that lived in the area and were on their way home. And so, they continued their conversation, this young black man, probably 19 or 20 years old and my almost 8-year-old white son, the way that people do when their passing the time on a long bus ride home.

Eventually we reached our stop and after Will Grey and his new friends said their goodbyes, we got off the bus and walked away to our hotel. As we walked in silence, I could feel the sense of embarrassment

and disappointment. Why had I been nervous? It is hard to admit but it's true: I was nervous because they were black. I had learned, living in this society that being black, and male makes you dangerous. More so if you're young. Even more so if you dress in a way that could lead an 8-year-old white kid from rural South Carolina to think you might be a rapper.

My parents taught me that we are all children of God. They hated white supremacists and often criticized the racism that was and continues to be part of the fabric of the south in which I was raised. They tried to treat everyone the same and wouldn't tolerate folks who used the "N-word" or told racist jokes. I went to a large state university, studied at a progressive Presbyterian Seminary and married a bleeding-heart liberal from Colorado of all places. And yet in that moment, none of that could overcome years of informal socialization that had taught me to be afraid.

I hadn't thought about that story for a long time. But then I read the story of Amy Cooper, the young woman in New York who called the police on a black man named Christian Cooper who was in the park bird watching. Ms. Cooper was accompanied by her dog, that was not on a leash. When she walked up on Mr. Cooper, her dog began barking at him. Even though park regulations require all dogs to be leashed and her unleashed dog was barking at Mr. Cooper, when he asked her to restrain her dog, *she* called the police on *him* because *she* felt threatened.

What really struck me was the way she spoke to the police about the *African American* man who she claimed was threatening her. "African American." She had completed diversity training; she had learned the correct language; she knew what was appropriate. But in that moment, her implicit, unintentional, bias emerged.

The black man was a threat. Because of what he said? No. Because of what he did? No. Because he carried a weapon or implied harm somehow? No. He was a threat because of the color of his skin. Like those young men on the bus with me and my family 8 years ago, Christian Cooper had done absolutely nothing to make anyone feel threatened except simply exist in the skin God gave him.

And that is a problem.

Reverend Traci Blackmon is a United Church of Christ pastor in Florissant, MO and she put the matter succinctly when she said, "It is impossible to be unarmed when my Blackness is the weapon you fear."¹

In her book *The Hate U Give*,² author Angie Thomas writes ostensibly about her own experiences as a young black woman growing up in a mostly black community while attending a largely white, exclusive private school. She describes how, to survive in a society framed by caucasian norms, many black people try to overcome people's impressions of who they are based on the color of their skin by behaving in ways intended to make them seem non-threatening to white folks. It's called "Code Switching."³ How frustrating must it be to know that the success or failure of many of your daily interactions will be dictated by how people react to the color of your skin.

And more than that, that your safety may be determined the same way. Writing for the Milwaukee Independent, Reggie Jackson, the journalist, not the baseball player, noted that

"Our skin produces a very real stress response in some white people. For law enforcement officers, the way they respond to this stress determines whether or not we will be the next unarmed black to join the long list of those killed by police. Whether we are armed or unarmed, our skin is a weapon

to white and black cops alike. We are told that our body language and tone of voice are supposed to be tools to disarm police officers. But when fear is the primary response to black people, how do we know if we will survive? Why does the burden to ease white people's fear fall on us? Why don't white people wake up and recognize their biases and stop being so afraid?"⁴

And that is the question of the moment, isn't it? And it's a hard one because it raises the specter of our agency in this; It forces us to accept that we have biases that we need to admit and work to unlearn. And that's hard to hear. We like to think of ourselves as good people. "They may have a problem with racism but not *me*. I love everyone. I believe we were all equal." And then you're sitting in your car when a person of color walks by and you reach over to lock your door, or you're sitting in a restaurant when an African American woman sits at the table next you and you unconsciously clutch your purse a little tighter, or you pass a Hispanic man on the street and start to walk a little faster. But even if you don't; if you're worshipping with us today; if you're a member of Overbrook Church, then there is a better than 95% chance that you are caucasian and therefore a benefactor of a certain amount of privilege that comes with that.

Much has been made of "white privilege" these days and many people push back against the term. If you're not wealthy, if you work two jobs and still have to scrape by, if you struggle with financial difficulties, or debilitating health issues, or personal problems you may not feel very privileged. But remember that the concept of white privilege does not mean that your life isn't hard. It just means that the color of your skin isn't making it harder.

An example of white privilege is what many black parents have come to term "The Talk." Reggie Jackson explains:

"The talk' is when your parents or some member of the family sits you down and tells you how to act in the presence of police when you are black. You are told to place your hands in clear view of the officer, to talk slowly and clearly, to follow all of the officer's instructions, to only answer the questions asked, and to be as non-threatening as possible if you expect to survive."⁵

By way of contrast, my parents never felt the need to warn me about the dangers of interacting with the police. To the contrary, my parents taught me that police are allies and that if I had done nothing wrong, I had nothing to fear. That I can look upon getting pulled over by the police as a mere inconvenience and not as a potential threat to my life and well-being, is a privilege afforded me simply because I was born with light colored skin. That's white privilege.

There is much to be aware of and much to learn. But we have to be willing to put in the work. It's not enough to see the protests happening on the news and express solidarity. It's not even enough to go downtown and put yourself on the line walking with our brothers and sisters protesting against systemic racism and the pervasive influence of white supremacy in this country. It's not enough.

We have to be willing to change. Even if it means facing hard truths. In his letter from a Birmingham Jail, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote

"We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men [and women] willing to be co-workers with God."⁶

If we think we are the church and therefore exempt from Dr. King’s reproach, let us remember that he wrote those words in response to a group of religious authorities who criticized his crucial work in the Civil Rights Movement and his leading of peaceful protests. Those religious leaders represented Judaism, and five Christian denominations... including the Presbyterian Church.⁷

We have come to a time and place when we have to lift up our voices together to say “enough!” We have to confess where we have participated, whether intentionally or not, in the culture of racism that says the lives of people of color have less value. We have to be willing to put in the hard work of self-reflection, asking ourselves hard questions and answering them honestly, and then working to change.

This is not just a call to simple navel-gazing and self-improvement. There is plenty of work to do. We have to demand change in the way schools are funded; In the way police are held accountable for their actions; In the way systems of finance and government conspire to keep poor and disadvantaged people, poor and disadvantaged. But first, we have to do the hard work of looking in the mirror and identifying where we have been complicit and where we have been advantaged by systemic racism in this country. And then we have to work to change that, too.

We can’t change the world if we are unwilling to change ourselves. As my friend and colleague Reverend Ashley-Anne Masters wrote recently *“We weren’t born with hate. Hate is taught. And white people have every opportunity to unlearn the system of supremacy. If we choose not to, we are actively and intentionally choosing not to value the image of God in every single face.”*⁸

There is work to be done. It is hard work. But it is worthy work. Let’s get to it.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "Traci Blackmon on Twitter: "Freebie:." Twitter, 4 June 2020, twitter.com/pastortraci/status/778085363671822336?lang=en.

² Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. Balzer + Bray, 2017.

³ "Angie Thomas on Code-Switching, Hip Hop & Her Book’s Namesake Tattoo." *shewrites*, 9 June 2020, www.shewrites.com/blog/view/2849760/angie-thomas-on-code-switching-hip-hop-her-books-namesake-tattoo.

⁴ Jackson, Reggie, "When the Skin You’re In Is the Weapon They Fear | The Milwaukee Independent." *Milwaukee Independent*, 16 Oct. 2018, www.milwaukeeindependent.com/featured/skin-youre-weapon-fear.

⁵ Jackson, Reggie, “When the Skin You’re In...”

⁶ King, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." 21 Jan. 2008, www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

⁷ "A Call for Unity - Wikipedia." 14 Sept. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A_Call_for_Unity&oldid=915686962.

⁸ Masters, Rev. Ashley-Anne, "For Those Who See Amy Cooper in the Mirror." *revaam*, 29 May. 2020, revaam.org/2020/05/29/for-those-who-see-amy-cooper-in-the-mirror/?fbclid=IwAR0ShR_Qhw1JbTOXUnHxPxliym9sOvMuQCmMkfOxVins-7KsS_mZb94IqYg.