

Choosing to be Black and Brethren
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Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren
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Deuteronomy 16: 18-20 and Galatians 3: 26-29

Good morning.

This sermon and opportunity come at an interesting time in my life. My mind and my heart and my soul are in a bit of a conflicting battle. On many days I question my place and affiliation within the Church of the Brethren. The struggle is real. It is not over polity or policy or some of the theological differences we have to traverse through. It is about where my faith and spiritual needs meets my needs to find my place in our current societal climate and where my peace and justice needs are met. That is just part of living in a complexity of being Black and Brethren. This internal wrestling is about who I am, who God created in me, and my place within this family of faith.

I do appreciate the idea that this sermon comes from this particular pulpit. It was nearly 26 years ago that my roots were planted in the church as I was baptized right behind where I now stand. Highland Avenue was my formal introduction to the Church of the Brethren in terms of how a group can make someone learn about being Brethren. I took my membership classes here and I was dunked three times here.

My initial introduction to the Brethren was that of a student at the University of La Verne. That introduction was not overt, but rather the subtle influence of many Brethren (who I didn't know at the time were Brethren) faculty and staff whose deeds, attitudes and actions demonstrated their faith. My introduction to the wider church came through the Brethren Name Game after I joined the national staff and attended my first annual conference a month later. Long time members trying to determine if they knew my lineage and my relations. It was amusing and interesting as people described themselves through their generational status, fourth generation Brethren; Related to this line of Millers, Davises or that line of Florys. In time I came to help people out by describing myself in two ways, as First-Generation Brethren, and/or that I was born Brethren, but had just discovered it.

So, the idea of not officially being affiliated with the Church of the Brethren is daunting and scary. The journey has been smooth in some ways and challenging in others. In my research before joining the national staff, I found out about the denomination's anti-war and peace stances. I learned that many from this church stood alongside the efforts of Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement. You

can even see the Church of the Brethren signs in pictures of the March on Washington. And this church was a staunch opponent of slavery, to which I am personally grateful, and an ally for the right side of the Civil War. So, you can understand how and why I feel like the Church of the Brethren and I have shared core values.

To be Black and Brethren isn't oxymoronic. But there is a juxtaposition of incongruities. I cannot speak for the masses because I am just one Black man, and the African American experience is not collectively uniform. Different perspectives play into the conversation. To go a level deeper, the incongruities are influenced by whether I am urban Black, rural Black, or suburban Black. That background forms the framework for my sense of justice, war, equality, equity, peace, and racism.

The Deuteronomy scripture speaks directly to what we face today in the judges not distorting justice and that we pursue justice in the name of the God. How much simpler is that? It talks about not accepting bribes. We think of bribes as monetary. But I would also think that bribes could be bribes of the heart and soul. That justice can be perverted and distorted by the way in which the judges wield power against those whom they consider "not worthy." In my case I see that as being people who look like me, or who are vulnerable or who do not conform to society's expectations for what is deemed, "acceptable."

What's been difficult is having my church be silent when I am at war with society. The consistent injustices occurring against Black and Brown people are not solely individual cases that don't impact us as a faith community. These injustices are about the destruction of humanity. Similarly, my being Black or being Brethren aren't separate issues. I cannot undo my Blackness. It is how I was born, it is how I identify myself and will always be how society identifies me on first approach. And whether I have an official affiliation with the church or not, I cannot undo my Brethrenness. I believe in peace and I believe in justice. They are synonymous to me. I have always thought of us not only as a peace church but as a justice church. Like when we marched in solidarity with Dr. King, stood against the war in Vietnam, or decried financial discrimination when, as a denomination, we said no to red-lining.

The struggle is real. For even in my Brethrenness, I am Trayvon Martin, I am Eric Gardner, I am Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray, and Tamir Rice, and Walter Scott, and I am Sandra Bland. For all the judges in our society do not sit on a bench in a black robe and dole out their definition of justice, but instead they sit in cars with badges and they sit behind desks as prosecutors and persecutors. I can neither hide my Blackness nor my Brethrenness. When given the chance, my love for humanity in all of its forms, my love of peace and my love of justice exude. I was reminded this weekend as well that I can

walk into any space and make myself welcome. I wish that were true. But there is a constant reminder for us Black Americans and persons of color that we live in a country built by us, but not for us. The very laws and proclamations that should protect us are either used against us or ignored when it comes to working for us. When we exercise our free speech rights, we are told to shut up and dribble and to stand and be patriotic. When search and seizure laws are adjusted in the wars on crimes and drugs so that it places the poor at a greater disadvantage.

Being Black and Brethren means that in this struggle I am segregated from my true self because the Brethren half of does not know how to engage. My resolve to be part of a peace church, a justice church, a church that has stood on the right sides of history, is met with emptiness. Not because I think the church, my church, does not want to engage. It is scared. It is unaware of how to engage. The Whiteness of my church manifests paralysis in the face of social conflicts that require an engagement or understanding of its very neighbors whom it ignores.

As a church we will talk about diversity. And we are eager to open our arms to it. But largely those arms are open for international diversity, and yet slow to engage when it is in the city 20 miles away. Why is this? Why is it easier for us, as Brethren, to join the struggle for the oppressed who live halfway around the world, but not necessarily for those who live next door? Some might say that it's because checkbook Christianity is so much easier on the conscious than the physical struggle of peace, justice and reconciliation.

Austin Channing Brown talks about where reconciliation fits within the White church and Blackness. She says, reconciliation is about “diverting power and attention to the oppressed, toward the powerless. It’s not enough to dabble at diversity and inclusion while leaving the existing authority structure in place. Reconciliation demands more.” And she adds that Reconciliation is the pursuit of the impossible; Reconciliation is what Jesus does. Reconciliation is ministry that belongs to Jesus.” Because it was Jesus who left the comfort of heaven and put on flesh, experiencing the beauty and the brutality of being human and who died on a cross and rose from the grave, making a way for all humanity to be joined in the union with God.

Our church has dabbled in it. In 1991, annual conference and the church adopted a report on Brethren and Black Americans. This was in response to a query that tried to call the Church to a new sense of responsibility to confront the racist attitudes that existed within our denomination and in society as a whole. The Church tried again in 2007 when it adopted the “Separate No More” statement, trying to answer the question of how we move toward becoming more intercultural.

Changes toward acceptance, diversification, and multiculturalism are not easy. They are hard and they have to be intentional. In the 1991 report the Committee identified “racism as a critical factor in our understanding of why the Church of the Brethren has not attracted more Black Americans and why we have been slow in responding to their concerns.”

I was reminded this weekend that often individual members of the denomination may or may not know what church statements are out there – or where the church stands on certain issues. That those conversations and determinations do not happen locally. There may not be knowledge that in 1991 it was recommended that congregations become informed about the condition of life for Black Americans and other people of color in their communities, and when inequities are discovered, make strong commitments of time and financial resources to local organizations work on these issues. Our largely White church members may not know that they are also called to stand in solidarity with Black Americans and other victims of racial hate by speaking out against overt expressions of racially motivated violence and offering assistance to its victims. Those and many other recommendations and observations come to a church that stands for peace and justice but maybe does not know how to act out that process. So why then does an arm of the church committed to peace and justice get vilified when it stands with Black Lives Matter? Are they not just following what the church called them to do?

I was asked this weekend how an individual or a church might engage and be an ally when the congregation doesn't have a person of color in its midst. My answer is to be active, to be engaged in the discussion; To know the issues surrounding the absence of peace and justice; and to reach out and ask those in the struggle to share and lead and to not be afraid.

But the work of reconciliation is not just about my White Brethren. James Baldwin said in his essay, “The Negro in American Culture,” that “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won't destroy you. Part of the rage is this: it isn't only what is happening to you, but it's what's happening all around you all of the time, in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, the indifference and ignorance of most white people in this country.”

To say that Mr. Baldwin penned that in 1961 and that it stands just as true, if not more so today, is incredible, scary and frustrating. In the midst of all that is going on with the social justice struggle of Black people specifically, and people of color in general, is to be in rage, and disbelief, and frustration. Whether it is the death of those named above and others, or the treatment of our

poorest in Flint, Michigan, or the dehumanizing of brown immigrants, and to have my church, a church rooted in peace and justice to say nothing, is but to be in rage.

As a church we have long believed that “All War is Sin.” But where do we stand as a church in the war on terrorism (aka Arabs, Christian or Muslim), or the War on Crime and Drugs (aka, men of color who have had a generation removed from relevance through incarceration), or the war on poverty, which has seen more Americans go into poverty than out of it in the last two decades. Where is our voice? Where is our systemic call for justice? Being Black and Brethren is not a choice. Each is rooted in to my entire being and they cannot be segregated. And because of that, there is an internal conflict of which do I serve if I cannot serve both.

We have been reminded in the scripture that “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are the children of God.” May the Church of the Brethren remember its place as the children of God.

Amen.