Citizens of God's Kingdom, July 28, 2013
"Choose this day whom you will serve"
Joshua 24:1-8a, 13-15; Luke 10:25-30
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1. During the month of July, we have been exploring as a congregation what it means to be "Citizens of God's Kingdom." This series grows from the theme of the Mennonite Church convention in Phoenix, Arizona. In preparation for that event, the MYF we spent a good deal of time over the past year exploring our relationships with people who are other than ourselves. Two weeks ago, as part of understanding what it means to be a citizen of God's kingdom, Conrad Showalter encouraged us to remember our stories, both in remembering who we *are*, but also in remembering who we *were*, where we come from. This kind of storytelling, too, was a part of our preparation for Phoenix.
2. When I think of my own relationship with people who are different from me, at least ethnically, two stories that I remember from my early childhood come to mind:
   - When I was a student at Washington Township Elementary School, a book that I checked out over and over again was *The Sneetches*. I liked the book because of the way it rhymed and made music to my ears as I read it. Of course, a lot of Dr. Seuss's books have a powerful point without being preachy, and it wasn't until much later that I realized that my sense of the silliness of making judgments based on the color of one's skin was being shaped by this book about those with stars and those with no "stars upon thars." That's why I asked Angela to read it.
   - About the same time, a black man was pursuing the most famous of all baseball records. I was already hooked on reading the sports section, and every day I would come home to see if Hank Aaron had hit another home run, and gotten one homer closer to Babe Ruth's career record of 714. Some people admired the strength under pressure that he showed. The easy part was hitting home runs. The hard part was receiving more than 80,000 letters during the year, many of them filled with death threats and racist comments. It was after reading his biography much later that I was able to put words to what I was experiencing as a seven-year-old. Here's what I wrote for a seminary journaling class several years ago:
   - Some people had Jackie Robinson.
     I have Hank Aaron.

     Five years after King was shot, Aaron chased the Babe. Seven years old, I read the paper daily. Six-ninety, six-ninety-one, ending the year at seven-thirteen. I was caught in excitement.

     Like many others, my friend wasn't. On his garage wall, in yellow chalk, he wrote, "Boo Hank Aaron," angry frowns filling in the "o"s. I couldn't figure it out. What did being black have to do with hitting a baseball?

     There would be the Sneetches and Atticus Finch, but Hank taught me about racism first. And that grace overcomes evil.

- And then when I was in high school English class, I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. One of the things that I most value about my experience at Iowa Mennonite was the way that I was confronted with ethical choices, seemingly everywhere I turned. I was at least somewhat aware of issues regarding race, and I so admired the courage with which Atticus Finch defended Tom Robinson.

    - ***Our stories shape us. It is important to remember who we are and who we were.***

3. Last Sunday, Pastor Cindy broadened this "formational remembering" into a claiming of our Anabaptist heritage. She reminded us that each of our confessions of faith, from Schleitheim in 1527 to the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* of 1995 has a particular point of emphasis—that everyone must choose faith for him or herself. We must choose each day to allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives. In the children's time, Aaron Lehman reminded us of the martyrs, of people that "God touched, and it changed the way they lived—and sometimes how they died."

4. Similarly, in our scripture today, Joshua helps the people remember who they are and who they were.

    - This is a story that is very reminiscent of the end of Deuteronomy, where Moses recounts history and gives the children of Israel a blessing. In Deuteronomy 30:19, Moses says, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. ***Choose life."***

    - And in the very next chapter, he commissions Joshua, who will lead the people into the Promised Land.

    - In Joshua 24, Joshua too is entering the final stages of his life. Joshua has lived a rags-to-riches life. He was born a slave in Egypt and followed Moses across the Red Sea. He became a military commander, and when the children of faced a new enemy soon after they escaped from Egypt, Moses turned to Joshua to lead their very first battle. A month later, when Moses climbed Mount Sinai to meet with God, Joshua was with him. It was Joshua who reported to Moses the sound of reveling as the people worshiped the golden calf. Joshua was Moses' #2 man, an advisor who served at almost every major crisis. Moses even changed his name, from Hoshea, which means "help" or "salvation," to Joshua, which means "The LORD saves." We know the name "Joshua" best in its Greek form—"Jesus."

    - So as Joshua enters the final stages of his life, he does what many do – he recounts the story of his people. He "tells to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done." Joshua takes on the persona of God as he speaks, beginning a step before the Israelites' father Abraham:

        - "I took your father Abraham from beyond the River …

        - "I gave him Isaac …

        - "And to Isaac, I gave Jacob and Esau …

    - "I gave Esau land to possess, but Jacob and his children went to Egypt …" You will remember from the service that the junior youth led a few months, how God put Joseph in a position to serve.
    - And then God says, "I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt …"
    - "I brought you out of Egypt, and I led you in the wilderness …"
    - "And I brought you to the land of the Amorites …" And in the gap that Cynthia didn't read, God recounts how the Israelites' enemies were handed over to them.
  - And then, like Moses, Joshua demands a choice. "Choose this day whom you will serve," says Joshua.
5. But Joshua goes further than Moses. Moses just says "choose." Joshua names how he himself will respond to the choice he's just described. "Choose this day whom you will serve," he says. "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."
6. We began our worship series with Ryan and others from Phoenix talking about our identity as beloved children of God. But this morning, I am going to suggest that to truly be "citizens of God's kingdom," it is not enough simply to claim our identity as God's children. Or even to proclaim God as Lord of our lives. To truly be "citizens of God's kingdom," we must take the additional step that Joshua did, and move from choosing God to serving God. Next week in our service, we will celebrate the baptisms of Erik McCall, Jack Gingerich, Ethan Miller, and Colin Samuel. They are making a conscious choice, a choice that many of us have already made and that others of us will make in the future. It's the choice we make every day to continue "living into our baptisms."
7. How do we do that?
  - Jesus offered the clearest answer to the question of how to *serve* as a "citizen of God's kingdom" when he was asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's the question as it's posed in Luke, and the way that Cynthia read it. In Matthew and Mark, the question is phrased this way: "What is the greatest commandment?"
  - And Jesus responds: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind." In other words, with all of your being. But that's not enough, Jesus says. "And love your neighbor as yourself." On these commandments, Matthew records, hang all the law and the prophets.
  - And then Jesus tells the story of a man walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. It's a familiar story, one that we know so very well. I didn't ask Cynthia to read all of it, because we're not going to spend much time with it. There are many points to the Good Samaritan story, and many sermons to be preached about. But I'm not sure a person can preach any of these sermons without the crucial understanding of the relationship between the Jew and the Samaritans.
    - ***Race is at the root of the story.***

8. The theme for convention was chosen because of the issues related to immigration that our country is dealing with. Phoenix is in Arizona. Arizona is one of more than 30 other states, including Indiana, that has enacted or tried to enact tough laws related to immigration. Immigration is a complex issue, and it is dividing our country, and even our churches.
9. Just over a week ago, a number of us had the opportunity to take part in a chapel service at AMBS, where Nate Gingerich and Ryan Miller and several others in the !Explore program led in worship. One of the students was Maddie Gerig, and I was struck by a statement she shared from an English class paper at Bethany. "The root cause of conflict over immigration is racism," she said, "a fear of what is different, unknown."
    - ***The root cause of conflict over immigration is racism.***
10. We've had a very public race-related incident in our midst the past few weeks, with the very public arrest, trial, and acquittal of George Zimmerman for the death of young African-American Treyvon Martin. The details of the trial itself are complex, and I'm not going to go there. But the response to the acquittal, by both whites and people of color has been significant.
    - And I confess—a week and a half ago, I sat at McDonald's on vacation, working on a class project as the TV droned on in the background. And I got tired of the noise. For three hours, the commentators and their guest experts rambled and rambled.
        - Discussing the court system.
        - And whether the jury had gotten it right or wrong.
        - And on what basis.
        - And what this means.
        - And I got bored. I wanted to move on.
11. But as I listened, I realized as a white person that President Obama had gotten it right when he finally spoke.
    - "When Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son," President Obama said. "Another way of saying that is 'Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago.' And when you think about why, in the African American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here. I think it's important to recognize that the African American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away.

      "There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That includes me. There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often."

12. Brothers and sisters, we can talk all we want about whether or not the jury was right in returning its verdict. But that's not the point. The point, which I'll again borrow from President Obama, is that:
    - "These sets of experience inform how the African American community interprets what happened one night in Florida. And it's inescapable for [African-Americans] to bring those experiences to bear.… And that ends up having an impact in terms of how people interpret the case."
13. President Obama was speaking as a black person. Persons with brown skin or other people of color could have made similar statements. Most of here this morning are white, and we may agree or disagree with the verdict. But I think it's naïve of us to suggest that our racial background doesn't *color* the way we respond to situations like this trial. As African-American Anabaptist Drew Hart said, "Trayvon represents all those black bodies that have been violated over the past 400 years in America. … for the unbelievable crime of being black in America." And to others in our congregations and communities, I have to assume that they can think of those who have suffered from being brown-skinned, or red-skinned, or any other color that has left them out of the dominant culture.
14. ***Brothers and sisters, if we are truly going to live as "citizens of God's kingdom," we must confront our own racism and do something about it.*** I'm not aware of anyone here who would describe themselves as racist. I certainly don't describe myself that way. As a white person, I can rejoice in how far we've come.
    - I can rejoice that, according to an article written in response to the Zimmerman trial, the last black lynching in the United States happened back in 1981, more than 30 years ago.
    - I can rejoice when I watch the feel-good baseball movie *42*, and I can think that the issues Jackie Robinson faced 66 years ago are no longer present in our society. That if Hank Aaron were chasing Babe Ruth today, he wouldn't get bags and bags of hate letters.
    - I can rejoice that there *has* been some real-life Atticus Finches in the world, people in the dominant culture who have used their positions of influence to make a difference. That Harper Lee's novel has become one of the most-read, most-assigned, and most influential books in high school English classes.
15. But I confess that I *have* sometimes been guilty of racist behavior. If I'm honest, I must confess that there have been times when I have said or done something that was simply wrong, and I knew it.
16. I'd like to think that I would no longer *knowingly* engage in racist behavior. But I can't say that I don't do it unknowingly, or that I don't benefit from what is known as white privilege. I suspect that that is where most of us find ourselves.
17. What we must do as people of any color is move beyond what is racist behavior or behavior born out of ignorance to behavior that is antiracist—behavior that confronts white privilege and makes a difference in our world. How can we do that? I'll suggest several modest starts:

- Conrad and Cindy introduced us to one behavior that can help us —we can tell our stories. And we can add to that telling by actually *confronting* our stories, by asking ourselves what it means when we see things in our past that puzzle us. For example:

  - ***We must tell, and confront, our stories.***
    I have heard relatives complain about "those people" who have been in the United States for many years and have not yet learned English. They ask, "Why do we have to have signs in both English and Spanish?" "Why should I have to 'press one for English'?" Shouldn't people be required to learn English if they live in this country?" And if I'm honest, I've perhaps asked questions like that myself.

    But I began to think about those questions differently when I started to consider my own story in a new way. By one strand of my geneology, my siblings and I are the ninth generation of our family born in the U.S. What does it mean that my oldest brother entered kindergarten as an English as a Second Language student. For him, the question if he'd gotten separated from my parents while shopping, wouldn't be "¿Habla Espanol?", but "Canst du Deitsch schwetse?" ("Can you speak Pennsylvania Dutch?") If my family, which came to North America seeking a better life, took more than two centuries to assimilate in language, how can I hold this against someone today?

    We must tell, and confront, our stories.

  - No. 2: ***We must seek out the stories of others.***
    In response to the Zimmerman trial, there was an open letter on the Mennonite Church USA Web site, written by the church's executive director and the church's moderator, who happens to be the first-ever person of color in the position. They offered a challenge. They encouraged white members of congregations to engage in conversation with at least one other person from another racial or ethnic group about the Zimmerman verdict. And to listen deeply to understand their perspective and experience.[1] Who might that person be for you? This week, I may call a fellow pastor I met in Mashulaville, Miss.

    We must seek out the stories of others.

  - No. 3: ***We must question the stories we are being told.***

    On the MC USA Women in Leadership site, pastor Laura Brenneman offered an action she will be taking. "I will no longer tolerate pictures of European American-looking Jesuses," she said. "They are not accurate and, worse, they reinforce notions that God has more in common with white men than any other people group. This means I will speak out and withdraw anything that looks like tacit support whenever I see pictures of a white Jesus."[2] What do our homes look like? Are there other images of Jesus we can bring to mind that influence the way we think of others?

    We must question the stories we are being told.

[1] http://www.mennoniteusa.org/2013/07/19/response-to-zimmerman-trial-verdict/. Accessed July 26, 2013.

[2] http://www.mennoniteusa.org/2013/07/16/i-am-in-mourning-a-white-womans-response/. Accessed July 26, 2013.

- ***Confronting our stories. Seeking out the stories of others. Questioning the stories we are being told.*** Those are just a start in the journey of being "citizens of God's kingdom." We know how Joshua chose to answer the question of who he would serve. We don't know how the lawyer who came to Jesus chose to respond. But we do know how the story changed his understanding. As Jesus said to the lawyer, "Go and do likewise."