

You no doubt heard the theme today is our readings: from the prophet, Amos, he calls for justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. In Galatians, there is no longer slave or free, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And in the Gospel, we just heard, according to Luke, Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue, from Isaiah, he has sent me to proclaim release of the captives, to let the oppressed go free, and today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

God willing, my sermon today will expand on these words heard by us in our holy scripture. I will use the words of our faith to call you in, and hopefully leave you with perhaps new ways of thinking about what the impact of slavery has made in all our lives.

I read a book that has had a profound impact on me, it is called Caste, The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson. (hold up the book). A movie was created from this book called Origin, and, when my husband Matt and I viewed this film at the Harbor Theatre about 2 months ago, we were reduced to tears by the end.

In her book, Ms Wilkerson points out that it is not what we so often call racism that is visible in our lives but is instead a caste system that is causing the foundation of this country to fail.

Ms Wilkerson says that “A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets a presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups, based on traits that are inflexible and carry a life-and-death meaning to each caste”.

She speaks of 3 caste systems: Nazi Germany and the inferiority of the Jews, India and the inferiority of the Dalits, and America with the inferiority of African American people, which arose out of the evil of slavery as its beginning.

Ms Wilkerson carries forth her examples of Caste from history and her own life and narrates a harrowing look at the worst of our humanity. It is a difficult subject that demands above all else, honesty, and a great deal of soul searching to confront.

In reading this book, it recalled many of my own experiences with the American caste system that has been a part of my life for 70 years. It is a part of everyone in this room's life, and for many of us, it is so inherent and unconscious in our daily life that we do not give it a second thought.

I think that most of us agree that Slavery is an abhorrent system in the world wherever it exists or existed. According to Ms Wilkerson, for the African Americans who lived here for the first 246 years of what is now the US, lived under the terror of people who had absolute authority over their bodies and their very breath, subject to people who faced no sanction for any atrocity they could commit.

During this time, black and brown slaves were delegated as being sub-human, an inferior class of people, subject to every imaginable means to keep them there, including whippings, the inability to maintain a family connection, the scourge of lynchings to set an example, the inability to be taught to read and write, to not be worthy enough to vote, to only be allowed to work at manual labor, to not hold property, and the list goes on and on.

Ms Wilkerson's most compelling case for her belief that the caste system is at the bottom of all of lives is the fact that Nazi Germany used the laws of the American south, constructed after the end of the Civil War when the Jim Crow period started to keep the African American in their places. These laws dehumanized the inferior class of people, and the Nazi's recognized them for the means to start turning every German against every Jew in Europe. People were of the same race in Europe, so it underscores her point that this is not about race, but about caste.

Jews had to be identified by a Jewish star tied or sewn to their clothing. African Americans simply had their brown skin to be identified. Jews were shot in the streets, no questions asked. African Americans were lynched from a tree, no questions asked.

Ms Wilkerson points out in her book that after the 1960's and the civil rights act, the ability to own a house and to pass on wealth to the next generation was prohibited by law. Where to live has always been controlled by the caste system. Who to marry, what level of education and what job persons of color could hold, were all dictated by written and unwritten rules

The book provides many examples, and it would take me 2 hours or more to talk about them in depth. I promise not to do that! Ms Wilkerson provides examples from her own life as a NY

Times reporter of the experiences inflicted upon her. When I read these examples, I thought, are you kidding me? I was unaware of the many ways the caste system intrudes in every life in America. And in each example, Ms Wilkerson says that she questions whether she should speak up or stay quiet. Should she draw additional attention to herself or simply let the incident pass. The inability to raise one's voice to call out mistreatment is always stunning when it occurs.

The book brought to mind my own experiences when I spoke about what I called racism with people I had met in church over the years. I know now that they were giving me real life examples of the caste system in this country.

The first was an African American couple, she a lifelong Episcopalian, he a converted Baptist. These were wonderful people, involved in the church, kind, had a sense of humor and so generous with others. He told me about his work in the Army during WWII where he learned to fix aircraft and enjoyed it. After the war, he sought a job at the Oakland airport, often applying for jobs along with others from his service. He never got a job at the airport, never received a reason. He knew, it had to be because of his color.

He also told me about a time when he was still in the military and was out on the town one night in LA with some of his friends. They were all in a car together, wearing their army uniforms. Then suddenly, the driver was pulled over and they immediately were surrounded by police cars and police, holding guns pointed at their faces, being told to step out of the car. My friend was terrified and thought they would die. They did nothing wrong; it was a case of mistaken identity.

Another time, I had the deep privilege of sitting at the kitchen table of a woman friend and her husband, where we spoke over a glass of white wine. The depth of honesty they showed me that day has remained with me, and our talk forever changed my viewpoint on racism in America, now something that Ms Wilkerson talks about as the caste system.

This husband and wife were again friendly, spiritual and generous people who went to the same church as my husband and me. By this time, I was in seminary, and we were talking about my studies when the subject of racism came up.

She told me how at her work with a large public utility company, she is questioned frequently about her license for civil engineering by a much younger, and usually, male, employee. She is not believed to be an engineer. Many young men resist being managed by my friend.

Her husband told me the story of how he was running late and walked in the door of a local bank 5 minutes before they were to close. Seeing the fearful expression on the woman's face when she looked at him, he turned around and went back outside, deciding to go in his car to the drive up instead so as to not worry the woman teller.

This couple lived in a comfortable townhouse in the hills of Oakland, and I was shocked at their examples. I said to them, it must be like wearing a mask on your face everyday you walk outside your door. They both exclaimed, yes, that is exactly what it feels like. They were judged first by the color of their skin; in everything they did.

This day in, day out confrontation with being treated as inferior contributes to the health problems of black Americans. Science is finally coming around to proving that it is not some break or frailty in the DNA of African Americans, it is the price to pay living in a system of caste.

Like I said earlier, this is a difficult subject, and requires soul searching to confront. Let's now talk about how our faith plays a role for us to look at the caste system, and what we can do to change it.

Jesus knew about the caste system of his day, which was the lives of the Samaritan Jews and the Jewish tribe of Israel that Jesus was a part of. The Samaritans were the same race as the Israelites but were considered inferior by them. It was each group's geographic location that identified them. We have stories from the Gospels, where Jesus encountered the Samaritans and created a famous parable about them, called the Good Samaritan. He called upon his Jewish brethren to see the Samaritans as equals, worthy and deserving of salvation.

We know how Jesus feels about systems that identify groups of people as either superior or inferior to one another; systems that oppress the other. Jesus addresses this human sin with the simple words:

Love thy neighbor as thyself.

By neighbor, Jesus does not only mean those people who are in your immediate vicinity, or those you know, or members of your family. He means to love EVERYONE like yourself, including strangers, including people who act and look different than you.

Because if we believe in our Baptismal covenant, where we are asked:

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being, and we answer I will with God's help, then we know that the caste system is antithetical to what God's mission is for us on this earth.

.And the only thing we know that can fight that kind of sin is the spirit of love. The love that places us all in equal terms, practicing mercy and compassion, fairness and justice in all we do. Are we up for this? Yes, I think we are. I think we have to be if we want to start showing up for one another and putting our faith in action and not only words. And as Christians, we are about hope, aren't we. There are things WE can do, each and every one of us, to turn the tide in this country and to eliminate our caste system if we demonstrate that the price is too high, and the model is unsustainable for the hearts and minds of every American. And the caste system is against God's love for us.

Can we be good Samaritans to one another? Here is an example of someone who did:

According to Ms Wilkerson, Albert Einstein, upon arriving in America, was astonished to discover that he had landed yet in another caste system, with embedded hatreds that were not so unlike the one he had just fled.

"The worst disease is the treatment of the Negro; he wrote in 1946. Everyone who freshly learns of this, feels not only the injustice, but the scorn of the principle of the Fathers who founded the United States that all men are created equal. Einstein could hardly believe that a reasonable man can cling so tenaciously to such a prejudice". And he adds, "the more I feel as American, the more this situation pains me. I can escape the feelings of complicity in it only by speaking out".

Ms Wilkerson believes, "We are not personally responsible for what people who look like us did centuries ago. But we are responsible for what good or ill we do to people alive with us today. We are, each of us, responsible for every decision we make that hurts or harms another

human being. We are responsible for recognizing that what happened in previous generations, at the hands of people who look like us, set the stage for the world we now live in”.

There is much healing to do.

“In a world without caste, being male or female, light or dark, immigrant or native-born, world have no bearing on what anyone was perceived of being capable of doing” she continues. A world without caste would set everyone free”, says Ms Wilkerson, and she is correct.

We have a choice and the chance to make things right. When you see a person of another color walking down the street, resist the impulse to cross over if that is what you do today. Instead walk past them and smile, say hello. If you have the chance to hire someone, look favorably on the African American sitting before you. Be pleasant and gracious to anyone serving you this summer who is black or brown skinned. Or an immigrant. Resist prejudices that arise when you watch tv or read news that depicts crime as primarily an African American problem. Reach out whenever possible. Look for ways to interact with people of different backgrounds in your life. Give to organizations that support the marginalized. There is so much we can do.

Love your neighbor as yourself. These words from Jesus need to echo in our minds whenever we are out so that we can be ready to act upon this command from Jesus.

Our last song for this morning’s service is We Shall Overcome. Some of you may be thinking, but that is a protest song, and we are not protesting. Think instead of the original origin of this song during the Civil Rights movement. By we shall overcome, today I hope you can sing with the passion for someone who wants to help overcome our caste system. And hopefully I have given you reasons to believe that God is on our side in this cause. Amen