

**RACE**  
Randall Tremba  
January 15, 2017  
Second Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Isaiah 49:1-7**

The Holy One says: "It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the your own tribe. I will give you as a light to all tribes and nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

**John 1:29-42**

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! When Jesus saw two of John's companions coming toward him, he said, "What are you looking for?" They said, "Rabbi, where do you abide?" And Jesus said: "Come and see."

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Last week Paula and I watched *Race*, the story of Jesse Owens' race to win four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin presided over by the recently elected Chancellor of Germany. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels wanted those Games to glorify Adolf Hitler and the Aryan race.

So the presence of two Jewish American sprinters and the success of the African American Owens got under Hitler's skin. According to some reports, Hitler publicly congratulated all gold medal winners but one.

We are not born racists, or anti-Semites, or misogynists, or homophobes. We learn those things. I learned white superiority and prejudice from my parents who learned it from their parents who learned it from their parents.

I grew up on the south side of Youngstown, Ohio. I had black schoolmates but I was not allowed to invite them to my house. The only explanation I heard was from my father who said: *racism is meant to live apart and*, he added for good measure, *inter-racial marriage is forbidden by the Bible*, by which he meant, *forbidden by God*. I also learned from my father that Martin Luther King was a communist and a danger to the American way of life.

My mother and father were kind people and would never say an unkind word to a person of color. And by that standard they did not regard themselves as racists.

However, my mother once told me she felt sorry for Negroes because she knew how much they wanted to be white. Which was a way of saying: *even though we are not much better off economically than black families, we have whiteness over them*.

Society told me the same thing in a thousand other ways. Society indoctrinated my black classmates too.

For the past 50 years I've been working to learn and practice a different way of seeing and being in this world. It's not easy. First impressions are lasting impressions. And it's especially not easy seeing and admitting the untold privileges of simply being white.

Which is why documentaries such as the PBS series: *Race: The Power of An Illusion* and books such as *Waking Up White* by Debbie Irving are so important. Irving's book will be the focus of our upcoming conversations Sunday mornings beginning in February. I highly recommend the book and urge you to participate in the seminar.

It's quite normal to love our tribe, race and nation. But if our love ends there it is, as the prophet Isaiah put: *too small a thing*.

Fifty years ago I was a sophomore at Wheaton College, a premier evangelical college located in a tree-shaded, Republican suburb 25 miles west of Chicago and a million miles from diversity. Wheaton was virtually all white which at first seemed normal to me. White kids go to elite colleges; black kids not so much.

And then, thanks to Martin Luther King, I had an epiphany.

And so in 1967 I joined a couple dozen other budding rebels carrying signs and singing "We Shall Overcome." It made me very uncomfortable, in part, because it was a declaration that I was no longer my parents' son. I was now marching to the beat of a different drum. It was a kind of baptism.

*Where do you abide*, they asked Jesus. And he said, *Come and see*.

As it turns out, even with eyes wide open there's a lot we don't see or refuse to see. And that's no accident. I was taught what to see and what to overlook. And I was taught to be nice.

When I began serving this church 40 years ago, it was a part-time position since there weren't many members at the time. And so for my first 20 years, I also served a small country church part-time.

I went about my work at both churches—preaching there at 9:00 and here at 11:00. Things were going nicely. And then one day, out of the blue a member of that country church rebuked me for preaching soft sermons. *You need to start stepping on some toes around here*, he said.

Well, that's not me, I thought. I'm not that kind of preacher. I'm nice to everybody. But niceness, I soon realized, can be a cover-up for dishonesty.

As a matter of fact, for a year or so I had been suppressing anger and disbelief over that church's reputation built on the repeated remarks of a certain prominent member. That member had since died. But the church's reputation lived on.

I had heard from various people that that certain member had said often, at the county fair and elsewhere, that no blacks (he used a different word) would ever be allowed in his church.

The next Sunday in my sermon, I decried that reputation—without naming names—and rebuked any and all who held such things in their heart. *If this is a church worthy of the name*, I said, *it belongs to Jesus and all are welcome. No exceptions*.

Much to my surprise, most of those present gave me a pat on the back. Most. Not all.

The next Sunday I noticed a small group of people in the pews whom I had not seen in that church before. When I finished my sermon, they stood up as a group and flatly denounced me for having disparaged their family as racists.

And to think, I had not mentioned any names the Sunday before. I guess I had stepped on some toes.

Now comes the amazing part. The next Sunday as I was approaching the church I noticed a black man walking alongside the road—not that unusual but still I couldn't help notice. When I started the service that morning I noticed that black man sitting in the back row.

Now, that church seldom had visitors. But during announcements I asked if there were any visitors—*as though none of us knew*. The black man stood up, told us his name and

said that he had been walking to his own church about a half-mile from this one when he realized he wouldn't make it on time. So he decided to come into this one.

And I thought to myself: *who will ever believe I did NOT arrange that.*

After the service the congregation warmly welcomed the visitor and shook his hand. A few even invited him to come back *anytime*.

Kindness is a first step but it's not the last. Come and see, says Jesus, for there's a lot to see that we haven't seen, including the systems and structures that afford so many of us privileges while denying equal opportunity for untold others.

Come and see, says Jesus. Come! Live in the light. And let that light show us the truth about ourselves, including our silent complicity in systems that suffocate, hurt and maim others.

Come and see. Come! Live in the light. And let that light leads us from guilt and remorse to repentance, responsibility, redemption and freedom.

Come and see, says Jesus. Come! Live in the light.

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**Hymn 749**

"Come! Live in the Light!"