

**RACISM:
SEEN THROUGH QUADRILATERAL LENSES**

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I understand and agree with the United Methodist Church's theological position that Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason are the sources and norms for belief and practice, but that the Bible is primary among them. When held together, these four sources and norms help formulate a particular, Spirit-led theological perspective. The *UMC Book of Discipline* states, "our theological explorations seek to give expression to the mysterious reality of God's presence, peace, and power in the world. By so doing, we attempt to articulate more clearly our understanding of the divine-human encounter and are thereby more fully prepared to participate in God's work in the world... Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason."¹ Wesley's approach recognizes that the Spirit of Truth reveals in many diverse ways. Using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, I will reflect on the issue of racism.²

The Bible serves as the primary source for theological reflection, because through "faithful reading of **Scripture**, we may come to know the truth of the biblical message in its bearing on our lives and the life of the world."³ I affirm the centrality of Scripture, since it proclaims and reveals the love of God, Living Word, and Spirit's presence in the world. When we prayerfully read Scripture, the Spirit of God speaks to us and into our lives. "Prayerfully" is critical; for some have regrettably used a literal or bias interpretation of particular passages to support and continue racism, slavery, and division. Yet, discerning the Spirit's guidance involves thoughtful interpretation of Scripture in light of the entire biblical narrative.⁴

¹ *The Book of Discipline*, ¶105, 78, 80.

² Wesley never used the term, "quadrilateral"; it was named by Albert Outler.

³ *The Book of Discipline*, ¶105, 82.

⁴ W. Stephen Gunter et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 57.

The Bible is clear that all of humanity is created by God, in the image of God, and all are precious children of God. God's unconditional covenant with Abraham proclaimed "*all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*" (Gen. 12:3). In forming the Israelites into "*a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (Exo. 19:6), God intended for them to be a light unto the Gentiles. Indeed, God's grace is upon all and on display in the Book of Ruth. There, a Moabite is invited into the family of God and becomes the great-grandmother of David and a foremother of Christ. Jesus, Himself, sought after "the other" when He befriended the Samaritan woman at the well.

In Luke 10, the Teacher conveyed this in His dramatic story to the law expert. Jesus' "Parable of the Good Samaritan" reminds us that we are to offer the love of Christ to all, regardless of their heritage, background, appearance, beliefs, or race/ethnicity. Likewise, none of these should cause bigotry, discrimination, or division (as individuals, communities, cultures, or institutions). Because of our unity in Christ, Paul stresses that, "*you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise*" (Gal. 3:26-29).

As those that belong to Christ, the Church is called to be the sacred Body of Christ. The Body represents more than the professing Christians that are alive today. The source of **Tradition** recognizes that "*we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses*" (Heb. 12:1). Like the early church, we too must "*stand firm and hold fast to the teachings...passed on to [us], whether by word of mouth or by letter*" (2 Thes. 2:15). In this way, Christians throughout the

generations still participate in our theological thought through the Church’s Tradition. For Wesley, the search for theological truth meant referring back to Christian antiquity.⁵

The *Discipline* affirms that, “as United Methodist, we pursue our theological task in openness to the richness of both the form and power of tradition.”⁶

One snapshot of the Church’s history may illustrate a non-Christ-like approach regarding racism. Overtime, the Church has come to “recognize racism as sin and affirm the ultimate and temporal worth of all persons.”⁷ Likewise, “The United Methodist Church recognizes that the sin of racism has been destructive to its unity throughout its history.”⁸ Thankfully, by God’s sanctifying grace, we are moving on to perfection. The *Discipline* adds, therefore, the need for racial justice: “Racism continues to cause painful division and marginalization. The United Methodist Church shall confront and seek to eliminate racism, whether in organizations or in individuals, in every facet of its life and in society at large.”⁹

After Scripture and Tradition, we turn to **experience**. This source acknowledges that “Christian experience gives us new eyes to see the living truth in Scripture.”¹⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson highlights these “new eyes” with the subject of slavery:¹¹

“Christians held slaves for many centuries and could argue persuasively that the majority of evidence in Scripture allowed such a practice...It was not exegesis of Scripture that created such a change of perception. It was massive and tragic experience of slavery brought home to human consciousness, bringing with it the recognition of slaves not as property but as persons, and with that belated recognition, the realization that no matter what Scripture says, owning persons cannot be compatible with the mind of Christ. Texts that formerly held only a marginal place, such as Galatians 3:28 – in Christ there is neither slave nor free – now are taken to be normative for Christian identity, while the texts that

⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁶ *The Book of Discipline*, ¶105, 84.

⁷ Ibid., ¶162, 117.

⁸ Ibid., ¶5, 24.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., ¶105, 85.

¹¹ Historians debate whether slavery gave birth to racism or vice versa. They generally agree both are related.

tell slaves to be obedient to their masters are put into a secondary and non-normative status.”¹²

Along with Christian experience is my personal experience of a loving God. I am grateful to have family and friends that are different from me and express the beauty of God’s love and diverse creation. One person in particular is my best and life-long friend, Rev. Denvil Farley, who is a white male that I met in second grade. Denvil and I went through every level of education together: elementary school, middle school, high school, two years of college, and our first class of seminary. We were roommates and in each other’s weddings. This summer, he was commissioned as a Provisional Elder and moved back to Florida. After his affirming interview with the Board back in January, he drove to my house that night to deliver the good news. I look forward to being “back in class” with him this next year, as we both grow through the Generative Church Leader Academy. It is incredible that God called both of us to be United Methodist pastors. We celebrate our relationship and the rich experience that it has provided us.

Through **reason**, we recognize the value of using our God-given ability to think rationally. There are several ways to reasonably consider the issue of racism. The article, “The Surprising Science of Race and Racism” affirms there are insignificant biological differences between races, causing “most biologist, geneticists, and anthropologists [to] discard the concept of race.”¹³ It continues with the assertion that “races” have more genetic similarities than differences. Furthermore, studying history and observing the lingering racial divide (for some), stresses the harmful effects of racism personally, relationally, communally, economically, and generationally. It is more reasonable, I think, to seek justice, peace, and unity by way of

¹² Johnson, *The Revelatory Body*, 49-50.

¹³ Eliza Sankar-Gorton, "The Surprising Science of Race and Racism," The Huffington Post, July 14, 2015, accessed August 23, 2016.

forgiveness and reconciliation. On this road, we arrive at “a place where shalom becomes a greater reality and all people can thrive.”¹⁴

I am the first black pastor appointed to serve at St. Luke’s, a predominately white congregation. I have been told that some of the congregants have “come a long way” since I have arrived. Initially, some questioned my appointment, interracial marriage, and diamond earrings. Since then, the congregation has come to love my multi-racial family. Yet I struggle, because I wonder how many of them do not support or understand that #blacklivesmatter.

The Black Lives Matter movement was formed to highlight such issues as racism in our country and discriminatory police departments and officers. The motto and movement are not to say that other lives do not matter or that black lives matter are more than others. More so, it is like going to the doctor for a broken bone and the doctor says “all bones matter.” Yes, but in that moment, you have to focus on the one that is broken.

In recent years, we have witnessed conflict between law enforcement and the black community. Unfortunately, more killings have recently made national news with the deaths of black citizens and police officers. With family members in law enforcement and the military, I support police officers and have great respect for their calling and contributions to society. I also understand that there is an underlying racial issue in our country and it greatly impacts how some officers relate to black citizens and vice versa. I am also aware that most officers are not power-hungry and discriminatory.

A few months ago, the Rev. Shelly Denmark and I carpooled to the Warren Willis Youth Camp to write curriculum for this summer’s theme. On the way back, I was pulled over for speeding (seven mph over) by a white State Trooper. I explained we were coming from the camp

¹⁴ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 124.

and that I did not realize the speed limit had decreased. He was intrigued about camp and asked what I do and I told him I was a pastor. He proceeded to say, “maybe the Lord brought me here for a reason. I am here to slow people down, for your safety. You can replace this car, but if something happened to either of you, you cannot be replaced.” He let me off with a warning. The whole encounter was over within two minutes. Not only did he show grace (which I shared in my sermon that Sunday), but he was cordial while still being assertive. At no point did I feel fearful, in danger, or act disrespectfully. I wanted the congregation to know that as well.

Since then, we have journeyed through the aforementioned “Shalom Sessions.” With this group as a model, I suggested and helped put together an eight-week sermon series, rooted in the Book of Ruth. It will start in September and will focus on “Saying Grace Respectfully.” This series will invite and encourage others to join one of two groups: either studying Ruth in depth with a small group or journeying towards reconciliation with the next Shalom group.

Race is a sensitive topic, which fuels a lot of emotions. Hopefully, these groups will foster healthy dialog, fresh perspectives, and new relationships. These small groups (along with the tragic shootings and my positive experience with the officer) serve as a reminder that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. I am committed to stand with my denomination in confronting and eliminating racism and moving towards healing, wholeness, and reconciliation.

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