



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Racial Equity & Women's -bMWh fU Ministries

FACING RACISM:

A Vision of the Intercultural Community

Antiracism Study Guides



Week 6. Responding as a Community of Faith

Read Mark 7: 27-28

He (Jesus) said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Introduction

The church, as a community of faith, constantly strives to achieve the kind of unity and fellowship that allows it to worship God in Jesus Christ as one – one in adoration, trust and love. Jesus' triumph over oppression and death gives us the keys to this unity through grace, confession, and repentance.

The 1999 PCUSA policy statement, "Facing Racism," alludes to the difficulty of building a racially diverse community when it quotes Catherine Meeks, stating, "The inability of whites and blacks to come together as a unified worshipping community has far less to do with diversity in worship styles than has been accepted in the past. The problem lies in the unwillingness of blacks to be treated as children and whites to share their power" (p. 15).

In the Mark 7 text quoted above Jesus is asked by a Syrophoenician woman to save her possessed daughter. She is not Jewish and knows she may be repelled but she is desperate and believes fervently in Jesus' power. She begs Jesus to free her daughter from the demonic spirit but Jesus tells her his immediate responsibility is to save the Jews. She reminds him that God's grace is both ample and abundant for all who truly believe. Jesus relents and, because of her faith, her daughter is healed.

One of the reasons this passage grabs our attention is because of the incendiary language used. Name calling reminds us of the kind of language used by bigots and supremacists. Jesus understands his call to be one of ministry to the Jews but others believe in him and seek his grace. Jesus comes to appreciate this expanded call. Does God show partiality with God's grace? Certainly not.

God gives all of humanity the tools and spirit it needs to be one in Christ Jesus. No obstacles, no matter how ingrained or deep-seated, are strong enough to deny this unity indefinitely, and no force, no matter how pervasive or deceptive, is powerful enough to permanently eradicate this bond. Despite the apparent persistence and legacy of racism there is hope. If we have the courage to face the challenge we can choose to change current realities and achieve the kind of unity and fellowship that Christ demands, but it takes work and persistence. Grace is God's contribution but we

have responsibilities as well. These responsibilities include confession, which is perceiving and acknowledging the realities of our being, and repentance, which is changing our ways. Indeed, hope abounds!

Discussion Questions

1. Unity and diversity seem to be opposing concepts; what are some ways in which unity and diversity show themselves as complementary?
2. Are there ways in which those with power are slow to share it in your community?

Grace

“The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church” (*Book of Confessions* 2007). Presbyterians do not see themselves as God’s singular expression of truth and faithfulness. We are an ecumenical people, members of the universal church of Jesus Christ. Our search for justice has no limits or boundaries; it, like God’s grace, is free to all, infinite in scope and jurisdiction.

Issues of racism and racial justice are not limited to the United States. Racism is a worldwide phenomenon, as evidenced by South African apartheid. While Christians have undeniably supported racism in many contexts, there have also been many times when Christians advocated for justice and unity. The Presbyterian Church was active and effective in helping to bring about the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa through its participation in the ecumenical efforts led by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational), the World Council of Churches, and the National Council of Churches in Christ. These groups perceived the racist system of South African apartheid as not only a threat to the social and economic structures of South Africa and to its people but also to the unity of the Christian church, a church deeply divided in South Africa along racial lines. In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared apartheid to be a sin and a theological heresy.

In 1985, a group of mainly black South African theologians created the Kairos Document, which challenged the vicious policies of the Apartheid state, the complicity of many Christian communities, and the inadequate response of churches. The Kairos Document is a clear declaration that Christian unity—which is rooted in recognition of God’s free grace—demands rejection of all racist policies and practices. In the document’s opening chapter, “The Moment of Truth,” it summarizes the racial turbulence that rocked South Africa and the divided state of the church by stating, “Both oppressor and oppressed claim loyalty to the same Church. They are both baptized in the same baptism and participate together in the breaking of the same

bread, the same body and blood of Christ. There we sit in the same Church while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace. The Church is divided and its day of judgment has come" (*Kairos Document* 1985). The document garnered worldwide attention and challenged the church to re-examine its understanding of unity and oneness in Christ Jesus. "The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church."

Unity is a central theme of another document written in the context of apartheid South Africa, the Confession of Belhar, which is anticipated to be the newest addition to the Presbyterian Book of Confessions. Written in 1982, the Belhar Confession admonishes the church to reject segregation and struggle for justice, stating, "unity is...both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought" (Belhar 1986).

Discussion Questions

1. How does God's grace create unity and oneness in a world of such expansive diversity?
2. How do divisions in the church challenge the power of God's grace and love?

Confession

The term confession has two meanings in Christian theology. One is the acknowledgment of sin before God and one another. We tell the truth about all the ways that we break relationship, turn away from what is good, and fall short of the glory of God. The oft-quoted expression, "confession is good for the soul" refers to the fact that for humans there is a therapeutic quality to recognizing and admitting failings and shortcomings. You cannot overcome what you fail to recognize as damaging and hurtful. Seeing the problem is the first step in solving the problem.

The second meaning of confession is a communal statement of belief. *The Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. declares the purpose of confessions as ways for the church to state its faith and bear witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ. It continues by saying, "In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions" (*Book of Order*, F2.01)

These two meanings are related. Confessions in the second sense, statements of belief, help us recognize our complicity and unfaithfulness. They help us know where we have turned away and need to confess in the first sense, to acknowledge our sin. Both forms of confession remind us of the power of God's grace. It is only because we know the grace of God that we can be honest about our fallenness. We confess in trust, hope, and faith. And it is only because we know the grace of God that we have a community of belief that can give an account of our hope in a formal Confession.

"Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community," makes continual reference to the Confession of 1967. This remarkable statement of faith serves as the foundation for the church's ministry of reconciliation. Speaking in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, the church in its Confession of 1967 asserts, "In (God's) reconciling love, (God) overcomes the barriers between brothers (and sisters) and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all (people) to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it" (*Book of Confessions*, 9.44).

When the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted through our presbyteries to add the Confession of Belhar to our Book of Confessions, this was an act of confession in both senses of the word. Relying on the grace of God, we both acknowledge our complicity in racism and affirm our communal belief that abolishing racism is one of the responsibilities of the church and of all Christians. The true unity of the church depends on it. In announcing the approval of Belhar by the presbyteries, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) said, "Done in a spirit of shalom and with a desire for wholeness, the church has said we acknowledge this confession to be relevant for such a time as this in the life of this denomination, and that we diligently desire to live into it as part of the body of Christ.

"We recognize our need to confess the ways this denomination has contributed to racism historically and even still today, and mourn all the ways we have fallen short. We believe this Confession, appropriated for this time and place, can bring about reconciliation and justice, and allow us to more fully follow Jesus in ministry and mission" ("Confession of Belhar approved by presbyteries," April 23, 2015). May it be so.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is confession therapeutic?
2. Is reconciliation possible without confession?
3. How does our church confess what we believe?

4. How does our church confess regarding the sinfulness of racism?
5. What are some other creeds/confessions included in the Book of Confessions and what are some of the matters of faith they address?

Repentance

Confession is recognition; repentance is change. Repentance means turning and walking in the other direction. It's one thing to understand something intellectually but something else altogether to live that new reality. Repentance is the gift and task of living a new reality.

Racism is sin. One of the simplest, most straightforward ways of defining sin is to see it as anything that creates estrangement or separation from God. Racism's divisiveness is abhorrent to our God of love. The truth is racism often cloaks itself in myths and laws that make it difficult to detect by those who benefit from its existence. That's why it is important for God's church to be sensitive to the cries of victims and the oppressed and, when appropriate, to repent. When asked why he associated with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5: 31). Repentance, as an act of accepting and living a new reality, is very much an on-going responsibility of the church today. The unity we seek as a community rooted and grounded in Christ Jesus depends on our ability to repent.

Discussion Questions

1. What does repentance look like? Can you think of an example in our community?
2. What is one small step our church can take to repent of racism and live into the New Creation?
3. Does your church offer antiracism training? Would it benefit from the training?

References

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