

“Unmuted Ministry, Unmitigated Mercy”

Psalm 103:1-14; Matthew 5:13-16 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 17, 2023
Reconciliation Ministry Sunday #1

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might trust in your mercy so deeply we can live without fear of the past or the future. In Jesus' name, Amen.

[Mouthing words: My sermon today is about what happens when we're not speaking out in ways that allow us to be heard. Our Reconciliation Ministry Special Offering theme this year reminds us that if we're going to work for racial justice, we need to do it out loud. What? Oh!]

How about now? Can you hear me now? I am very curious to know if the creators of our Reconciliation Special Offering theme materials realized they were leaning into one of the omnipresent moments of the era of Zoom Church: “You're on mute. We can't hear you!” I'm guessing they knew exactly what they were doing.

Knowing how to use your mute button is an essential skill. It's how we show respect for others, ensuring that our background noises or off-hand comments don't interrupt whatever it is we're all listening to together. But it's just as important that we learn how to turn off that mute button when we have a contribution to make. And when it comes to racial justice in this country, I believe the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) – and indeed, our little part of it, Vista La Mesa Christian Church – have a contribution to make. It's time to unmute! (Not literally, Zoomers!)

There are a lot of different names for the mute button at churches when it comes to talking about racism. Some will use the mute button of “no politics at church.” But the church’s purview includes anything that involves loving our neighbors better, so learning to undo racism is definitely on the list. Some will turn to the mute button of “that’s divisive,” but Jesus did not call us to false unity but to communion, a unity rooted in honesty and justice. Some may even try to use the trickiest mute button of all, pointing out that racism is so embedded in the church’s history that we don’t have any moral ground from which to speak on it. But that misses the point entirely.

The truth is that the church, at least for those of us within it, is quite possibly the very best place to talk about racism. And today I want to talk about why. Because if we can embrace our call to address racism, we can begin to unmute our conversations and counter the narrative that is currently blasting over the airwaves painting the church of Jesus Christ as one of the primary purveyors of racialized discrimination, hatred and violence.

At this point, it is helpful for me to name that I am coming to this question as a White woman. I grew up in a town that was almost entirely populated by other White people, so my earliest experiences with people of other races took place in the context of church, Regional and General Church gatherings. Church is what taught me about people of other races and about racism and our call to dismantle it. Sadly, I have since learned that this is not what most Americans are taught by their churches.

I came of age as a pastor at the moment when our Regions were beginning to offer and require anti-racism trainings for clergy. That is probably where I came to my early conviction that church is the very best place for White people to get involved in anti-racism work. The truth is that anti-racism training can be very emotionally taxing for White people. First of all, we're used to being treated as individuals, rather than as part of a racial group; that is one of the primary privileges of Whiteness. So our feathers get ruffled when we are repeatedly categorized in the fashion that structural analysis requires.

Secondly, thorough anti-racism training includes a serious look at the history of racial oppression in our society and in the church, which in this country means examining the historical impact and ongoing damage of White supremacy. As you can imagine and may even be experiencing in this exact moment, that kind of conversation can make people defensive. Quickly and deeply defensive. Because we are used to thinking of ourselves as individuals, we feel individually accused, sometimes of things that happened centuries before we were born. We assume that we are being told we are "bad people" simply because of the color of our skin. We hear "structural racism" and we feel like we're being told we are irredeemable. And that's where we need to pause and take a deep breath and remember where we are.

We are in Church. We are living in a community that declares that we are loved, each of us as the unique individual we are, including the complex mix of categories we belong to that have shaped our experience. We are in Church. We are

Church, and as Church, we claim to live as people who believe in and trust deeply in the mercy of God. We don't believe that anyone is irredeemable. We don't believe that our past mistakes determine our future. We don't believe that God leaves us where God found us. If we believe in the unmitigated mercy of God, then defensiveness is a waste of time. More than that, our defensiveness betrays a lack of trust. We do not have to live like that. Our faith offers us a better way.

And that better way is not just offered to us, but offered to us so that we might share it with others. It is a message our society needs to hear in these challenging days. There are voices out there, claiming the name of Jesus, who are working as hard as they can to cover up and re-write the ugly parts of our history. Whether through the Doctrine of Discovery, chattel slavery, or Japanese internment, structural racism is mixed into our roots. It's not the sum total of our history, of course, but we cannot accurately assess our history without acknowledging those realities. Yet we have state governments restricting teachers from helping students understand this history, insisting that it was more good than bad, and that the most important thing is to protect the feelings of White children.

Why would we want to raise children who could be emotionally immobilized by the realities of history? Pretending these ugly chapters didn't happen gets us nowhere. And the defensiveness inherent in this censorious approach is antithetical to the gospel of God's unmitigated mercy. It's time for the church to unmute and start preaching the good news of God's grace. It's time for us to be louder as we

proclaim that the way out of sin is confession and repentance, and that there is no need to be afraid of such a process, because God's mercy doesn't come with fine print. God is longing to redeem us from the ugliness of the past. But as long as we insist on pretending it didn't happen, we won't get there. When we step out in faith and dare to trust in God's unmitigated mercy, we discover abundant life, where justice and joy flow, and loving our neighbors comes naturally.

This is the salt that our times require. This is the light we must shine more brightly. It's time to unmute! It's time to proclaim loudly, with our words and our actions, that there is no chapter of our history that we can afford to keep hidden, and more, that there's no need to, because there's no ugliness from the past that can keep God's grace from bringing us through together. I hope you can hear me. I hope you'll share the news, without being tempted to mute yourself because of others who still choose to pretend. Let us indeed trust in God's mercy so deeply that we do not need to live in fear of the past or the future. Hallelujah and Amen.