

*Walking Humbly**

Micah 6:8

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Hola, bom dia, jambo, bwana-asifiwe, male-magua, konnichi-wa, and of course, an-young-haseyo! These are some of the greetings you will hear on any given Sunday at Church of All Nations. I want to thank God and our wonderful Presbyterian family for giving me the honor of preaching at this august assembly for the second time in four years. I have been asked to preach particularly on the theme of walking humbly with our God from Micah 6:8.

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

The Birth of a Multicultural Church

One of the reasons I was asked to preach is to share with you the amazing things that have been happening at Church of All Nations in Minneapolis, the congregation I am so privileged to lead. In January of 2004 a group of mostly second generation Christians of a Korean immigrant church in the Twin Cities was blessed by our “mother church” to launch a multicultural community called Church of All Nations. We were chartered with great fanfare, but no one knew if a hundred mostly young Korean-Americans could actually become a Church of All Nations; many thought the name was a bit premature, if not presumptuous.

Today, we have an adult membership and worship attendance of about 250. We are currently 32% Asian, 37% white, 20% black, and 10% Latino, with over 20 nations represented in our membership. Our pastoral and teaching staff includes people who hail from Korea, Kenya, Sudan, Brazil, Japan and the US (both Euro- and African American). Our session also reflects the major racial ethnic groups of our congregation.

We are one of a handful of congregations in the US with no ethnic majority and sizable groups of the four major racial categories of white, black, Asian and Latino. But we actually have even more denominational diversity than ethnic diversity, and draw as many Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans as we do Pentecostals, Baptists and Evangelical Free.

Our highly visible commitment to ecumenical unity may be one reason why most of our new members have no Presbyterian background. We seem to draw equal numbers of “evangelicals” and “progressives,” Republicans and Democrats, traditionalists and dreamers, and a lot of what I call “posts” – those who see themselves as post-modern, post-ideological, post-denominational, post-foundationalist, post-missional and post-emergent – we’re even post-trendy.

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From the beginning, the crafting and nurturing of our congregational identity was seen as paramount.

Our central mission is to do the ministry of reconciliation, and it is happening in all kinds of wonderful ways here. For instance, in January of 2006 we moved from our “mother church” to a declining white PCUSA congregation founded in 1884 called the Shiloh Bethany Presbyterian Church in an urban suburb called Columbia Heights. Seven months later Shiloh Bethany had a congregational dissolution, and all of their members became members of Church of All Nations, handing us the keys and the title to the building.

Incidentally, 1884 is the year that PCUSA missionaries first arrived on the shores of my home country, Korea. So we came full circle, historically speaking. Not one Shiloh Bethany member left after the merger – praise God! One of the key reasons for this union was the growing recognition of the need to be a new kind of church for an increasingly multicultural population in Columbia Heights and the entire Twin Cities area. Church of All Nations fit that need very well.

Exactly a year later in August of 2007 an independent Pentecostal Brazilian congregation which also had a multicultural vision asked if they might merge with us. We became 10% Latino overnight! As the co-pastors of the Seara Brazilian Ministry have testified, it was love at first sight. And I can tell you, a full year into this journey, we are still on our honeymoon. We have wonderful friendship, collegiality and mutual respect among our six international pastors, and a culture of inclusion and investment with our many full-time interns. Our diverse staff tries to model for our congregation a way of walking humbly with each other and modeling for the church the ministry of reconciliation.

We witness many signs of growth in our midst, but the most important thing is that people are filled with joy, hope and genuine love for each other across all kinds of lines, crossing barriers erected by church and society, history and culture. For decades now, Shiloh Bethany members have prayed that their sanctuary would be full again, and that the building would be restored to its original condition. Who knew that God would answer the prayers of this typical, declining white church through a young, multicultural church? Who knew that a church chartered just two years before would own a sizable building overlooking a beautiful lake?

Many of us who began this journey assumed that we would be dealing with much more conflict as many cultures and worldviews add to the complexity of congregational dynamics. What we have discovered, to our delight, is the exact opposite. The very decision to join a church in which one chooses to be a minority seems to draw the kind of people who are willing to “lay down their sword” of power and privilege, and to walk humbly with God. The Korean American founders had to set the example first. Today, we all seem to be caught up in a virtuous cycle of lifting up and valuing other individuals and cultures, to “consider others better than oneself.” The culture of public confession, corporate repentance, joyful celebration and vulnerable relationality that we have cultivated at Church of All Nations is key to understanding the dynamism and eschatological hope evident in our life together.

We live in the time between the “already” and “not yet.” Our church also sees itself between Pentecost in Acts 2 and the coming kingdom in Revelation 7, when all nations, tribes and tongues will glorify God together in one voice. We feel called to be an ecumenical church that embodies the major spiritual roots of the early church – to

be simultaneously Rational, Sacramental and Pentecostal. We are also convinced that only intentional movement away from rigid denominationalism toward visible unity will lead the global church to recover its identity as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. We are a high-risk, low-anxiety church where anything is possible, including the possibility of failure. The only poverty we contest for ourselves is the poverty of imagination. We feel so blessed with God's abundance and grace. With humans, this is impossible. Thanks be to God who makes all things possible!

A Brief History of Race in America

Now let me share a bit about the theological, historical and sociological reflecting that goes on at Church of All Nations on a daily basis, especially regarding race in America. From the ruckus over Barack Obama's former pastor Jeremiah Wright, it's clear to me that we still don't know how to engage this topic in either church or state. After all, racism remains the mega-idolatry in the meta-narrative of American history. Race is the third rail that will electrocute anyone who touches it. I am grieved over this episode, as I believe that Dr. Wright will be remembered as one of the great prophets of his generation. Do we need reminding that it was the African American church that kept the prophetic tradition alive in America? The Black Church has been the only consistent, alternative voice to the dominant narrative generated by empire.

As a Korean American, I speak as a historical newcomer to this debate. When I was growing up in 1970s South Carolina, we didn't even have a category for Asians or Hispanics – there were so few of us in the Deep South back then. I had no ethnic group to belong to, except when I went home to a mother, a father, a brother and sister who looked like me. Thanks be to God that I also had the Korean immigrant church on Sundays to look forward to the Korean Community Presbyterian Church of Columbia, S.C., where my pastor was the Rev. Sun Bai Kim, my lifelong mentor. The immigrant church served as a spiritual and cultural oasis for people like my parents. But one of the painful things that we have to grapple with is the larger social context within which the white church, black church and immigrant churches find themselves today. White Presbyterian missionaries from the US came to Korea in 1884 and made the outrageous claim that “the God who made us is the same God who made you.” In other words, they taught us that a sovereign God made all of humanity and all of creation. A century later a lot of us growing up in America realized that that is not quite the case. Your doctrine might teach the sovereignty of God and a shared humanity, but your churches sure don't embody it. You opened up your Bibles to us, but made it crystal clear that your churches are not open to blacks, Asians and Latinos.

It's painfully obvious that India is not the only country with a rigid caste system. From the birth of this republic, our founding fathers enshrined into the constitution the notion that blacks would be counted as three-fifths of a person. Only since the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 have African Americans as a whole been legally enfranchised and able to vote. Is this country not founded on the unstated principle that whites should be on top, middle-colored people in the middle, and blacks at the bottom? Have we not determined as a society that only whites are fully human, middle-colored people almost-human, and blacks and American Indians sub-human?

Now I want to ask, on the fortieth anniversary of Dr. King's assassination: How did we get into this mess? Clearly, nations have tried to dominate other nations from the beginning – that's nothing new. What's new was that when “in 1492, Columbus

sailed the ocean blue...” to the so-called New World (new to the Europeans), he sailed as a Christian. Attila the Hun was not a Christian; Genghis Kahn was not a Christian; Alexander the Great was not a Christian; the Egyptian Pharaohs were not Christians. When the Egyptians warred against the Hebrews and prevailed, that meant that the Egyptian gods were stronger than the Hebrew god. So you’re supposed to go to war to prove that your tribal god is mightier than your enemy’s tribal god.

So how then do Christian nations behave in the same brutal way that non-Christian nations have behaved since the beginning of time? How do we justify oppression, slavery, the theft of land, theft of labor, genocide, rape and exploitation of every kind done unto non-European peoples? How do these Christians break every one of the Ten Commandments, violate the Beatitudes, and defy every teaching of Jesus in perpetrating a global holocaust onto non-white peoples around the world? How do Christian nations do that? It’s really simple. Invent racism.

European nations had to invent the notion that darker skinned people are not fully human so that they could justify this unrelenting global war of terror. Well into the 19th Century American intellectuals, politicians and religious leaders debated whether black people had souls. White people needed to buy into the myth of the inferiority of others by saying to themselves: “We know that God made all of humanity, but if we can just convince ourselves that dark skinned people aren’t really human, we can do whatever we want.” Or, “Certainly, these African heathens cannot be as civilized as we are! Can they really be considered fully human like us?”

It’s clear that racism is a philosophical construct, one invented by Christian nations to absolve themselves of the atrocities of empire, to do what every power-hungry nation has done to another, and still call themselves Christian. It’s one of the biggest self-deceptions ever invented in human history. And that self-deception continues to undergird American life.

Do we realize that when an ethnic group tries to wipe out another ethnic group in Asia, it is called genocide, but when white settlers wipe out over 10 million Native Americans over a period of 250 years, so that only a couple of hundred thousand are left today, we call it Manifest Destiny? When whites brutally oppressed blacks in South Africa, that was called apartheid, but when whites in America did the same thing, we called it Jim Crow. When people from the Middle East set off bombs among civilians, we call it terrorism, but when white supremacists bombed black businesses, homes and churches all over this country during the Civil Rights era, it was called “unfortunate.” Is not 400 years of unrelenting oppression against Native and Black Americans a form of “state-sponsored terrorism”? We Americans don’t alter our history; we simply euphemize and euthanize it. This penchant for the whitewashing of history is one reason why all Christians should reflect seriously on South Africa’s Belhar Confession, a foundational document in our self-understanding at Church of All Nations.

There is a powerful myth at work in America – the myth of the white man as the good guy, the righteous sheriff who comes to clean up the town, the cowboy protecting the pioneers from the “naked savages,” the homesteader who pulls himself up by his bootstraps – forget about the fact that he pulled himself up on top of land that was stripped from someone else and labor that was stolen from someone else. There is no affirmative action program more grandiose than the one invented for white people in America. How often have we heard about the bootstraps? Give me all that stolen land

and stolen labor and see if I don't have stretch marks from all that pulling.

It's not that there is a deliberate attempt to distort history. It's that there is such a powerful need in America to maintain a parallel myth of the white man as the hero that it overwhelms actual history and prevents white people from speaking honestly about the past, and therefore taking responsibility for the present. Most damning of all is that white *Christians* are just as prone to drinking this imperial Kool-Aid as anyone else, and so become incapable of offering genuine confession and repentance. Another obstacle is that the grip that radical individualism has on the Western mind prevents white people from confessing corporately about structural sin and injustice. How many times have we ethnic minorities heard, "My great-grandparents immigrated *after* the Civil War." Or, "I'm not a racist—I have one black friend." Or, "We've always lived in Minnesota and so never owned slaves." To which my response is, "So we Minnesotans never wore cotton or smoked tobacco?" (Incidentally, I support the continued use of the term "ethnic minority." Just when we are approaching an era when that term will be used for white people for the first time in American history, we want to change the rules?)

How do we boldly and explicitly confess our past so that our memories can be healed? How do we penitently confess that we are still complicit in the structures of injustice that still fund our so-called commonwealth? What does it mean for us to walk humbly with our God and with one another in this time and place, and model a constructive way forward as a beloved community?

From Martin King to Rodney King

Remember the Rodney King incident and the riots that ensued in Los Angeles in 1992? We had 400 years of white racism against blacks, and when black people exploded in anger at the white police brutality finally caught on videotape for all the world to see, it ended up being blacks and Koreans fighting it out in South Central L.A. How did this happen? Koreans started coming to this country in the late 1960s, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. How did Korean immigrants get caught up in the middle of the racial fear and hatred between blacks and whites that goes back to the time when Europeans first stepped foot on this continent in the early 1600s?

However, I am not at all suggesting that we Korean people are not culpable in this great American tragedy. Like all immigrants before us, we used the same strategy to "get ahead." In the mid 1800s, millions of Irish were escaping the great potato famine ravaging their land. American nativists considered them European refuse dirtying up America, literally. They were greeted by angry mobs who shouted, "Go back to Ireland!" and "They're here to steal our jobs!" Sound familiar? But the Irish immigrants' response was essentially: "We know we're starving, diseased, uneducated 'European scum,' as you say, but at least we're not black." After the second generation lost their Irish brogue, they were accepted as "white" and became part of the great American melting pot. Of course, we are well aware that this melting pot only worked for European immigrants and had always intentionally excluded darker skinned Americans.

A few decades later after the Irish, the Italians started coming. They were a little darker, a little hairier, but they made the same case: "Hey, we know we're not as white as the Anglo-Saxons here. And we know we're from southern Europe and Catholic and not as 'American, baseball and apple pie' as you people who have been here before

us. We're not even as 'white' as the Irish, but at least we're not black."

And so in America, Italians got to be white people. In America, even Jews got to be white people over time. Where else in the world could the Jewish people have gained that kind of social acceptance?—what a country! This is no small feat considering the historic bias against new immigrants from the earliest days of our republic. Benjamin Franklin, one of our most illustrious founding fathers, said about the Germans, "Why should the Palatine boors be suffered to swarm into our settlements and, by herding together, establish their language and manners to the exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us, instead of our Anglifying them?" He claimed that the non-English immigrants were not "purely white," and that the Germans, Russians, and Swedes were of a "swarthy complexion."

However many generations it took, Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, Irish, Italians and Jews all got to be part of melting pot whiteness in America because there was a common target of hatred called blackness. Now what do we do with the middle-colored people, like Latinos and Asians? With racist laws forbidding interracial marriage, third generation Asian Americans looked just as Asian as the first generation. We could lose the accent, but we couldn't lose our non-European looks. For instance, my Korean wife was born in Montgomery, Alabama, and our children are third generation Korean Americans, but they look just as Korean as their grandparents who came from Korea in 1975. Now here's the clincher. Even though we Koreans can't get rid of our Asian-ness enough to enter fully into whiteness in this country, "At least we're not black."

So here's the deal we middle-colored people made with the white power structure of this nation: "Let us enter into your elite educational institutions, let us work in your corporations, let us live in your neighborhoods. We know you flee when black people move into your neighborhoods, but hey, slow down. We're Asians; we're not black. No, we're not as white as the Europeans, but at least we're not black." And so we Asian immigrants used the same strategy as every immigrant group before us, stepping on the backs of black people to enter into white privilege.

As Asian people who have been offered the crumbs of white privilege in exchange for silence and invisibility, we've traded in our birthright of dignity for a bowl of pottage. We have failed to understand that in our day and time, that bowl of pottage is the petty crumbs of empire. We have chosen the path of least resistance rather than the straight and narrow path of solidarity with the poor, the marginalized and the rejected of society. O Lord, how now do we recover our humanity and our prophetic imagination?

I think it's really tragic that the Rodney King incident incited such violence between the African American community and the Korean immigrant community...but I understand. The 1970s, '80s, and early '90s was the time when many Korean immigrants got their start in low-cost, urban neighborhoods. Now if you go to South Central L.A., hardly any Korean-owned businesses are there as newer immigrants have taken over. You see what I'm saying? Korean immigrants have been here long enough now not to need to be in the poorest neighborhoods. "Well, we're movin' on up, to the east side, to a deluxe apartment in the sky...." Y'all ain't talkin'! From a Korean perspective, it was tragic that the Rodney King incident exploded just in that brief moment of immigration history when Koreans owned businesses in South Central L.A. The

dream of Martin King seemed to turn into the nightmare of Rodney King.

On the other hand, it's not just a historical accident. It's a historical pattern that my people were a part of. That it happened to us might be tragic, but that this sort of ethnic conflict occurred at all in the 1990s is indicative of how hidden the structures of racism are on a day-to-day basis. Is this how a new immigrant group becomes "American"? And what does that say about whether we are Christian or not? Are we genuinely Christian when we ourselves participate in this historic pattern of injustice in this country?

So I want to conclude by walking humbly with God and with you, my fellow Presbyterian sisters and brothers. On behalf of all Korean immigrants in this country, I apologize to you, my African American sisters and brothers, and ask your forgiveness. On behalf of all Korean immigrants, I also apologize to our Native American sisters and brothers for benefitting from the land that was stolen from you. And on behalf of all Korean Americans, I apologize to my white American sisters and brothers, for when we as Asians gladly exploit the "model minority" myth for our own advantage, we are complicit in perpetuating racial divisions and the dehumanization of us all. I humbly ask all of you: Please forgive me and my people, by the grace of God. And may that same grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all, now and forever. Amen.