

RACE, WESTMINSTER, AND “LORD OF THE CONSCIENCE”
Genesis 37:12-25a

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on June 21, 2020, the Third Sunday After Pentecost, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “Here I am.” So he said to him, “Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, “What are you seeking?” “I am seeking my brothers,” he said; “tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.” The man said, “They have gone away, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him” —that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat;...

When I was eleven years old, my family bought a lot in one of the first subdivisions of Germantown, Tennessee, a small town of 5000 residents about five miles east of Memphis where we were living. When we moved in right after my fourth-grade year in school, it was hot; the roads were unpaved; most homes in the neighborhood were under construction. I was shy and didn’t know anyone.

But there was a fifteen-year-old boy who lived across the street whose name was Brad. His parents and my parents had begun what would grow to be a significant friendship. Our families were attending the same church. I idolized Brad, but he worked at the local drug store, was near to getting his driver’s license, and wasn’t all that interested in a child my age. Still I would wait hours sitting on my front porch hoping Brad would come home so that we might play baseball in the front yard. And sometimes we did.

A few summers later, partially with the help of Brad and his family, I secured my first job as a member of the jump crew of the well-known Germantown Charity Horse Show. For two weeks, those of who got these prized positions cleaned horse stalls, painted bleachers and concession stands, secured hundreds of folding chairs from venues around the city of Memphis, set them in place for the several thousand people who would come each night to watch the magnificent horses walk and jump in all their majesty. Once the show began each evening, we would crouch in front of the stands to be ready to race into the ring and put the jumps back in place when a horse had knocked one over, much as a ball boy at a major league baseball game would retrieve a foul ball. I received my first paycheck: \$49.50 for the week’s work.

One of those afternoons, I was riding shotgun in the center front seat of a pickup truck, with Brad on my left driving, another teenager on my right, and an elderly black man scrunched into the back of the cab who was working with us for presumably the same \$1.30 an hour we made. We were on a mission to pick up a load of folding chairs from somewhere in Memphis, and well into the trip we passed on the left Melrose High School, a large black school well known for producing some of the best basketball players in the country, a school that just a few weeks earlier had beaten Overton High School in the city championship game in front of 12,000 fans, myself included. Overton was led by Johnny Neumann, who went on to lead the nation in scoring at Ole Miss; Melrose's two stars – guard Larry Finch and forward Ronnie Robinson – signed with Memphis State University and four years later – the year I graduated from high school – led them into the championship game of the NCAA tournament where, like everyone else that decade, they lost to UCLA.¹

Feeling cool around these older boys, but wanting to act cooler, I blurted out: “Brad, why are you driving us through this ‘N-----’ part of town?”

As soon as this sentence fell from my lips, I remembered the tall, elderly black man scrunched into the back of the cab a few feet behind me. I felt horrified at what I had done. No one said anything. Neither Brad. The boy on my right. The elderly black man. Nor myself. The only word spoken was the silent stirring of the Spirit within my fallen heart speaking to me that what I had done was wrong and that I had hurt another human being.

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A year earlier, Martin Luther King, Jr., had been killed six miles from Melrose High School at the Lorraine Motel. Among the memories I have taken away from that assassination is the black men – some elderly – marching in caps, jackets, open collar white dress shirts, holding above their heads signs simply saying, “I Am A Man.” The “Am” is underlined. I have a framed photo of these men carrying those signs above my desk and computer screen as I write this.

As I have told you many times, and shared with virtually every new member class, a major part of my own faith formation occurred, when I learned that the minister of the small, white framed, and white-membership-ed Presbyterian Church my family and I attended supported Dr. King and marched in his memorial march, contrary to nearly every white adult I knew among my parents' friends and in this same church. His quiet witness spoke to the silent sense I had as a child that these attitudes were not right and that there had to be a better way.

As I grew older, I came to believe that this inner sense that there had to be a better way was the Spirit speaking silently to me in the faith proclaimed by the church of my childhood and in the minister's quiet demonstration of that better way. That sense, coupled with the tremendous care my family and I received when my father died my freshman year in college, bonded me to the Presbyterian church and constituted my call to the ministry. It was a call I have rarely doubted and never regretted. It was a call rooted in race and pastoral care. But the slur spoken from my lips had revealed that my fallen, human, teenage desire to be accepted rang higher than any desire to do or say the right thing.

¹ For a terrific article concerning the impact this team had and didn't have on race relationships in Memphis, see Adam Goudsouzian, “The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sports,” in *Study the South* (March 31, 2016), available at <https://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/back-to-one-city/>.

What has always drawn me to pastoral care in the church is the opportunity to be with people in the most intimate times of their lives, as they share with me aspects of marriage, divorce, infertility, parenting, work, faith, doubt, sexuality, joy, suffering, addiction, accomplishments and achievements, moral dilemmas and struggles. As a shy, bookish person, to have people share their lives with me has always been an energizing honor. I have most felt that honor when I have been led to speak a word of grace or solace to soften blows people have inflicted upon themselves or society has inflicted upon them because of who they are, what they have done, or what has been done to them. It has led me more often than not to accept rather than to confront, to empathize rather than criticize, to refrain from adding one more voice to the external or internal voices people hear that they have done a terrible thing or are an unworthy person. I have thus often responded in pastoral care the way both the elderly black man – who probably had no choice – and the teenagers sitting with me in the truck – who did have a choice – reacted to my slur: choosing silence over confrontation.

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After that incident, as I continued my involvement in the Presbyterian Church, I watched ministers I admired – black and white – and listened to their stories about being involved in the civil rights movement, often at Montreat Conferences in North Carolina. Their examples vaulted me into the ministry. But I also knew early on that if I were to accept a call to a church in the Deep South, I would be called upon to deal publicly with the issue of race. My love of getting close to people pastorally meant more to me than what I sensed would be the need at times to confront people in the society in which I was born and reared and in which the slur I spoke was not uncommon vocabulary. So I never sought a call in the South and the few inquiries I received from search committees in that region I did not pursue.

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Next Sunday you are going to do something that no church has ever done for me: acknowledge an anniversary. The fortieth anniversary of my ordination. Which is tomorrow. In my sixty-fifth year.

I thought I might make it to the end of my ministry without having to confront publicly the issue of race. And I almost made it. Until Officer Derek Chauvin choked George Floyd for 8 minutes and 46 seconds until he died, and we all *saw* it because video technology is so clear and because we have paused our lives out of respect for COVID-19. The cold, nonchalant, almost antiseptic nature of Derek Chauvin's choking of George Floyd entered our lives with impact akin to the photograph of the battered and bloodied face of Emmet Till on front pages of newspapers delivered to our doorsteps in 1955 and images of Bull Connor's firehoses and German Shepherds turned on demonstrators came into our homes via the nightly news as we prepared to sit down and eat together as families in 1963.

As much as I admire people who serve in law enforcement, as much as I stand in awe of the life and death situations they face nearly every day with courage and discipline and from which I am therefore spared, as aware as I am of at least two families in our congregation who have lost family members serving in the line of duty as police officers, as deeply as the Fall of humankind in Genesis 3 and the deadly consequences that continue today lead me to believe that civil force is tragically necessary and even divinely ordained,² *there are no two sides to what Derek Chauvin did*. The coldness of his act – its chilling nonchalance – were as heartless as Joseph's brother's sitting down to eat together as soon as they had thrown Joseph into a pit. George Floyd died by choking at the hands of an officer of the state. The gentleman in the back of the

² Romans 13:1-7.

truck who heard my slur died *with* or *from* the thousand comments like mine he received over the course of his life, working at a job I received as a teenager that his own grandchildren probably could not have secured despite their connection through him. These deaths are part of our history and system. They go by several names: racism, institutional racism, systemic racism. No matter what the first name is the last name is the same every time. Racism. It is wrong. It is fallen. It is evil. As the original sin in our nation's settlement and founding, it surrounds our lives in the present as completely as the green lawns surround our homes watered well because we are at home to water them.

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I am sure that I will say next week what I have said many times: that serving Westminster and marrying Maggie Hayward are two of the three best blessings in my life. These two blessings happened within two years of one another sixteen and fourteen years ago, respectively. I'll spare you the details of what I love about the marriage, but among the aspects of Westminster I love is the way I get to talk with so many of you one-on-one about what you *do* and *experience* in the various vocations you have – nearly all in public service in some form – and how you arrive at the tremendously varied social and political views you hold. You are the smartest, kindest, most loving, most grateful, most energetic, and most interesting people I have ever been around. To witness the friendships that develop and even the marriages that survive across party lines is marvelous to behold. To see people who are socialists and libertarians in the same pew, pro-life and pro-choice in the same Fellowship Hall, gay and straight at the same table in the Old or New Testament classes I teach – all sharing both friendships and differences and working together to help build this church – is an absolute joy.

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Part of the reason such joy exists in our congregation is that we respect and live out our “mantra” –

“God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of [people] which are in anything *contrary to [God's] Word, or beside it* in matters of faith or worship.”³

These words come from one of the founding documents of Presbyterianism in America, “The Historic Principles of Church Order,” written in 1788 by the Synod of Philadelphia, the first gathering of Presbyterians in our nation. They embody the best of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment heritage. They are part of our denominational constitution. God alone *is* Lord of our consciences. Not the church. Not the minister. Not the political party. Not the nation. Not the race. Not the past. Nor the present. *God alone* is Lord of the conscience. *God alone*.

But the killing of George Floyd is clearly “*contrary to God's Word*” and thus not open to debates of conscience. Neither is the four hundred plus years' history of enslavement, secession, civil war, Jim Crow, lynching, segregated schools, and discrimination concerning where people can live or where and under what conditions they can work or vote. Nor are the subtle and not-so-subtle ways we think, speak, act, legislate, and organize our society along these lines. As much progress as we have made, as hard-won as it has been, the sins of our fathers continue to visit us, setting our teeth on edge.⁴

³ The *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, F-3.01.

⁴ Ezekiel 18:2.

As I enter this next and final phase of my own ministry, I stand ready to work with the Session and staff to lead Westminster in doing something we have not yet done during my tenure here: place on the Session Table a significant social and political issue to discern what God is leading us to do as a congregation. As I do so, with the deep affirmation I feel toward Westminster's embodiment of "God alone is Lord of the conscience," I ask each of us to start thinking about the following questions:

Given that "God alone is Lord of the conscience" leads us to encourage and support our members in our *individual* actions and service in all aspects of our lives:

- Can we honor our affirmation of "God alone is Lord of the conscience" and make a *common statement* on the issue of race in America in light of the killing of George Floyd and the protests that have arisen? Can we agree on a meaningful statement?
- Can our affirmation of "God alone is Lord of the conscience" lead us to a *common action* concerning our *internal life* of worship, Christian formation, congregational life, pastoral care, as well as our personnel, administrative, and financial policies, structures, and practices?
- Can it lead us to a *common action* in our *external life* in mission in and to the community and larger church that is different from or adds to what we are currently doing?
- And as we are truly alone with God in our own consciences, can what we do as a *church* lead us as *individuals* to *reflect* and *pray* on our history and relationship with people of races not our own, and can it lead us to *confession* where confession is needed, to *assurance* where assurance is given, to *renewal* where renewal is sought, to *conversion* where conversion is in order, and to *action* where action where action has not been evident?

Of course we can. And I am ready to lead us in that effort.

We have a terrific cadre of pastors at Westminster, each with different experiences and convictions, each with his or her own distinctive voice on this and other matters as well. We have a terrific program and administrative staff. And we have a great cadre of members and leaders of varied histories, experiences, and responsibilities. Above all, we worship a God who, following Creation rested for a day⁵ but did not retire from the scene, and but who will guide us in who we are to be and do, in what we are to become.

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On his way to his initial inauguration, Abraham Lincoln stopped in Trenton, New Jersey to speak to the State Senate. He acknowledged to the legislators – all of whom were male:

You give me this reception, as I understand, without distinction of party. I learn that this this body is composed of a majority of gentlemen who, in the exercise of their best judgment in the choice of a Chief Magistrate, did not think I was the man.

⁵ Genesis 2:2.

Lincoln then offered himself as a “humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty” to lead God’s “almost chosen people” toward “something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come.”⁶

I believe we as a congregation can offer ourselves as a “humble servant in the hands of the Almighty” as we seek to soften the consequences of the Fall that have taken root in the legacy and continuing aftermath of slavery in our country. I believe we can be part of this “almost chosen nation” we love becoming “a land of great promise to *all* the people of the world to *all* time to come.”

Amen.

⁶ Abraham Lincoln, “Address to the New Jersey State Senate,” Trenton, New Jersey, February 21, 1861. Available at <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/trenton1.htm>.