

General Council Chapel Worship Service for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

This worship service was celebrated in March 2004 as part of the United Church General Council Offices' commemoration of the UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. It was prepared by Kim Uyede-Kai, then staff person for Program and Resource Development in the Ethnic Ministries Unit.

To prepare for this service, collect stones (preferably dusty) of different colours, shapes, and sizes to distribute to participants. Near the conclusion of the service, the stones will be brought forward and offered at a table or other central location.

Gathering

This is the Wilderness time
When every path is obscure
And thorns grow around words of hope.

**This is the Hungering time
When bread is not enough
And stone—cold and hard—does not nourish.**

This is the Cleansing time
When dust and ashes shroud our dreams
And faith is frayed and ragged.

**This is the Visioning time
When the world as God's desires it
Shimmers briefly in the clearing chaos.
Be patient with us in our Lenten wandering, O God,
As we struggle to meet You
In our wilderness lament.**

Hymn

“Out of the Depths, O God, We Call to You” (VU 611)

Scripture Reading

Luke 13:31–35

Reflection: Prophecy and Stone Throwing

Hold the stone that was on your chair. Feel its weight, its coolness, its edges, its dust. Listen to its warning and wisdom.

One day, when my second son was much younger and in grade one or two in his very multi-ethnic school, he came home in a really bad mood. A white boy had made fun of him in the schoolyard. He made fun of the shape of his eyes. And he called him “yellow” and “Chinese”—two words that together were meant to be insulting and degrading. My son was indignant. He was not Chinese (and besides, what was wrong with being Chinese anyway?). His retort back to his adversary was, “I’m not yellow! I’m light brown. Bart Simpson is yellow. Do I look like Bart Simpson?”

A young voice of prophecy in the schoolyard. A voice that says:

- Asian kids are not inferior to white kids or any other kids of colour.
- Racial discrimination by colour is for cartoon characters not real people.
- Differences of skin tone are neither inferior nor superior—nor invisible.
- Stones of racial discrimination can be resisted.
- Stones thrown can be deflected.

There have been many more such stones thrown at my son since that incident. Some smaller; some bigger. And I’m sure he has thrown some stones of discrimination of his own.

There are many stones of racial discrimination thrown in the Jerusalem that is Church House. I’ve also been on the receiving end of stones—and in the very hallways and meeting rooms of these offices.

- “When I see you, I don’t see any colour. Why do you call yourself a person of colour? Your skin is pretty much like ours. You look like one of us.”
- “You were born here; you speak English. Why are *you* in Ethnic Ministries? I thought you were in the Support to Local Ministries Unit.”
- “I thought *all* you Asians celebrated Chinese New Year.”
- “You Asians haven’t suffered racism like Blacks and Aboriginals have.”
- “Why would Ethnic Ministries staff be involved in Black History Month celebrations here? You people are Asian. White people are different though. Their work is related.”
- “You Asians have a problem with Black people working with you, don’t you?”
- “Why doesn’t Ethnic Ministries do things the way that the Justice, Global, and Ecumenical Relations Unit does?”
- And “Now that there is a Racial Justice portfolio, the church is finally *starting* to do something about racism.”

Real stories. Real stones. Real Jerusalem.

In this Decade to Overcome Violence, we come to a violent Lenten image in this week’s lectionary reading—Herod plotting to kill Jesus. Prophets in Jerusalem killed, stoned to death. But as the Decade unfolds for us, we are beginning to acknowledge that there are many forms of violence. Racial discrimination is a violence of metaphorical stone throwing.

Colour, like in the mind of the child in my son's story, is often the first thing we use to discriminate. How often have we used the colours white, black, yellow, and red to define four contrived races of people? Yet, what have those colours commonly symbolized for us?

- White—dazzling, light, reflection of all colours so that they are no longer visible, pure, holy, clean.
- Black—wicked, dirty, fearful, the absence of light, in fact, the absorption of all light.
- Yellow—cowardice, sickly pallor, jealousy, sensationalistic, “no frills” branding.
- Re —anger, shame, bloodshed, debt.

Colours are stones thrown.

Not seeing colour anymore is the goal of the liberal, anti-racist, multiculturalist. Colour blindness is also racial discrimination. To be “colour blind” is to be blind to the negative associations by which we judge someone's colour. To be “colour blind” is to be blind to the positive associations of colour. To be “colour blind” is the adding up of all colours, with the result being like visible light—all colours add up to white. To not see someone as they are —blessed with colour, with shade, with hue, with a multitude of genetic blendings, all equal in worth to your own—is to also not see Christ. Christ sees us as we are intended to be.

Silent Reflection

Prayer

Hymn

“Joyful Is the Dark” (VU 284)

Blessing

**May the blessing of God give us strength for the journey;
May the Spirit of Wisdom give us vision for the road;
May the love of Christ make us caring companions,
As together we walk this Lenten week. Amen.**

Stone Meditation

Lent is often a time for Christians to give something up we like and to do without it for 40-odd days and nights. Doing without is a spiritual discipline.

Consider your stone to be racial discrimination. What spiritual discipline would it take to give it up? Will you fall off the wagon and indulge when no one is looking? Will you take it back on Easter Sunday?

Hold your stone.

Feel its sharp edges as the edges of racial discrimination—exclusion, joke telling, judgment, tokenism, objectification, Anglo-European standards of physical beauty. What sharp edges have you felt—for yourself or for another? What edges have you cut others with?

Feel its weight—the heavy weight of stereotyping, ignorance, colour blindness, superiority, colour politics, silencing, invisibility. What heaviness have you felt—for yourself or for another? What heaviness have you weighed others down with?

Grip your stone tightly. These stones were washed before they were placed on your seat. Yet, dusty residue continues to crumble away from the stone and stick to your skin. If you give up your stone, will another stone take its place? Will you put on the ashes of the prophet and hurl stones that you call prophecies?

We are—each one of us—prophet and stone thrower. After the blessing before you leave, you are invited to give up your stone to (place on) the table—the table where none are excluded. Where all are welcome.

You will give up your stone but you will be taking away with you the dust from your stone on your hand, perhaps even on your clothes. It is a reminder that you carried a stone that is racial discrimination. You put the stone down rather than throw it. And that is a prophetic action.

Prayer

God, who speaks through stillness and quiet,
In word and symbol,
We thank you for this time set apart for our pondering,
our struggles, our listening, and our growing.

You are able to accept in us
What we cannot even acknowledge.
You are able to hold in your memory
What we have tried to forget.
You are able to hold out to us
A reconciliation we cannot even conceive of.

Give us courage to name the stones
Of racial discrimination within us
And the stones outside of us;
To name all that we have rejected in ourselves,
And all that we have rejected in others.
May we find no part of your creation
To be alien or inferior to us.

We open up our hands to You
And release our grip on that which harms ourselves and others,
So that Your creation may be healed and made whole.
Amen.