

My topic this morning comes from both the Bible lectionary readings and the fact that February is known by many as Black History month. The common lectionary readings for today have one obvious connection: Isaiah and Paul and Peter all confess their participation in SIN. Isaiah starts his ministry by saying “I am a man of unclean lips, in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” Paul says to his church at Corinth “I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle.” And Peter, when Jesus causes a huge catch of fish, falls on his knees saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

What does this have to do with hearing more about black history? Most of us live in Newburyport, a white enclave, so we are tempted to say we do not need to talk about race and racism. We are tempted to think that because Lincoln gave us the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and 2008 voters gave us a black president, progress toward racial equality and integration must be steady and sure. But progress is not steady; racism still raises its ugly head and can easily be called SIN, particularly “systemic sin.”

In my own life, (true confessions), I know that I was quite sheltered from the realities of race and diversity in this world. I grew up in a “lily-white” suburb of Boston. Though I was a young boy in the 1960’s, I wish our family had talked more about pressing societal problems. Even when my father, an elementary school principal, helped welcome 3 black students from Boston, I recall little conversation about how they must feel, like whether or not being on a bus two hours a day seemed worth the effort. It was the METCO program of busing some inner city black kids out to the suburbs.

I know that I am still learning all the time, especially about injustices in the world. One of the things I’m learning regarding race and racism is that I need to learn new vocabulary words! We know “words do matter” so I’ll share just a few I’m working on these days.

In conversations about race, the phrase “white supremacy” comes up often, yes even the “SIN” of white supremacy. I don’t

believe it is helpful to feel guilty for what our ancestors may have done long ago. Most of us here are white, and don't want to identify with being "supremacist" (thinking our race is superior and should dominate). If we are really honest, however, we might admit to some "unconscious bias" regarding race. I think it is helpful to look at the reality of "white privilege" at the very least. I think most know we are inheritors of "white privilege" ... which may be connected to or a result of white supremacist policies and actions of the past.

You may have noted that I admire and often quote black preachers and speakers. They are often prophetic and passionate. They have most likely experienced prejudice and hate in their lives, and yet so many have a strong faith, and preach so passionately a message of hope, or at least of courage for change! One prophetic black voice I heard recently was that of Edward Carson, who is the Dean of Multicultural Education at the Governor's Academy. It was the Dec. 2021 William Lloyd Garrison lecture. Prophets are truth tellers, especially truths about sin, about changes needed. Dean Carson pointed out that Newburyport's own William Lloyd Garrison, a white "brother," was a "*radical*" abolitionist as well as an evangelical Christian. Carson called him a "prophetic agitator." Like prophets before him, like Isaiah and Paul and Peter, Garrison expressed needing pardon himself... for a time when he felt black people would be better off being sent back to Africa. But, in time, William Lloyd Garrison became a fiery spokesman for the abolition movement, and in Carson's words, he became an "ANTI-racist."

This is a newer term for many of us... We may say we are tolerant, non-prejudiced, non-racist, etc., but our black brothers and sisters need us to be ANTI-racist. When I was on the Newburyport Commission on Diversity (now *Diversity-Equity-Inclusion*), we promoted the slogan "See Something, Say Something." Representative John Lewis made this passionate plea in his last years: "If you see something not right, not fair... **Say Something, Do**

**Something!**” This is being ANTI-oppression, for whatever kind of oppression we see. It is courageously standing up to stop something that is wrong... not being a silent “bystander.” We can’t help but think of the images of a policeman with his knee on George Floyd’s neck and ask, “where were the people who could *say something and do something* to stop that cruel, slow suffocation.” Most were afraid to confront law officers, or took video from a distance. Perhaps the ones most able to stop that police brutality were the fellow officers who are on trial now for their silence. I don’t think we can talk *too much* about that incident, because there are surely many others like it that have *not* been videotaped, *not* reported. The George Floyd murder is emblematic of current day racism, current day lynchings, ongoing systemic sin, where systems and policies need to be reformed. I’m not talking about “de-funding” police departments, just about reforming them, and being sure there is some level of “anti-bias” education, or “de-escalation” training to reduce the need for brute force and the use of firearms.

So many topics, and hours of conversation needed! But I remind us again that Isaiah, Paul, and Peter, were transformed into powerful leaders partly because they confessed their personal limitation and sin. This must hold true for societies and nations also; confessing sin can be the starting place for positive change.

Allow me to mention a few current examples of the sin of racial injustice. What about the NFL??? How can it be fair that the majority of players are black while the quarterbacks and head coaches are mostly white?? I’ve heard often that intellect is questioned! (Quarterbacks and head coaches surely need to be very smart!) I also read that medical payments for concussions were denied to more black players, the not-so-hidden implication being that any mental deficits must have already been there. And what about the SCOTUS candidates??? These black women are being grilled excessively about their educational and intellectual “qualifications” when they

clearly excel in their academic preparation. There is also an accusation of discriminatory affirmative action! But should not the highest judicial body look somewhat like the make up of the country? Reagan appointed Antonin Scalia saying Italian Americans needed to be represented on the court, and Trump said one factor in appointing Amy Coney Barrett was that she was a mother.

What about VOTING rights, and ease of voting? Talk about white/suburban privilege! I know that I can get in and out of a polling center here in Newburyport in 10 minutes! I never imagined there are places where you wait in line hours and hours, where no one is allowed to bring you food or water! If all citizens have right of voice and vote, the work of a good society ought to be making it *easier* to cast a vote, not harder.

One more obvious example of racial inequality and segregation: HOUSING! We know that homes in the wealthy suburbs of Boston are not attainable by most middle and lower income families. So what we have is segregation by wealth. We know that much of the wealth of our country was gained on the backs of black slave labor. And to bring it to the present, we can easily see in our own city that jobs with lower pay, needing less education, are filled with a disproportionate number of people of color, blacks and Latin Americans. So if we want to be *enriched* by the company of people have less income or don't look like us, we need to provide spaces for "affordable housing." Yet, sadly, we fight the ingrained fear and prejudice of NIMBY: "Not In My Back Yard!"

We need more conversations about race, but it's time for me to wind down. I want to leave you with the feeling of *passion* for justice, for what is good and right, with the passion of John Lewis, Dean Edward Carson, and yes, an amazing white singer. I'll now sing a song by Ken Medema called "CRACK IN THE WALL." Ken tells of his own upbringing in a relatively wealthy suburb, of slowly discovering the "walls" that keep people segregated, especially the walls of

wealth disparity. Like William Lloyd Garrison, Ken has roots in evangelical Christianity and personal piety, yet also has passion for social justice, social change where it is needed! With Ken, let's look for and work for "cracks in the walls" of all forms of oppression. (If reading this, feel the passion by reading it out loud!)

Crack in the Wall, by Ken Medema, c.1989

*I was born inside a legend with its walls 10 miles high. We had filtered drinking water, we had steeples in the sky. And I did not know till later what I was not meant to know. They put justice on the playbill, but avarice ran the show! I believed the gentle children with the flowers in their hair. I reveled in their spirit and there was music everywhere. And they wore their hair like heaven, and they thought they had the truth. Then, like little Jackie Paper, they gave up their foolish youth. There was a devastating silence: revolution's fires grew cold. And the music lost its passion and my spirit just grew cold. I felt like I was dying, just like the music and the fire. Good friends turned into power junkies, and the walls grew higher and higher! **CHORUS: I think I see some sunlight coming through a crack in the wall! And I'll sing these songs, and I'll pound these walls, until the walls come a tumblin' down, down, down!** In the years there were survivors whose passion was not dead. Heard them pounding on the high wall until their hands were turned blood red. Oh some were jailed and some were murdered, I thought the struggle was in vain. Just when I thought the cause was hopeless, I hear them pounding once again! Could it be I hear the music? Could it be I feel the beat? From the hedges and the highways, on the busy city streets? I can almost hear the voices! I can hear the rising cry! Hear them pounding, hear them singing! Break down the walls and stop that lie! **CHORUS***