

January 17, 2021  
Rev. Kerry Smith

Romans 12:1-3  
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Can I Say This at Church? Racism

Romans 12:1-3

New Revised Standard Version

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

There is a movie with Will Smith called “After Earth” that has a great speech about fear. Will Smith’s character says, “Danger is real but fear is a choice.” We are afraid to talk about racism in church, at work, with our friends, and with our families. We don’t want to ruffle feathers so we avoid talking about racism at all. “Danger is real but fear is a choice.” We have been talking about things that you don’t normally hear about in church. Jesus didn’t avoid big questions about important topics of his day, so we shouldn’t either.

Did you know that children are not color blind? Children as early as six months of age recognize race and children as early as two or three years old have begun to consume racist ideas. Children have to be taught to be antiracist just as they are taught indirectly by so many things they see and hear and experience to be racist. We may think that by raising our children to be nice, that translates to them being antiracist, but when we don’t talk to our children about race they take away that it isn’t okay to talk about race and racism.<sup>1</sup> It’s never too early to talk to our kids about racism.

I love the Apostle Paul’s words in Romans because he talks about not being conformed to this world, but being transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. There are so many amazing books that can help us to learn and be transformed. Ibram Kendi’s book *How to Be an Antiracist*, Austin Channing Brown’s book *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, Ta-Nehisi Coates book that is a letter to his teenage son about being Black in the United States *Between the World and Me*. If you like podcasts, I recommend Scene on Radio’s season two called Seeing White about whiteness in America. When we don’t run from the learning that pains us, we can be transformed. We have to be constantly growing. We want to become a better human so that we can treat other humans better.<sup>2</sup> When we recognize acts that we do as racist, we can grow and become antiracist.

Niceness does not disprove the presence of racism. We want to be quiet and learn. We want to apologize and make amends and take action. That is how we become a better human, a better neighbor, a better person of faith, a better friend, a better family member. It’s important for us to have uncomfortable difficult conversations.

White supremacy doesn’t value another person’s life as much as you value your own. We think, “I am white therefore I am better. I am right, holy, good, innocent, and you are inferior. I am superior solely because I am white.” White supremacy steals our ability to see, feel, hear, and hold in high-esteem people who don’t look like us.<sup>3</sup>

When our kids were young, my husband Lee and I went on vacation and left the kids with my mom. We had a lovely time. As we were coming home, we drove into the neighborhood and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-ibram-x-kendi-on-how-to-be-an-antiracist/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-austin-channing-brown-on-im-still-here-black-dignity-in-a-world-made-for-whiteness/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-austin-channing-brown-on-im-still-here-black-dignity-in-a-world-made-for-whiteness/>

my mom called and asked us if we knew where our son Everett was. Everett was seven years old at the time. Everett had run after our dog who had escaped out the front door. Now imagine Everett was Black and you saw him running down the street. Would you think he was up to no good? Would you be afraid? Everett was found several blocks from our house walking down the street with an older gentleman who was protective of him. Now Everett is thirteen. A few months ago, two of Everett's friends from school were walking home. They are both Black. A man came on his porch and started yelling at them. They didn't understand what he was saying, so they asked him, "Sir, are you talking to us?" He said, "Yes," then started cursing them out. He accused them of stealing stuff and told them to get out of his neighborhood. The man on his porch later said it was mistaken identity, but imagine this racist behavior happening to your thirteen year old preteen.

This shouldn't be America, but it is. I wish America was not like this, but it is. We at Greenland Hills know that we are called as Christians to pursue beloved community where all are welcome, loved, and invited to Christ's love. Our world is woefully far from this vision of beloved community. In the Christian Church in America, the reality is white Christian nationalism is tolerated and often encouraged. This should not be true. Beloved community is built when we love each other enough to tell the truth and ensure justice is done. White Christian nationalism should be challenged because it is sinful and it is against the teaching of Jesus. Domestic terrorism and violent white supremacy is the leading domestic threat to our life together according to both the FBI and to the Southern Poverty Law Center.<sup>4</sup>

We believe in healing and reconciliation but that requires truth and justice. We have to know our history as a city and as a country where centuries of racial injustice and genocide preceded us. Indigenous people who were on this land were murdered. They were forced to leave their own lands. Black people were not allowed to live in certain parts of this city. They were unable to obtain mortgages while white people with a similar credit history were given mortgages. We need to learn these things. Our transformation begins with honesty. If you've done something wrong to someone else and you genuinely don't know what you've done wrong, you're not going to be able to fully reconcile with that person.<sup>5</sup> You won't be able to adequately apologize and say the things you need to say to create a path toward healing. We have to begin by being honest about our history.

When we look at scripture, God calls people to remember the past and where they've been and what it is that God has brought them through. Then, God always leads them forward. Remembering the past and what got us here is a crucial part of true healing. God walks with people as they become changed, transformed. Healing doesn't mean that we return to how it has been before, *because that is what we need healing from*.

Will our country be okay again? The truth is it never *was* okay. We have to be honest about how we got here. We need a political system that serves the common good. We have to do some deep inner work on the parts within each of us that reflect the things in our society that we hate. We have to name the parts of our community that make us sick to our stomach. We have to create space for dialogue and accountability about that. As hard as it is, we have to embrace conflict. We have to stop clinging to what is comfortable. We cannot heal until we move out of our comfort zones and face injustice.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.statesman.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/10/09/fact-check-did-fbi-director-warn-about-white-supremacist-violence/114251512/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.vox.com/21327742/bryan-stevenson-the-ezra-klein-show-america-slavery-healing-racism-george-floyd-protests>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who was arrested and imprisoned for his outspoken opposition to Hitler, said, “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” Bonhoeffer wrote about cheap grace as the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. There must be repentance, accountability, consequences, and repercussions. Unity demands it, justice demands it.

Last week we celebrated Jesus baptism and remembered our own. We heard the questions asked at baptism, “Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” Paul tells us to not be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. We have work to do because evil, injustice, and oppression hide in plain sight in our world. I am thankful to be in a community of faith that does justice work and antiracist learning. I pray we will continue to serve as an example to other communities.

There’s too much silence in our country about things that really matter. We have to care for the common good. We have to be a leader instead of a follower. To set an example rather than go along with the crowd. We have to be courageous in all that we do. Martin Luther King Jr.’s last book was titled, “Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?” It was published in 1967 but it could just as easily have been published today. Where *do* we go from here? We pray our marching orders from Jesus each Sunday in worship: thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. May we go and do it today. Amen.