

Sermon: God's Plan for His Church
Text: John 17

Instead of working through discussion questions this week, I wanted to print a prayer offered by the Bishop of our larger church family, the United Brethren in Christ. It addresses the racial tensions we are all greatly troubled by in our world today. It speaks to the unity that Jesus most certainly was praying about in John 17. Please read these words with a soft and prayerful heart. And join our Bishop with the same prayer: "Lord, you have my attention. Show me where to go from here."

"Lord, Help Us": A Prayer by Bishop Todd Fetters

The fires of racial tension in our country have been stoked once again. After an initial sigh, which could be translated, "Oh no. Lord help us," the scriptural words that rose within my soul were, "Mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15).

My heart truly breaks for our African American brothers and sisters in the United Brethren in Christ. I mourn with you that race relations in the United States is not where any of us had hoped and would have thought it would be 50 years after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his powerful "I Have A Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial.

Earlier this week, I spoke with a personal friend and several United Brethren ministers who are African American. They graciously afforded me the privilege of listening to their thoughts and feelings. Despite a spike in frustration and a resurgence of fear and anxiety due to historic and systemic racism, each of them expressed an enduring and persevering love for the Lord and their fellow man. These men and women know that the real power to heal our pronounced relational divides lies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yes, we grieved together, but not as men and women without hope. Our hope is placed in God who created us without favoritism or preference, and who loves us unconditionally. Our shared hope for America and the nations firmly resides in the Holy Spirit who can free our minds from the chains of ignorance, bigotry, and hatred, compelling us to act with understanding, grace, and brotherly love. Certainly, I must say that it seems to me that God has our attention. I know He has mine.

With 250 years of history under our belt, I'm grateful that the United Brethren church has typically landed on the correct side of issues of race and the vulnerable. When most American denominations were compromising to allow room for slavery, we remained abolitionist. As the Civil War ended and other denominations were trying to figure out how to make room for former slaves, we pushed ahead to advocate for full citizenship. As we saw Native Americans and Chinese immigrants suffering abuse, we spoke out against it.

We emphasized this in 2001 when the United Brethren in Christ adopted eight Core Values. One of them, "We Demonstrate Social Concern," says:

"We must not only seek the salvation of our fellow human beings, but show genuine concern for their total well-being. We recognize our responsibility to victims of poverty, prejudice, injustice, and other forms of human suffering.

"The poor will always be among us, and we cannot ignore their plight; the Bible clearly states our obligation to those living in poverty. But there are many others, whether they are poor or

not, whose situation requires our aid. They include persons in prison, immigrants, widows, orphans, the unborn, the handicapped, the homeless, the elderly, and victims of abuse. We also respond corporately to large-scale tragedies, giving sacrificially to help victims of natural disasters or social strife.

“Demonstrating social concern also involves raising our voice against injustice and prejudice. We stand against discrimination, slavery, and injustice, insisting that equal rights be granted to everyone. We advocate fairness in the workplace, in the courts, and in all other settings, and seek the end of any discrimination based upon racial, national, economic, or social differences.”

This Core Value states some actions to take: raise our voice, stand against, advocate, recognize our responsibility, seek the end, insist, don't ignore, help, respond corporately. As United Brethren, inviting anyone to “come with us...we will treat you well” (Numbers 10:29), we can apply these in various ways to society's ongoing struggle with racial injustice.

Some of us thought 20/20 would be a nice metaphor for vision in 2020. Perhaps there is more for us to see. Perhaps 20/20 is a Divine prescription to see racism more clearly and do something to eradicate it.

While United Brethren can be thankful for our history, we do not take this moment to pat each other or ourselves on the back. Instead, we mark this moment by taking up the same mantle of our spiritual fore-brothers and fore-sisters, which is to follow the example of Christ and love our neighbor, regardless of color, as ourselves.

Amidst this tragic chaos, I have wondered and I've prayed, “What does the Lord ask of me? What does the Lord ask of the United Brethren church?” Micah 6:8 provides an answer from God himself:
“He [the Lord] has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Let's act justly. As individuals and as churches, we need to find our voice to stand and speak against discrimination and injustice. Our history shows that UBs know how to do this.

Let's love mercy. Our Lord is patient with all of us, not always giving us what we rightly deserve. Just as we love receiving mercy, we need to love showing mercy.

Let's walk humbly with our God. He created every man and woman of every nation, tribe, and tongue. None better than the other. All very precious to Him who sent His Son to die so that anyone might have eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I realize that when it comes to issues of race, UB people are at different points. Some have spent decades working on racial awareness and understanding. Others have just recently been jolted awake to the problems. Wherever you are on that road, continue down it. And as you journey, remember to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.

My prayer is, “Lord, you have our attention. Show us where to go from here.”