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Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ
Bethesda, Maryland

Sunday, December 11, 2016
3rd Sunday of Advent
10:00 AM

“Playing Favorites”

Isaiah 61: 1-11

61:1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
⁵ Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,
foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines;
⁶ but you shall be called priests of the LORD,
you shall be named ministers of our God;
you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations,
and in their riches you shall glory.
⁷ Because their^[a] shame was double,
and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot,
therefore they shall possess a double portion;
everlasting joy shall be theirs.
⁸ For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;^[b]
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

The man on the phone was agitated, clearly upset. He kept trying to hang up on me, kept trying to end the conversation. And I was determined to *not* let him hang up on me. I was determined to find some aspect of common ground where we could share some small recognition of our shared humanity.

The phone call took place a couple of weeks ago. Some of you saw and commented on my Facebook post about this phone call. I've talked with some of you about it. And poor Mimi and Janet had to listen to my end of the call.

Here's what happened...

About three weeks ago, we got an anonymous phone message on the church voice mail from a man who said he lives near the church and he had seen the banner on the side of the church that says, "Black Lives Matter to God and to Us." The anonymous caller said he was disgusted by that banner and we should take it down.

Then about two weeks ago, we got a phone call during the day. Mimi answered the phone. The same thing. A man calling to say how offensive the banner was. I was not in the office that day, so Mimi asked him for his name and phone number so that I might call him back. "That's none of your business," he said, and he hung up.

But, because Mimi is savvy, she jotted down the number that appeared on our Caller ID, then she did a Google search and came up with his name and address. Turns out, he lives less than a mile up Massachusetts and back one of the neighborhoods. He lives very near several church members, and he lives not far from my family and me. He is not a stranger or someone from far away. He is our neighbor.

So I called him, told him that I had tracked down his number after his anonymous call. And for an hour, the two of us had a wide-ranging, passionate conversation about race and racism and the Black Lives Matter movement and the

current state of political affairs in this country. I'm fairly certain I recognized his voice as the same voice on the earlier message. Clearly the man wanted to talk about this.

Now, I realize that I am not being fair to this man this morning. He is not here to express his views or explain himself. I can also say that I took pretty good notes during our phone call. And it is important to me that you hear about this call, because I am very aware that he was talking to me as a pastor of this congregation. He was not talking to me as an individual. He was really talking to all of us as a congregation, so I want you to know some of the things he said. It's also important to me that I speak about this on the 3rd Sunday of Advent, because this phone call – and the painful ideas about race and racism that it brought up -- helped me understand something about the theological concept of Joy, which is the theme for this day.

Three things said in phone call...

First, In the course of the conversation, he told me that the three-fifths compromise in the United States Constitution was not racist. (The background on that, in case you've forgotten, is that when the United States Constitution was written, a compromise was reached about whether, or how, to count slaves when determining a state's population for legislative representation. The compromise was to count a slave as three-fifths of a person. There were those who didn't want to count slaves at all because by counting them it gave slave owners a larger representation in Congress.)

The neighbor on the phone wanted to argue with me that referring to slaves as three-fifths of a person was better for the country than counting them as full persons because it gave slave-owners fewer votes. In some kind of historical, legislative wonkiness that may have some kind of abstract truthiness.

But, Dear God in heaven (and I mean this as a prayer), What kind of people have to debate and define whether a human is a human or not. My basic starting point is to say that the slavery, and the three-fifths compromise, point out what Jim Wallis calls America's original sin: Racism. Racism at the founding moment of our nation. Racism imbedded in our national birth certificate, if you will.

That is why it is important to put a sign on the side of our church that says, "Black Lives Matter to God and to Us." Because, from our national conception, loud voices have said that Black lives do *not* matter. From the horrors of slavery to the lynchings and evil of Jim Crow to red lines drawn on maps that kept African Americans and others out of neighborhoods (like this one) to the deadly rampage of a young white man with a gun in Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina – a young man whose trial is underway this week, by the way. Step by step, year by year, decade after decade, in small ways and large ways, we have denied the equality, the humanity of our sisters and brothers.

The second thing this caller, this man who called the church a couple of weeks ago, this neighbor of ours, told me was that the Civil War ended racism. *That's* why we put a bright yellow banner on the side of the building, because there are people who choose not to see reality.

The third thing he told me is that he has worked hard for everything he has. And if people just worked hard enough, they would succeed. (He also happened to tell me the name of the very fine private prep school his parents sent him to and the name of the all-male, all-white college he had attended.) But if people just work hard enough, he said, as he had done, they would succeed.

That's the part of the phone conversation where my head almost exploded. This man, our neighbor, seemed to have no concept of the idea that some people, many people, are born into systems that offer them nothing – and that some people, many people, are born into systems that actually penalize them. And that much of that inequality is based on race and racism.

In September and October, our 9 am adult study group talked about white privilege. We looked at some statistics that bear out this inequality:

The median white household in this country has wealth equal to about \$111,000. The median black household in this country has wealth of about \$7,000. (Forbes 2015)

A university study found that sheriff's offices are seven percent less likely to respond to emails from person with "black-sounding names" than they are to respond to people with "white sounding" names. (University of Manchester)

Black students are four times more likely than white students to be expelled from school. And that starts at Kindergarten. (NPR, Dept. of Ed).

And during the Countrywide/Bank of America lending mess, it was learned that Countrywide Lending charged higher loan fees to Black and Hispanic borrowers than they did to white borrowers. (Let's Talk).

So, no we do not all start out equally. And for some people to succeed means they have to work 10 times harder.

To say, "Black lives matter to God and to us," is to remember that this theological statement has not been lived out in this country.

And this is not a history lesson. Not old news. This is a current day reality.

The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that 867 hate incidents took place on the ten days after the presidential election. "Noose Tying 101" written on a classroom

wall at a university in California. Two white men beat a black woman in Las Vegas while yelling “Black Power” and “Donald Trump.” A black man in Massachusetts received a letter saying his neighborhood has “zero tolerance for black people.”

Other anti-Black, anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant vandalism and attacks. Despicable. Painful. Hateful words and acts.

So, that is where we are, friends—the inheritors of racism, coupled with economic inequality, that bring us to today, to this moment. That is not a happy history. And this is not a happy sermon two Sundays before Christmas. And that is the point—Christmas is not about happiness. Christmas calls us to something deeper. Christmas call us to Joy.

“God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,” the prophet Isaiah said, “God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”

Isaiah, 2800 years ago, knew a world like ours, a world of difficulty. And in the midst of trouble, he said, “God has sent me to proclaim the year of God’s favor, and to comfort those who mourn.”

The Gospels tell us that when Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth that is the scripture he read. That was his starting point.

Friends that is our calling, that is our task, that is our work in this day, that is our starting point: To make these words a reality. To follow in the ways of Isaiah, to follow in the ways of Jesus, to work with the oppressed, to proclaim release the captives. For five Sundays now I have preached almost the same sermon: The call of the church is clear: To love, to serve, to include. Especially, I think, that is the call, the responsibility, of those of us who have some measure of privilege.

It has been interesting to see the roll out of the President-Elect's proposed cabinet. Names are still coming in, but it appears the people named so far have a combined wealth of about \$35 Billion.

One of the things that's happening, too, is that this new administration is creating fear among many who are currently in power, or on the inside, because of fear that they will lose their corner of influence or power or even wealth.

I was chatting with some friends about this anxiety the other day and one of my friends, who runs a soup kitchen in Nashville, said, "The people who come to lunch at my soup kitchen aren't depressed or excited about Trump or the current political scene. In their minds they will continue to be at the bottom of the totem pole – no matter who is in the White House."

Here's a provocative theological idea: God doesn't side with billionaire cabinet secretaries. God doesn't side with racists who make anonymous calls to church offices. And God doesn't side so much for nervous middle class and upper middle class who wring their hands over every news story. God side with the oppressed, the stepped upon, the overlooked, the forgotten, the abused.

At least that's what Pope John Paul II said. He talked about God's preferential option for the poor. He was borrowing a phrase from Jesuit priest Pedro Arrupe, but the idea is that God is always on the side of the neediest.

Liberation theologian James Cone used that same idea in developing Black theology. Because of the history of systemic oppression of Black people, he said, God must side with the black person or not be God at all.

Those may be challenging ideas for some ears this morning. But that is what Isaiah was getting at, I think: God plays favorites. God picks holy side. And God's

favorites are the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, those who mourn.

That is why the writers of the Christmas story connected these ancient Jewish texts with Jesus of Nazareth: They saw in him that same holy favoritism.

These ideas may be challenging. And these ideas may not make us happy. As I think back to my phone conversation with our neighbor, I think that's what I sensed: I think that man is unhappy with a new way of seeing the world. I think maybe he thought he had the world figured out, but then he hears, or sees, a voice asking him to think of the world in a different way.

And I think many of us are unhappy, but for different reasons. Unhappy with racism, unhappy with inequality, unhappy that the world we thought we were moving toward is not so nearby, unhappy with unleashed anger, unhappy with fact free news.

We Americans, we like to be happy. Christmas itself, as we celebrate it, comes with this veneer of happiness: Singing old carols and decorating trees with popcorn and drinking eggnog by the fire. And those are happy, comforting traditions. But they are false idols if they distract us from the hard work that Christmas is really about. I do not think Jesus came into the world so that we could wear cute sweaters and go a-wassailing.

Those things may make us happy. The word we have for this Sunday of Advent is not happiness. The word we have is Joy.

Lillian Daniel, one of my UCC preacher colleagues and a very fine writer, wrote about happiness and joy recently. She quoted Harvard psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar who "says that joy is the intersection of deep pleasure and deep meaning. Joy can occur

even in unhappy situations, such as in the midst of a sacrifice. Joy springs up in that odd moment when despair turns madly, unexpectedly, against all odds towards hope.”

I think that is where we find ourselves in regard to racial justice, in regard to economic justice, in regard to our national life. We find ourselves living in a moment that requires the sacrifice. The sacrifice of happiness. We must sacrifice the old ways of what we thought was happiness so that new ways of justice may be born.

“Joy allows us to see the brilliance of life even as it is slipping away from us,” Lillian Daniel wrote. That is what I should have talked about to the anonymous phone caller the other day. He saw life, a way of life, slipping away. I wish I had had the good sense to invite him to go ahead and give up his old notions, so that new life may be born.

Maybe I’ll call him back sometime and talk more about this. (In our phone conversation I invited him to coffee or lunch, so we could visit face to face. He didn’t seem to want to do that, but after an hour of heated discussion with my final invitation to coffee, he said, “How about scotch and soda?” So, maybe we will sit down over Scotch, and I can talk to him about fear and unhappiness and joy.)

Because that is also the sermon I am preaching to myself this day—and to you. I am asking myself to give up my desire for happiness, to give up my desire to be the center of the universe, to give up my need to be the apple of God’s eye—to see that God plays favorites for those who have deep needs. To see that I can join that work, that we may join that work for justice for God’s re-ordering love in the world. That is the work of Christmas.

That work, that willingness to change, that call even to sacrifice, may not make us happy. The work ahead may be difficult. To live like Jesus in a world that praises Caesar may not make us happy, but it will bring us joy.

As we make our way to Christmas, may we make our way past happiness to deep Joy to the intersection of deep pleasure and deep meaning where Joy is born.

Amen.