

**The Life You Save May be Your Own:
The Sacred Work of Confronting Racism**

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Truman A. Morrison Lecture Series
Sermon at Edgewood United Church
November 16, 2008

Scripture readings: Deuteronomy 30:11-14, 19 and Luke 10:25-27

Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptance in Thy sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What an honor and a joy it is to be the lecturer and preacher for this year's Truman A. Morrison Lecture Series. When John Baumgardner called to extend the invitation, I knew immediately that the subject would be racial justice as sacred work. After all, we were in the midst of an historic presidential campaign and I knew that, whatever the outcome of the election, race and racism would be on our minds! I also chose this subject because the man for whom this lecture series is named believed that to love God, you must work for justice and to work for justice in this country, you must join the struggle to eradicate racism.

I am profoundly grateful for the legacy I have inherited from my parents, Truman and Eleanor Morrison, and this Edgewood community in which my faith was formed and nurtured. As a young child in the 1950s, when Joseph McCarthy was terrorizing the nation by charging every justice-loving person with being a communist, my parents were assigned that label on more than one occasion because of their work for racial and economic justice – first in the western suburbs of Chicago and then in East Lansing, Michigan. In those days, my father was fond of quoting a southern theologian and anti-racism activist named Clarence Jordan who said, "If you are a Christian and you haven't been called a communist recently, chances are you haven't been following Jesus."

I am forever indebted to the faith, hope, and activism that animated my parents' lives and that they communicated to me and my siblings with a sense of urgency, responsibility, and joy. The message went something like this: "Melanie, we don't believe there is some grand design for your life predetermined by an Almighty controlling God. We *do* believe it is a high and holy human calling to work for love and justice and to resist death in all its forms. You must do your own choosing, living and dying. Despite what some Christians would have you believe, Jesus will not do those things for you. He *will* journey with you as brother, guide, and friend reminding you that nothing, absolutely nothing can separate you from the love of God. The Bible is not a blueprint or an answer-book. Rather, God has granted you and me and every one of us the responsibility to discern and then choose each day between life and death in small and big ways. You are accountable for those choices. It matters what you choose."

I share these messages with you not only because they have profoundly shaped who I am, but also because they reflect part of the spiritual grounding of this faith community. Edgewood's earliest years as a congregation were intimately bound up in the civil rights struggles of the fifties and sixties. Shortly after moving to East Lansing in 1954, to start a fledgling church called Edgewood People's Church, my parents learned that even though MSU had students and faculty of color, the realtors in East Lansing had an unwritten agreement that no home would ever be sold to a person of color. My parents became active in the effort to expose this real estate practice and members of Edgewood's church council vowed to attend the meetings of the East

Lansing City Council, each and every month for as long as it took, to speak out and put pressure on the city council until it passed an Equal Occupancy Ordinance.

Through the years, my father and I talked about the messages he received about race and racism as a white child growing up in Birmingham, Alabama in the twenties and thirties, and the messages I received as a white child growing up in East Lansing, Michigan in the fifties and sixties. My father was deeply grateful for the people, books, and events that had shaken him to his core, helped wake him up to his own racist conditioning, and sowed the seeds of a critical consciousness and a radical urgency about racial justice that he carried with him until his death. Thankfully, he was also willing to turn the spotlight of that critical consciousness on himself and talk frankly with me about what he had failed to see and do and communicate.

For example, we talked about the tendency of white liberals to romanticize and exaggerate our involvement in the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties, and the fact that, in subsequent years, too many of us have been erratic and episodic in our commitment to the ongoing struggle for racial justice. We enter the fray for awhile but then become distracted by issues we consider more urgent. In talking about such things, we acknowledged that, while I learned growing up that racism is a system that oppresses people of color, I was not taught that this same system benefitted me and my white family in untold ways.

In other words, I learned as a child to see people of color as *disadvantaged*, but I did not learn that I was *advantaged* by that same system of racism. I also think we (the Morrisons) believed that we were the *good* white people. The exceptions. Not like those *racist* or oblivious white people. That familial pride, that illusion, erected an emotional wall in me for years, at the same time that my parents' activism ignited passion for racial justice. I initially resisted the notion that I had white skin privileges or exhibited racism. A number of events converged to produce cracks in that wall and help it start crumbling, including truth-telling friends and allies who loved me enough to call me on my self-righteous insularity. Those illusions die hard, however, and I can still succumb to wanting to separate myself from *those* white people and seek approval from people of color.

A crucial turning point in my life came when I had the privilege of leading a seminar called Difficult Conversations in the early nineties with an African American friend and colleague, Lynnette Stallworth. The seminar invited African American and white women to engage each other in dialogue and study about the ways racism impacted our lives. Lynnette and I spent the good part of a year meeting, designing the seminar, and coming to know each other in deeper ways. That year's preparation, my growing friendship with Lynnette, and the seminar itself, changed my life. I began to see just how profoundly racism had shaped my identity, my interior landscape, my interpersonal relationships, and my choices about where I live, where I worship, what I do, and what I fail to do.

I came to understand more deeply that racism has affected me as a white person in very different ways than it has affected people of color, but it has profoundly shaped me nevertheless. I do not believe racism *oppresses* me, but I do believe it has damaged me and other white people. To name just one example: many of us who are white do not have a vocabulary for talking about our thoughts and emotions when it comes to racism. We have very little experience or practice talking about racism, especially from the heart. We don't often view racism as something that our lives depend on eradicating. We have inherited generations of silence, looking away, pretending not to notice, numbness to the pain. Obliviousness has become second nature. Even though I had parents who talked openly about racism and racial justice, my emotional vocabulary was underdeveloped and my attention span limited.

Through my friendship with Lynnette, and the Difficult Conversations seminar, I began to feel my own anger, rage, grief, and shame at racism, both historical and contemporary. Through the gift of working with truth-telling white people who also called me out on my racism, I began to shed the notion of being a special white person. One of those beloved, truth-telling friends was Dawn Mead's partner, Ann Flescher, who died this past May. Her unceasing passion for racial justice is just one of many reasons I miss her more than I can say. Through these friendships and re-engagement in movements for racial justice, I began to see racial justice as a sacred calling and a way of life involving both deep personal work and activism in the world.

I am so grateful for the people of color in my life who have reminded me that, unless I come to understand what is at stake for me personally in eliminating racism, I will likely remain the white helping hand that strikes again. They have said to me, in so many words, "I appreciate that you want to understand my experience, Melanie, but what I most need from you is that you understand your own; that you do the hard and strenuous work of understanding what it means to be White in America. Unless you do that work, you are dangerous."

A similar warning is sounded in this morning's gospel story. Jesus is talking with his disciples when a lawyer interrupts: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks the lawyer what he understands the heart of the law to be. The lawyer replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." "Right," says Jesus. "You know the answer, now put it into practice." But the lawyer follows up with another question, "Who is my neighbor?"

It is important to note that the parable of the Good Samaritan does not pose the question: "Who is my neighbor?" That was the *lawyer's* question. As he so often does, through the use of a story, Jesus turns the lawyer's question on its head. Instead of focusing on the hypothetical neighbor, Jesus brings the question back home to the lawyer and suggests he ought to be asking, "What kind of neighbor am I?"

The point of Jesus' parable is not to moralize or challenge the lawyer's stereotypes and biases by saying that God's love extends *even* to Samaritans. He doesn't say, "These too are your neighbors and you must love them because God's love is all inclusive." That would have been enough to anger the lawyer who most likely looked upon Samaritans as second-class citizens. But Jesus does something more scandalous still: In the story he tells, the Samaritan is not the *recipient* of love and justice; he is the *embodiment* of love and justice. At the conclusion of his story, Jesus turns to the lawyer and says: "Model your compassion after the Samaritan; be a neighbor as the Samaritan was a neighbor."

I think there an unspoken sub-text in this story. I think Jesus is issuing a warning to the lawyer that goes something like this: "Before you can be a real neighbor, you've got some work to do. Your power and privilege, if it remains unexamined, is going to cause more harm than good because people who extend help and hospitality to those they deem 'less fortunate' exhibit condescension rather than solidarity. They presume they know best what the other person needs."

The word neighbor is similar to friend and anti-racist ally in that we don't get to claim those words for ourselves; they are names bestowed on us by those who believe we have befriended them or have been an ally to them. Befriending and being an ally require both a relationship and acts of solidarity. Those of us who are white cannot just announce that we *are* "anti-racist allies." We can express our *desire* to become anti-racist allies, but "ally" is a name to be earned *in relationship*, just as the Samaritan earned the name "neighbor" by his tangible acts

of love and justice.

What were those acts of solidarity? Just listen to the number of active verbs contained in this brief, three sentence account: A Samaritan while traveling *came* near him; and when he *saw* him, he was *moved* with compassion. He *went* to him and *bandaged* his wounds, having *poured* oil and wine on them. Then he *put* him on his own animal, *brought* him to an inn, and *took care* of him. The next day he *took out* two denarii, *gave* them to the innkeeper, and *said*, 'Take care of him; and when I *come* back, I will *repay* you whatever more you spend.' I counted 14 verbs!

The lawyer asked for a profile; a blueprint. He was given a story about a man who brought his whole self to the relationship. For those of us who come from a place of privilege, being a true neighbor, friend, or ally requires a willingness to listen deeply and to take the other person's pain and anger seriously without always taking it personally. This is easier said than done, of course. When those of us who are white begin to viscerally, not just intellectually, understand the scope and depth of racism that has been perpetrated in our name, we can be tempted to retreat into our heads again or defend against the pain.

I have experienced this on more than one occasion when a person of color is sharing an experience of racism or making a presentation about some aspect of racism. No sooner has the last word been uttered than a white person jumps to her feet and says, "I feel so guilty about this. Tell me what you want me to do!" I will never forget hearing the response of a speaker one time who responded to this question "What can I do?" by saying, "I suggest you *do* nothing right now. Just hold the pain, feel it, listen and learn more deeply about racism. If after taking the time to learn more about the history of racism and your involvement in it, you are still wondering what you should do, I suggest you take the lead from organizations of color in your community that are addressing this issue."

I don't remember the questioner's response. I think she stood for a moment in stunned silence and then sat down. Like the lawyer, she had wanted a roadmap, a solution. But the speaker, like Jesus, recognized the danger of the messianic helping hand and urged the questioner to stop, feel the pain, and then risk the intimacy of authentic engagement. There is an Hasidic story about a conversation between two villagers. The first said: "Tell me, friend Ivan, do you love me?" Ivan responds: "I love you deeply." The first man asks: "Do you know, my friend, what gives me pain?" Ivan replies: "How can I know what gives you pain?" To which his friend then says: "If you do not know what gives me pain, how can you say that you truly love me?"

The sacred work of racial justice cannot, I believe, be enacted and sustained unless we develop authentic relationships of accountability and support across racial differences. We need each other beyond all telling of it. The challenges before us are enormous; racism remains a wound at the heart of this nation that cannot be wished away or treated carelessly. It matters profoundly what we do or fail to do. God has set before us life and death, blessing and curse. May we choose life so that we and our descendants may flourish. Amen.