

We Who Are Called

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Our New Testament scripture is my focus today, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, where Paul speaks to, perhaps even chastises, the Corinthians by reminding them that they are called to be about love the greatest gift—the beginning, middle, and end for each of us as believers. Paul is, I believe here, redirecting the Corinthian church to the right ways of Christian behavior, reminding them who they are, who they are called to be, and the power of the love that each of them possesses.

While I have loved this powerful passage for years, I have been particularly intrigued with it recently. As I don't have to tell any of you, we as Americans live in dark, divisive, confusing times. I have found myself on the brink, maybe past the brink, of total despair in the last few years. We live in a country, in a society, that has become about demonizing “the other,” whoever we have determined the other to be, and I have grown desperately weary and frightened for myself and others who fall into the category of the other. I have asked myself in these dark days how I can make a difference? What is my work and ministry in these difficult times? How do I show the face of Christ to the world, no matter who they are, where they have come from, and what their political leanings are? Who, as a person of faith, am I called to be?

Almost twenty-four years ago, I did a program in Asheville for the first time called Building Bridges. Building Bridges is an eight-week small group discussion series around racism and the history of Asheville. To be honest, I was not particularly interested at that period of my life in discussing racism. I believed we had lived through the turmoil of the sixties and seventies, and there was no longer a need to concern ourselves with race and racism. What I learned in my first Building Bridges course was huge for me. I became aware of the wounds I had growing up in this society as a young African American man, wounds I had never admitted to myself, much less to anyone else. I learned all the ways racism exists in our society, and while I had been deeply affected by the racism in our society, I could not articulate the manifestations of racism, institutional racism, the difference between integration and assimilation, and the difference between prejudice and racism. After that first session, I was convinced that each of us in this society, myself included, must always be in conversation about racism and how it lives in us, in our relationships, in our policies and practices. I became a member of the Building Bridges steering committee, became a small group facilitator for many sessions, and I still volunteer with the organization today.

In 2005 I was offered the opportunity to become the co-director of Christians for A United Community, a coalition of churches whose ministry focused on dismantling the root causes of racism and the disparities caused by racism. We do this work through advocacy, relationship building, and dismantling racism trainings. I jumped at the chance to work with this organization, believing that I had done dismantling racism work for years, that I was a man of faith, and that I would be a great gift to the work of this coalition. What in fact happened was a huge piece of learning. Another layer of my understanding was peeled back for me, and I came to understand how my identity had been shaped, changed, warped even, by my internalization of the

oppression I had experienced over the years, an internalization that cast a negative light on how I saw myself and how I saw others that looked like me. Perhaps the biggest revelation for me from my work with Christians for a United Community came from the connection between my work in the community around justice issues and my faith. For years I had done dismantling racism work in the community quite apart from my faith, and the great gift that the wonderful people of CUC gave me was an understanding of how to connect my spirituality with the work of justice, the work of addressing racism in our community. Indeed, the two not only became connected, but my spirituality, my relationship with God, became the foundation and fuel for my work and ministry in the community. I came to understand that working to dismantle the evil of racism in the world was not just a good idea or a charitable act; it was a crucial part of my identity as a Christian, who I was, and who I am called to be.

This brings me to the question I asked at the start of my sermon, who am I called to be in these difficult times. The work of addressing racism in our communities, in our institutions, in our hearts is, I believe, very different than it was years ago. I am, honestly, filled with fear, with rage, with apprehension about tomorrow at every turn. The events especially of the last two years have done damage to my soul. They have created an uncharacteristic darkness in my spirit, a darkness that at times threatens to overtake me. Our newsfeeds, our headlines, are filled with episodes and instances of violence and divisiveness. I often feel hunted as though someone, somewhere, somehow is after me, waiting for me, and that I will become the next statistic or the star of my very own police abuse video. And the darkness in me tempts me with anger, bitterness, and vengeance, all waiting at my doorstep for me to open that door and begin an intimate relationship with them.

For many years I taught bible study at my church on Wednesday nights. Just after the shooting at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston South Carolina, two years ago, I was teaching the class one Wednesday night and in walked a young white man I had never seen before, and as he walked through the door, a panic seized me. I immediately began to wonder what I should do. Should I ask him to leave? Should I ask members to escort him out, should we search his belongings, were we all about to become victims in yet another horrible scenario? It turned out the young man was friends with other members of our church, and he had simply walked in a few paces ahead of them. All was fine, except I was, am, deeply ashamed of the place my brain went in those few seconds.

So again I ask, who am I called to be? Who was I called to be when that young man came to our bible study class? Who am I called to be while the blood of many of our young men is shed in our streets? Who am I called to be when confederate flags roll past me in an Ingles parking lot? Who am I called to be when the world, our world, terrifies me every day?

I am called, we are called I believe, to lean into our faith and all that entails. We are called to love—to love each other, ourselves, and “the other”—whoever the other is in our lives. We are called to understand who the “others” are, why and where they exist for us, and to come to understand what showing love looks like. We are called to work for justice; we are called to bring comfort and healing to those brutalized daily by the aggressions, both micro and macro, of racism. We are called to show the world the love that lives in each of us, the power of the love that calls to each of us to be patient, to be kind, to not live in anger, and to understand that each of us as

followers of Christ has the spirit of God dwelling in us, giving us the strength and direction we need to live out our calling.

I will honestly say here that it is not easy showing love, manifesting the love of Christ. There are many days when I have no idea what it looks like to love myself, to love my church family, and to love those in the world. But I must, we must, simply because God loves us and never gives up on us.

And in those moments, those moments when I am ready to give up and allow the darkness to overtake me, I am reminded that I don't have the luxury of giving up or giving in. I stand on the shoulders of, and walk roads paved by, all those who have come before me.

A few months ago, I went on a field trip with our middle school classes to see the film "Hidden Figures," a wonderful and important film about African American women who worked for NASA in the early sixties. I cried almost all the way through. My tears came from watching the depiction of the daily indignities that these women suffered, the same kind of indignities that my parents and grandparents and great-grandparents and aunts and uncles and on and on suffered each day of their lives. And they never gave up, and they gave me the life I have today.

"Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." That is who I am called to be.