"The Conversation on Race,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on January 18, 2015

This is a good day here, when we gather early for breakfast with our neighbors from Calvary Baptist Church and then here for worship; this day we remember and celebrate the life of Martin Luther King Jr. But I have to tell you that this week, anticipating this day, I've been discouraged, that we haven't made more progress in the almost fifty years since Rev. Dr. King was killed. That we live in a society that is still too segregated; a society where your skin color does make a difference in how you are treated and what opportunities are available to you.

That's why I picked this morning's reading, reflecting Dr. King's own discouragement back in 1967, when he said,

"You see the trouble now is that the movement is making demands that say in substance that we must have genuine equality. And I am convinced that a lot of the people that supported us when we were in those glowing epic-making days in Alabama and in Mississippi, when we were in Birmingham and Selma, many of the people who supported us, supported us because they were against the extremist behavior toward Negroes, but they never intended for us to live next door to them. They never intended to lift the Negro out of poverty. They never intended to make adequate, quality, integrated education a reality in all of its dimensions. And so we must see the white backlash for what it is. It is merely a new name for an old phenomenon. It is a new name for something that has been happening on the shores of America for more than 300 years. There has never been a single, solid, determined commitment on the part of white America where genuine equality is concerned for the black people of this nation."

Did you read what Bill wrote in the bulletin for today? We didn't coordinate our messages, but he took a similar tone, quoting Dr. King saying the dream had, in many ways, "turned into a nightmare," that there were going to be difficult days ahead.

Of course there has been progress in civil rights. But just because our laws are better and we elected a black man as president does not mean that we now live in a "colorblind" society. And anyone who tells you that, or that we are now "post-racial" is either naive or trying to subvert the change that is still sorely needed.

Sometimes I find the news of violence and hatred and polarization so discouraging. And that's how I've been feeling this week, worn down by all the bad news. Until Friday, when I attended the Shabbat service up the street at Temple Emmanu-El. They've been having a joint service with

Calvary Baptist Church as long as we've been having our breakfast with them. There's a great choir for that service, with members of the Temple and Calvary singing, and readings from Dr. King, and the spirit in that place was palpable. I'd love for you to experience it—you should come next year. That service, and the faith and enthusiasm of those gathered there, did for me what good worship is supposed to do—it renewed my hope and my faith, it gave me strength to carry on. One of the readings from the prayer book was this one:

Standing on the parted shores of history
we still believe what we were taught
before ever we stood at Sinai's foot:
that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt
that there is a better place, a promised land;
that the winding way to that promise
passes through the wilderness.
That there is no way to get from here to there
except by joining hands, marching
together.

One of the ways we can join hands and march together is by engaging with that subject many of us would rather avoid: the subject of race.

Race is a human construction, used to support and maintain the dominance of one group over another. We are born with differing skin pigmentation, different hair and eye color too. But identifiers like white and black and brown were invented to describe and categorize human beings—our genetic makeup and our varied hues are way more complicated than that.

Racism is what happens when a culture decides that one group is better than another, based on these perceived physical characteristics. There's a book called *How the Irish Became White*, that tells the story of Irish immigrants to America in the 18th century. Because they were neither Anglo-Saxon nor Protestant, these immigrants weren't seen as white either. The author, professor Noel Ignative, describes how, in time, the Irish did manage to become white, and to move from oppressed to oppressor.

I suspect that it's fear that keeps us from more deeply engaging issues of race. If you are White, you may worry about saying something that shows your ignorance or insensitivity. You may fear that dialogue about race is designed to make you feel guilty or ask you to give up something you cherish. If you are a person of color, you may be tired of having to help white folks to get it. You may be wary of the motives of people seeking dialogue—are they interested in changing things, or just looking for you to help them feel better? No matter what your racial identity, you may wonder, "Is this going to be safe, affirming, helpful—or not?"

This year, when we've had a spate of killings of young black men by White police officers, when a new movement, "Black Lives Matter" is both inspiring people to take a harder look at racism and causing a backlash among people who see it as anti-police or anti-authority, isn't it clear that we need to be addressing this systemic problem called racism?

When we incarcerate black men at a much higher rate than White men, when black parents have to teach their children how to act so they aren't seen by authorities as dangerous, will anyone tell me that, even with all the progress that's been made, we don't still live in a society that is racist? A society that privileges some at the expense of others?

I'm all for people taking personal responsibility for their lives. God knows we need more of that. I'm certainly not advocating for a culture of victimhood, or for "special rights." Only that we do what we can to make ours a more just world. And one thing we can do is to start a conversation about race here in this community. This is not about guilt for anyone; it's about understanding and liberation for all.

We aren't born with racist thoughts; they are something we're taught, often in subtle ways. The young among us seem to have this inherent sense of fairness and justice, don't they? So why do so many adults seem resigned to the way things are? I think it's because we're afraid to rock the boat, afraid of what change might cost us. We've decided, to one degree or another, to go along with the system. We've adjusted to it—but Martin Luther King said there are some things to which we should never be adjusted:

"I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence…

"I'm convinced that there is need for a new organization in our world. The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment--men and women who will be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos. Who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"

I'm grateful for the story Julie shared in her sermon last Sunday, about the transformation she found, doing the work of welcoming refugees. The reading she chose, those words on the Statue of Liberty, remind us of the promise of our country: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." This is what we aspire to. So tell me, when did we get so fearful? When did we start thinking so small? Isn't it time to start telling the truth about race in our country, about the difference between rhetoric and reality, so we can start moving forward again?

I'm someone who belongs to all the major oppressor groups: white, male, heterosexual; middle-aged and able-bodied, for now. I know that life is easier for me because of this privilege. But even privilege has a cost.

One thing I've learned from doing this work is that privilege brings its own kind of isolation and fear. The way out is through open and honest engagement with those who are different. Doing this, you start to understand that your own perspective and context are not universal. If I want to be connected to others, and not isolated in my own little enclave, than I need to hear what it's like from your perspective. I especially need to listen to you speak from the places where you are marginalized, even and especially when it makes me uncomfortable.

I can testify that there is liberation, even for a white guy like me, in ritual and in truth-telling. There's power in identifying those things that would divide us, that keep us from the fullness of human connection. There's liberation in claiming our differences, rather than pretending we're all the same. There is healing and transformation in sharing our stories. Which we will start next Sunday, at the end of coffee hour. We'll offer a light lunch and I hope you'll want to stay and be part of the beginning of a conversation on race.

On Friday night, at the reception following the Shabbat service, a member of the Temple and I stood talking, looking across that gathering of people from diverse backgrounds and traditions. It was Martin's dream: "all of God's children, black people and white people, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics," gathered there together. And that man asked me, "Why isn't it like this everywhere?"

You know we aren't there yet. But a different world is possible. The way to the promised land passes through the wilderness. And there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together.

Amen.