

I'm grateful to be invited to say a few words here tonight, both as a resident of Oakwood these last 12 years – the proud father of an Oakwood High School grad who just completed his BA at UD (Go Flyers!) – and also as the pastor of David's United Church of Christ, which is just a couple miles down the road in Kettering.

We are part of a progressive Christian faith tradition that takes seriously the teachings of Jesus and honors his roots in the life-affirming words of prophets like Micah, who stated that God only requires we "Do Justice, Love kindly, and Walk humbly together." In that spirit as a congregation we affirm that part of what it means for us to Be the Church is to "Reject Racism," "Embrace Diversity," to "Fight for the Powerless" and "Share earthly and spiritual resources."

But we recognize that too easily words can become meaningless slogans. I have walked with members of my congregation in Dayton's Pride parade and the march to remember the legacy and message of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and it is not uncommon to hear folk say how much they appreciate the ideas at the heart of his "I Have a Dream" speech. But living into those words requires more than warm, fuzzy feelings when we confront the reality that many of our neighbors who are People of Color are forced to endure.

Right now in our country, the poverty rate among Black Americans is more than twice that of white people. African-Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of white people, even though we know they do not commit more crimes. And they are more than twice as likely to die at the hands of a police officer, as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor did. Those are just facts about our world. Which means that as people who take seriously Jesus' commandment to "love our neighbors as ourselves," and who believe that ALL people are created in the image of God, we are called to affirm that Black lives matter.

In the Beatitudes of Matthew 5, Jesus tells us that the lives of the "poor in spirit" matter. He goes on to say that the lives of the meek matter, those who work for peace matter, those who hunger and thirst for justice matter. And Jesus said, the lives of those living with grief matter... and

right now we see people in the streets all across America mourning the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, even as we recall the names of others who have been killed for no reason... Tamir Rice, Michael Black, Travon Martin, and very close to home here in Dayton, John Crawford III, who was shotdown in a Beavercreek box store while carrying a toy rifle that he had picked up in an aisle at the store... and we wonder about those for whom there was no video, no public record... too many names, going back to Emmett Till and beyond.

[In my live presentation on Thursday evening, I opted to omit this paragraph due to time, as I wanted to respect the guidelines given to me by the event's promoters, but here it is if you're interested.] The witness of Jesus in the New Testament reveals how he constantly taught his followers that the lives of those suffering around him mattered. Jesus taught that the hungry mattered, when he fed them; the lives of the sick mattered when he gave them free health care; and when his disciples were trying to limit their love to just the tribal family, he told them a story that stated clearly that Samaritan lives matter... so given the injustice we see in the world today we are called to affirm that Black and Brown lives matter, the lives of our Native American neighbors, our Asian neighbors, our LGBTQ neighbors, any of our neighbors that have experienced racial profiling and discrimination for any reason, they all matter.

I stated a couple facts about Black lives, but there are so many more damning statistics about the impact of systemic racism in our culture, such that the evidence is clear that racism is not some freak accident that only occasionally raises its ugly head in our society. Rather, it is a *feature* of the way we have built and shaped the policies, systems and structures of our world.

These problems aren't limited to the acts of racist individuals but are the fruit of systems put in place to favor some of us, while diminishing and denying others. If we are going to live together in a society that truly supports the ideals of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness for all people, we are going to have to come together – white folk with people of color – and dismantle the mechanisms that support racial profiling and

discrimination in every area of our common life, from policing policy and training, to education, health care, economics and everything that will go into making our society more just, more equitable and fair.

Martin Luther King was quite right when he said that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. (That our lives are) "caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny..." Don't you love those words: an inescapable network of mutuality... a single garment of destiny... Martin went on to say that "Whatever affects one person directly, affects all us indirectly."

So, my point here is that racism is not merely a matter of simple human prejudice and the need for individuals to have a change of heart... which of course we all do. Surely, white folk like me need to do better at listening to the life stories of our Black and Brown neighbors, and I'm betting that each one of us here today desires to overcome the tendency toward prejudice, racial fear and bias in our own lives.

But while we're working at becoming better informed, and hopefully growing into better people, praying for God's grace to change our hearts and minds so that we can better deal with the white privilege and racism that permeates our culture, and many of our lives... more importantly still, we need to lock arms with one another and work to repair the systems of the world we share. Because it's true that as long as there is no justice, there can be no peace. When there is no justice, there is no peace. Thanks for listening.

Oakwood BLM Speech

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Rev. Dr. Brian Q. Newcomb