

Let me introduce myself: My name is John and I want to tell you my story.

I grew up in a middle class family, in a middle class suburb of a large mid-western city. Mom and Dad, five children and grandmother made eight of us in the family. Various cats and turtles and parakeets and neighborhood children running around the house made things lively, and always a lot of fun. As we began to get old enough for school Mom and Dad moved out of the city to a nice suburb with tree-lined streets, a park and an elementary school near by. Mom and Dad wanted us to have the advantage of an education in one of the best school districts in the state, so there we lived.

Dad had a good job which provided a good living for us. One year in the mid-1950's he reported that with some overtime pay he had made \$8,000 that year. We weren't rich but we certainly always had enough to eat. And we always had enough to go movies, ball games, and occasionally out to eat.

Dad made enough money to buy a brand new Ford Fairlane in 1955, and then a brand new Ford Galaxy 500 in 1963. And every summer we went on a nice family vacation in the car. We had fishing trips to Minnesota and Canada, camping trips to Washington D.C., the Great Smokey Mountains, and Yellowstone. Those were great trips.

We always went to church, the church was always an important part of our lives. We didn't get any Sundays off; if it was nice Mom would say, "Everyone will be at the park or the lake, we'd better go to church today." When it was cold and snowy, Mom would say, "No one will be church in today, we'd better go to support the church."

The church had always an important part of our lives. Mom and Dad met at the church. Both sets of grandparents were members of our church and always there with us, keeping eyes on my brothers and me during the sermon, separating us when we started pinching our sisters, or pushing and shoving each other. We were surrounded by family and friends, and were filled with love and faith and hope.

We lived in a safe and wonderful world. And we believed that we could grow up and go to college and do whatever we wanted to make something of our lives. And we have all graduated from college, found good jobs, raised our families and lived happy lives.

My name is John and that is my story. But that is not all of my story. My name is John and I am white. I am white. You probably noticed that when I stepped into the pulpit, but you didn't give it a second thought. I am white, there is nothing unusual about a white man stepping into the pulpit in this church. But that is what I want to talk to you about today. That is the issue I want to raise with you today, to disturb and challenge you with today.

I am white, and because of that I am a child of privilege. Most of us who are white, who

have grown up in this white American society have never given it much thought. And many of you who are white would take offense at that statement, but that is what I want to wake you up to today. Take my story as a prime example:

When Mom's family moved to the city from the little town where she was born they could have moved into any neighborhood where they could afford to live. When Mom and Dad married and began looking for an apartment they could have moved into any neighborhood where they could afford to live.

There were no Latinos in the city in those days, but many black people moving into the city from the south looking for work could not look in any neighborhood. And if they found good paying jobs and could afford to buy a nice house, they could not look in our neighborhood, because the banks would draw red lines on city maps to prevent them from moving into certain white neighborhoods.

When my Dad dropped out of medical school and started looking for a job he went to the Pullman Company office downtown and was hired as a conductor, and for 27 years he rode the rails working as a Pullman Conductor. I loved riding the train and rode many miles with him, benefitting from company policy allowing dependents of conductors free passes with their fathers. My first summer job out of high school came as a offer from one of Dad's frequent customers who owned an engineering firm in another city. In all those times I rode the train with my father I never saw a black Pullman Conductor or a white Pullman Porter, black men were not allowed to work as conductors, they were only allowed to make the beds and help people with their luggage.

When we moved out of the city to the suburbs so we could attend the best schools in the state, it was no problem. But there we no black children in our school because the could not live our neighborhood.

On summer vacations, after long days in the car, when we drove into small towns to find a motel for the night, we never had a problem, sometimes the rooms in one place were all taken, but we knew down the road there would be a another place with a room for us. If there were "White Only" signs we never saw them.

But one day my Dad's eyes began to open. When he drove up to the college to bring my older sister home one weekend, she introduced him to her new friend, an African exchange student whom she had invited to stay with us. On the way home they stopped in a little town café and went inside to eat, but the man behind the counter said, "I'm sorry we don't serve black people." They got up and went to find another place for lunch. It was the first time Dad came face to face with it. Apparently he began to think about it; later during summer vacation that year as we driving along the highway looking for a place to stay, he said, "I wonder where black people stay when they travel." "No where," he guessed because they could not travel like we did.

The church was at the center of our lives. At the church we learned about a loving God

and heard the stories of Jesus who called us to love one another. But when black people began visiting our church some people stopped coming, and others started grumbling. When a black family dared to walk down the aisle to join the church one Sunday morning, some people wanted to fire the minister because he dared to take their black hands and to welcome them into the church. Finally some people said, "If this keeps up we will have to move the church," all because black people wanted to come to church and worship God with us. And so they decided to move.

Now, you are probably thinking, "That is terrible. We would never do that! We are not prejudiced like that. We have heard all those stories of segregation but those days are gone. We passed a civil right law 50 years ago, now black people can eat where they want, and live where they want, and we have even elected a black president. Those days are gone!"

But those days are not gone, and that is why I am telling you this story today, to wake you and challenge you!

I want to remind you there is a difference between prejudice and racism. Prejudice is pre-judgment, forming opinions and making judgments about things and people before knowing something or someone. Prejudice is assuming that broccoli tastes terrible before taking a bite. Prejudice is assuming that rich people are hard-working and poor people don't want to work; that country folks are all hillbillies and city dwellers are superior; that white people are trustworthy and black people are not. We all know what prejudice is, and we know it is wrong, that we should avoid making up our minds about people before we know them, before meeting or talking to them, that we should not judge people simply by the way they look or the way they talk or dress before we have talked to them.

We all know that prejudice is wrong! But the issues we face in these days are much more than overcoming personal racial prejudice, though that is certainly part of the task before us. The issue we face is overcoming the racial prejudice which has been ingrained in the very fabric of our society from the very beginning of American history, which has become institutional racism. The challenge before us is facing and combating the pro-white, anti-black bias which was woven into the fabric of our society at the beginning.

We are combating 400 years of racism in America. Beginning when Africans were stolen from their homeland and brought to this land in chains and sold into slavery, to the days when African men, women and children were not counted in the national census as fully human, but only as 3/5 a man, woman or child. We are facing the consequence of racism, from the long years when laws were passed forbidding black people education, restricting their movement, denying their employment, locking the doors of schools and libraries, banks and businesses, city halls and hospitals and churches against them. We are living with legacy of 400 years of taunting and torment, abuse and neglect and violence.

It is only in the past 50-60-70 years that we have begun to address these issues, as we white people have been forced to examine our society and our systems of power, to integrate our

armed forces, to open the doors of our schools and lunch counters and voting booths to people of color. And even now there is still resistance, resistance to change, resistance to admitting our problem, and pushing back against the forces of inclusion and progress, to keep things they way are!

And that is the reason why I am speaking to you today. That is why I am raising these issues in this church, because this is a Christian Church, because we call ourselves Disciples of Christ. In the Second Corinthian letter the Apostle Paul addresses the issue, and calls us to our mission.

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all . . . and he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view. “From a human point of view” in the Greek language of the New Testament is *according to the flesh*. That is, according to their physical appearance.

Even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. But now we see Christ as the one who died and was raised. Now we see the new life which he has brought and the possibility of new life which he can bring to us. And now we see the hope of renewal and re-creation which he brings to us. Paul goes on to say,

All this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

All this is from God who has given us the ministry of reconciliation, who has called us to ministry of reconciliation!

In response to the racial tensions and violence which erupted in American cities in the 1960's the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) began an effort to address these issues and established a Reconciliation ministry. An office of Reconciliation was opened in Indianapolis and a yearly Reconciliation offering was begun to support programs and ministries of reconciliation and poverty across the nation.

Many of our Disciples of Christ congregations have participated in these programs and taken offerings to support Reconciliation ministries. If you have done so, I thank you and urge your continued support.

If your congregation has not done so, I urge you to begin today. I ask you to form a task force, or appoint a Reconciliation committee to learn the issues, to begin to discuss the issues among yourselves, and to recommend and present a plan of action to your church board.

In recent decades the emphasis of the Reconciliation ministry has focused upon

identifying and addressing the root causes of racism. The General Assembly voted to make the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) an anti-racist and pro-reconciling church, and to establish that as one of four priorities of the church. We have begun to create Anti-Racist / Pro-Reconciliation (PRAR) teams in all the regions, and the Mid-America region established a PRAR team more than ten years ago, and it has been working with our congregations ever since.

On behalf the Pro-Reconciliation / Anti-Racist team I present to you the challenge, and ask you to answer the call of Christ, and become involved in the ministry of reconciliation. I ask you to contact the regional PRAR team, to schedule a PRAR workshop in your congregation, to invite neighboring congregations – Disciples of Christ, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians – to open wide your hearts and your doors to anyone and everyone – to Jews and Muslims and unbelievers alike – to become involved in confronting the issues of racism and joining Christ in his ministry of reconciling the people of our land to one another and to God.

On behalf of Christ I call you - to learn the issues, to discover the resources which are available in your church and your community, to talk to people; to talk to your people, especially your young people, to talk to white people, to examine your lives and the privileges which you have! On behalf of Christ I call you to talk to people of color, to listen to their stories, to learn how you can partner with them in facing the challenges before us all, to talk to school officials, and police officers, governmental officials, to learn you can work together to combat the sin of racism.

On behalf of Christ I call you to be reconciled to God and to one another! On behalf of Christ I urge you to join in the ministry of reconciliation, to work and worship and pray, to talk and dream together in faith and hope and confidence until that day when our dreams will come true, and all our children, our black and brown and yellow and red and white children will see the day when they shall overcome the shackles of the past and be joined together in one great colorful nation of God's people!

– Rev. Dr. John J. Yonker, Columbia, Missouri
Member, Pro-Reconciliation / Anti-Racism Team of the
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