

**We Can't Breathe Until**  
Micah 6:1-8 and Matthew 28:16-20  
Racial Justice Sunday: June 7, 2020

**Text**

**Micah 6:1-8**

Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,  
and let the hills hear your voice.

<sup>2</sup>Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,  
and you enduring foundations of the earth;  
for the Lord has a controversy with his people,  
and he will contend with Israel.

<sup>3</sup>“O my people, what have I done to you?  
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

<sup>4</sup>For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;  
and I sent before you Moses,  
Aaron, and Miriam.

<sup>5</sup>O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,  
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,  
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”

<sup>6</sup>“With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?

<sup>7</sup>Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

<sup>8</sup>He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

**Matthew 28:16-20**

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

**Reflection:**

Let me begin with my story. As a member of a racial minority living in Canada, I often found myself feeling like a stranger in a largely Caucasian denomination. My story goes back to 2001 in my first English-speaking Pastoral Charge in the Oxford Presbytery of London Conference. As I began my ministry with the Pastoral Charge and looking at the church bulletin, I came across what was to me a strange order of service: the offering was collected right after the Children's Time near the beginning of the service. I had learned in my theological training that the offering is a response to God's Word. So, it usually comes after the sermon as we do here at West Point Grey United. I expressed my concern in the Elder's meeting and we decided to change the order after a workshop on worship.

One member of the church did not like the change; she wanted to see her son collect the offering before he goes to Sunday School. After that she started to complain about my ministry. She held power in the church and others said they felt they could not express any different viewpoints about anything in the church. Her husband was the Chair of the Official Board and she was the pianist and treasurer of the church. They acted like gate keepers of the church. This family had exercised power in the congregation for many years. I was concerned about the way the church was being managed. I decided to try to help the congregants to empower themselves to take on shared leadership. This way of doing ministry was not agreeable to the family so she sent official complaints to the higher church courts - Presbytery and Conference.

After hearing her complaints against me, the members of the Presbytery Pastoral Relations Committee visited our church to investigate. Then Conference staff also visited us too. They were all Caucasian. At that time, I felt they were choking me. "I can't breathe." George Floyd's outcry reminds me of my situation about 20 years ago. I was then advised by my Presbytery Pastoral Relations Committee to leave my Pastoral Charge. The Presbytery and Conference took the easy way out: dismiss the newly-settled Korean minister.

As soon as the people of the pastoral charge heard I was being dismissed, almost every member, 70 out of 71, except the complainant's husband but including the couple's parents, petitioned Presbytery and Conference to rescind this action. In the process the members empowered themselves to take responsibility for the mission of God in their community. This experience enhanced my awareness of issues in church life such as power, prejudice, racism and attitudes towards difference. In this context, when I heard of the United Church's vision to be an intercultural church in 2006, I hoped it might address some of the realities experienced in my pastoral ministry.

I decided to explore and practise the vision of becoming an intercultural church where people of varied backgrounds come together for the common good. Beyond our cultural differences, gender, sexual orientation, age and abilities, all participants are invited to create intentionally safe, welcoming spaces where we learn and grow together to work for God's justice for all people.

In this intercultural vision there is no place for racism. However, our faith community members of Asian heritage are experiencing racism in our society. Last week I asked Linda about to gather experiences of racism. Many people shared their stories. I couldn't include all of them here but

here are some. They are hearing “go back to China.” They also hear people deliberately use the term “China virus.” We are hearing derisive words and witnessing violent actions against people assumed to be Asian heritage. In this frightening and uncomfortable situation, people are staying at home not necessarily because of COVID-19 but because of racism. As a result, we are imposing further self-isolation on ourselves and our families. We suffer from aggressive language, cursing and even physical attacks. We often also experience very subtle words and actions of discrimination and systematic racism in workplaces, even in medical schools and hospitals.

In this situation, we share the wisdom of Chinese philosophers. 己所不欲，勿施于人

(孔子) Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire (Confucius). 行有不得，反求诸己  
(孟子) Turn inward and examine yourself when you encounter difficulties in life (Mencius). Here is a poem written by Andrea Su Xu.

I KNOW

2020 is an extraordinarily difficult year  
I know  
The world is in turmoil  
Many people lost their jobs even lives  
I know

When you attack an Asian woman or an elderly person  
I know  
You are filled with fear  
I know

Jesus said  
“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” – Luke 23:34  
I know  
Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness  
I know

Only love is eternal, only faith is indestructible  
I know  
For every person of every race is a child of God  
You know.

As I read these stories of racism, I am deeply touched by the vision for oneness, healing and togetherness in our struggle for justice and against racism. I am equally touched by your concern that we discuss this matter in our faith community as we seek to become an intercultural church. Our faith is a living faith. We seek to restore humanity to those who are suffering from racism. One day we will have vaccine for COVID-19, but there is no vaccine for racism; we have to create justice. We have to fight this deadly virus which destroys our self-esteem and humanity.

Today's scripture is called "The Great Commandment"; however, we may be misled in our understanding of it. When we say that someone commands you, we understand that the person is speaking directly to us to do something. If I say, "Stay here," for example, you have two choices: either to stay or not. No matter what you have decided, it is up to you. You can follow the commandment or reject it. It is a kind of one-way relationship whereby you decide how to act.

Here we must consider another word; that word is "commission," since it enriches the meaning of "commandment." When you are commissioned you are not merely commanded but also equipped, empowered and given the necessary authority to accomplish your duty. Jesus is commissioning and entrusting the disciples with the mission once entrusted to him: to go into the world and share the good news in the spirit of Jesus. In commissioning, there is a relationship - God is sending God's people into the world and we are being sent along with God's blessing. This is not a one-time nor a one-way command but emphasizes a continuous relationship with the sender. When we are sent by God, we are reflecting God's dream for the world in our action and reflection and act accordingly. We are doing God's mission. Today we are commissioned to combat racism in every corner of our lives. We are ambassadors of God to do this mission; "We can't breathe until we are free from racism." Until we are free, let us commit to continue God's ministry and mission. Amen.

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