

Isaiah 49:1-7

I Corinthians 1:1-17

## INTRODUCTION

I have in mind today a number of separate events drawing our thoughts to what God may be laying on our hearts to think about and to do.

Like the confluence of mighty rivers – the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers join to form the Ohio River in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (site of Three Rivers Stadium where the Pittsburgh Pirates play – part of the legacy of Major League Baseball overcoming it's racial segregation, beginning with the career of Jackie Robinson.)

There are more than two rivers converging on us as we sit here today. There are many -- represented by those separate events. Let me offer a brief review:

### I. MIGHTY RAGING EVENTS

~ Several years ago Police Officer Master Sgt. Debra Clayton was killed in the line of duty in Orlando, Florida. She was laid to rest in a respectful and solemn ceremony at First Baptist Church in Orlando, attended by more than 5,000 people. She was a 17 year veteran of the Orlando police force. She was a black woman.

~ A box office success a few years ago was a movie that told a true story. The movie was called "Hidden Figures" and it is the story of women employed behind the scenes by NASA, at the dawn of the space program in the early 1960s. The job of these women was to verify by human calculation that the NASA computers were giving correct information, thus helping to ensure the success and safety of the first manned space flights, in particular that of John Glenn. These women were black. Among other discriminatory practices they endured, they were forced to walk to the nearest rest room that was not "whites only" in the NASA complex. It was not in their building - in fact it was more than a mile away.

~ Tomorrow we take a day off from school and work to honor the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He worked tirelessly and passionately for racial equality and mutual respect in our country. Not only was he arrested several times, mistreated, and injured, but he also gave his life in Memphis, TN in 1968, calling non-violently for an end to racial discrimination. His was not a political campaign; it was a life-changing calling.

~ As reported by Time magazine recently, 93% of police officers believe that their lives are in danger whenever they put on the uniform.

~ I am inviting us to give consideration to The Belhar Confession, the most recent

confessional standard added to our Presbyterian Book of Confessions. Though it was approved by our denomination in 2016, it was adopted in 1986 by the integrated Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa. The Belhar Confession was written as a protest against the heretical theological stance of the white Dutch Reformed Church. Those who wrote it and believed the faith it described were a significant part of the dismantling of racial apartheid in South Africa in the 1990s. The Confession stands for justice, unity, and reconciliation.

The question for us today seems to be, “Will all these rivers somehow flow into one unified, mutually beneficial society, or will they remain separate, raging waters sweeping along in opposition to one another and perpetuating irreconcilable division?”

What control or influence do we as individuals or as a small group of Christians have over such circumstances and events? The rivers seem mighty and to have a mind of their own. What can we do?

## II. A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND OF CRITICISM

As we consider these questions, let us note the way the Apostle Paul handles the problem of division and irreconciliation in the Corinth, Greece. He begins with a positive and encouraging affirmation of the Christians who were part of the church there. He commends them for their faith and notes that they have considerable spiritual gifts. He tells them he is thankful for them, and for the ways God has enriched their lives.

He acknowledges that they speak well; that they are knowledgeable – not just about matters of faith, but, as he says, they have “knowledge of every kind.” They are faithful and well-rounded, well-read, well-informed people. Paul appreciates them, values them, and tells them so!

Then, and only then, does he level his criticism at them. He points out their strengths before he points out their weaknesses and failings.

And those failings are considerable. They are divided. They quarrel among themselves. They pledge allegiance to different human beings –

"I belong to Paul"

"I belong to Peter"

"I belong to Apollos"

and in the height of arrogance some even use the name of Christ to appear better than all the others.

(Sounds like a kind of first century "identity politics" if we may describe it so.)

And Paul calls them out for these divisions. He is scathing in his criticism. He asks a

simple, yet deeply profound question, “Is Christ divided?” Their behavior, attitudes, and actions make it look like that is the case. And for Paul, that is an unjust and unfounded slap at the Master.

So the point is two-fold.

1 – Exclusive loyalty to competing human beings or groups and the divisions it causes are disrespectful to human beings and a sin against God.

And here I quote the Belhar Confession which promotes unity to the point of saying that "unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity, and hatred between people and groups is sin..."

2 – There are both good things and bad things to be said about all human institutions, organizations, attitudes, actions, and individuals. To focus only on the good is to turn a blind eye to what is wrong. To focus only on the bad is to devalue individuals and institutions.

Any approach to resolution of problems, injustices, and sins must focus first on the positive, sincerely and with integrity – (my Mother used to instruct us kids that "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all!") Follow Paul's example and articulate the good first and with conviction.

Then, and only then, address the injustices and sins of human existence.

It is important not only to advocate for what is right against what is wrong – it is equally important how one advocates for what is right. I must be aware that my advocacy is potentially tainted by sin. I must also be aware that anyone who is against me when I advocate is also himself or herself, a mixture of good and bad.

Know and articulate the good, first.

Then, with humility, articulate criticism about what is bad or wrong.

### III. A PARTICULAR CASE

I am compelled to refer to a particular circumstance that includes in some measure all these things.

I am thinking of the conflicts behind two highly politicized movements.

Many people show their support for law enforcement in our community and nation by posting a yard signs that read, “Back the Blue.” Some burn a blue bulb in their porch light for the same reason - or fly the American flag with black star field and stripes with one lone blue stripe in the center. Our law enforcement officers are under siege. They feel threatened on duty because they wear the uniform. They do not deserve to live in constant fear. Their job is to maintain public safety, to go in where others must flee, to engage and

diffuse tense situations. They need to do that knowing they have the respect of the general public. They deserve our thanks.

And there are many people who support the movement called “Black Lives Matter.” They advocate for justice for minorities who, because of their race, are at the mercy of those in authority. They are incensed at mistreatment by law enforcement because of the color of their skin. Supporters of the black lives matter movement call out the racial prejudice and discrimination that still exists in our society – often subtle, not overt, and frequently hard to prove in our criminal justice system. It is a movement, the title of which, is intended to identify injustice against black people. So to say, “All lives matter” though true, dilutes the impact, and redirects attention from the people "Black Lives Matter" hope to assist.

Besides the division these two movements create, neither one has much good to say about the other. The impression is that "Back the Blue" sees no good in "Black Lives Matter." And "Black Lives Matter" sees no good in law enforcement. Both groups are near-sighted and wrong if that is, in fact, their view. There is good and bad in the "Back the Blue" movement. There is good and bad in the "Black Lives Matter" movement.

I do not put political signs in my yard. When I was an active pastor I was keenly sensitive that I had to work hard to be seen as a pastor to all, regardless of their political views or my own. I tried to give the broad sense of what God's word is saying to people, and then let individuals, guided by God's Spirit, make their own decisions about who and what to support.

However, if I were one to use yard signs, in this case, I would have a yard sign that says “Back the Blue” in support of the individuals and organizations that make up law enforcement in our community. AND I would also have a sign, of equal size and placed with equal conviction, that says “Black Lives Matter.” And I would hope that the good each of those movements stands for would prevail in helping to bring reconciliation and unity to our community and nation.

## CONCLUSION

What can we do? The answers that lead to positive and beneficial outcomes are as many and varied as there are individuals who vow to do something to help achieve racial reconciliation.

Simply put, we can either be part of the solution – even if only in a small and limited way.

Or we can be part of the problem.

Irish statesman Edmund Burke is credited with a quote repeated by many,

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.”

May God give us faith, knowledge, and courage to be part of the solution.

IN NAME OF FATHER, SON, HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.