**I Believe: The Confession of Belhar**

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Texts: Deuteronomy 6:5, Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

In 1948, the South African government set in motion of set of policies that segregated the nation. These policies became known as apartheid, a word in Afrikaans that means apart-ness. The idea was that by concentrating the resources within a few specific segments of society, the country would be stronger. Blacks were stripped of their land and citizenship. Schools were segregated. Mixed marriages were strictly forbidden. Travel was restricted. The whites were conscripted into armed service to uphold these practices against their neighbors. And the enforcement was brutal.

For twelve years, the world turned a blind eye to what was happening. The UN expressed concern, but did nothing. But, in 1960, things changed. A protest at Sharpeville turned deadly. Police fired into the crowd of thousands, killing or injuring hundreds. The UN could be silent no longer and condemned the practice of apartheid. In 1977, the Lutheran and Reformed churches denounced apartheid as heresy.

In 1982, the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the segregated Black denomination created by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1881, could be silent no longer. This was a moment of status confessionis…apartheid was contrary to the message of the gospel and must be renounced. Segregation had no place at the Lord’s table. A group of seminary professors were tasked with writing a confessional statement. One day later, they presented the Belhar Confession, a short, but powerful statement that calls the church to unity, reconciliation, and justice in the name of the gospel and, in 1986, it became one of their confessions.

Now, not all churches jumped on the bandwagon. For example, Reformed Church in Africa refused to recognize apartheid as unscriptural and those who practiced it as unchristian. In 1990, they agreed to recognize the confession, but not give it confessional status, In the name of unity, they left space for those ministers and congregations that could not agree with its principles to remain a part of the denomination while upholding the practice of apart-ness.

And what of the Presbyterians? Well, in 2004, the General Assembly began to study how the Belhar Confession might speak to issues of structural racism, past and present, here in the United States. While it passed in General Assembly, it was ultimately denied a place among our confessions because it was not able to be agreed upon by 2/3 of the presbyteries across our nation. In 2014, it was once again brought to the table, and this time, it was approved and ratified, becoming the newest Confession in our denomination.

The practice of segregation in this country was within the lifetime of some of us sitting here today. You may remember when what schools, businesses, parks, and churches you could attend were determined by your race. Perhaps you remember the Civil Rights Act, passed a mere 60 years ago, when the nation moved to rectify this practice that divided us from each other.

And we’ve come a long way. But structural racism and racial tensions still grip this nation today. Rhetoric in homes, schools, and churches have created, over our lifetimes, unconscious biases about what is normal and natural that affect the way we work, play, and worship together.

That’s the thing with structural racism. The ways that the system affords privileges to some and insurmountable roadblocks to others is so seamless that it just seems like the natural order of things. Even when we see a glimpse of it, we can’t fully unravel it.

But it’s there. Making it harder for children of color to receive a education. Making it harder for families of color to build even basic financial security. Making it harder to access healthcare and to limiting housing options. Making it harder just because we don’t look the same.

But surely, the church, which professes love and grace would not be silent. The church, which prays that the kindom, that is God’s kindom of peace and justice, would come, would not be silent. Martin Luther King, in 1963, declared “the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And, sadly, statistics show that not much has changed.

Here’s the thing…talking about racism, or any kind of -ism for that matter, is hard. Our whole way of being is brought into question. We realize our complicity in a system we didn’t create, but we are a part of perpetuating. Our hearts and souls ache. And the conversations are hard. People get upset and defensive. People cling to power. People complain that it doesn’t seem fair to hold us accountable for what our ancestors did. And yet.

Yet we are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul even when it’s hard. And moreover, we are to love God with all our might…which means after we do the internal work, we are to go love God with our actions, to do the work of reconciliation and justice, to make the world the way it should be.

I have spent the last week finishing up lesson plans for the Hebrew Bible stories our children will read this fall…stories about Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Samuel, David, Esther, and Daniel. And one thing I can tell you that’s quite clear, in the story of the people of God, is that God doesn’t care one little bit about our social norms concerning power. Whether it’s challenging our expectations about age, upending our hierarchical structures, putting in women in power, or choosing the ones no one else would expect, God sees what humans so often ignore. God understands that the whole of who we are isn’t on the outside, but instead loves the humanity within each of us. And God, it appears, looks out especially for the underdog.

And Jesus does the same. Jesus, his ministry foretold Isaiah, has a knack for locating the broken-hearted, the oppressed, and the imprisoned in the midst of the crowd. He finds them and uplifts them and makes it known that the structures of power that humans built are contrary to the ways of kindom. It’s Zaccheus, Matthew, the blind man, the divorced woman, the child, the outsider who get his attention.

This, this concept that God looks for those who are poor and oppressed and lavishes care upon them is a theological concept called the preferential option for the poor and is a major feature in the Belhar confession. It posits, “that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

This doesn’t mean that God doesn’t care about the needs of others or that those who are doing okay are outside of God’s gaze. It just means that God’s paying extra attention to ones among us who are hurting because they’re the ones who need it most. But you can understand how, if you’re the one for whom the system is working, this could be distressing.

The thing is that the gospel is rarely good news to the rich and powerful. The gospel speaks of a radical overturning of power, the lowly will be raised up and the rich brought to their knees. Not good news if you’re the one destined to lose your comfortable place of power.

But, actually, God doesn’t seem bent on raising the lowly up over the others, but rather dismantling the damaging power structures all together. Abraham, David, Esther, Matthew, the divorced woman, the fisherman…God didn’t set out to put them in positions where they would trample of the rights of others, as their rights had, actually, been trampled on, but rather to put them in places where their gifts would aid in bringing about the kindom of heaven. For God, it’s about unifying the people.

For the comfortable and privileged, it doesn’t mean you have to be uncomfortable, but rather that everyone can be comfortable together. You can still have enough, enough food, enough shelter, enough dignity…just maybe not more than enough. There’s plenty of God’s providence for us all.

The Belhar Confession affirms that God pays attention to those who are hurt and hurts with them. But it doesn’t stop there. It continues, saying, “that God calls the church to follow God in this…stand[ing] by people in any form of suffering and need…witness[ing]…and striv[ing] against any form of injustice…and witness[ing] against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and control and harm others.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In other words, God calls us into the work of reconciliation in the world. It’s powerful work, this ministry of reconciliation.

It starts with our internal work, turning ourselves to see the structures that oppress others, sitting with the discomfort when we realize our complicity, recognizing that God knows this and still offers us grace, and listening for nudges that set us in the places where our capacity for loving human diversity can grow. It means loving the Lord with all our heart and soul.

But it continues in our external work. That’s the work the Matthew 25 movement is all about: dismantling structural racism, eradicating systemic poverty, welcoming all into vital communities that model beloved community, loving God’s world with all our might.

This ministry of reconciliation, this ambassadorship, means going out with eyes open to see those who are hurting and to hurt with them. The writers at Belhar said, “We believe that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness…together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

It’s not without risk or without sacrifice. Because you’re going make people nervous. You’re going to make people uncomfortable. And you’re going to give up some of your comfort – your time, your money, your power.

It means doing the hard work because the neediest among us can’t wait for the world to be made right some day in the future. There’s a church who wanted to help the impoverished neighbors near the church. They hadn’t had any luck getting them to come to the church, so they bought a house and arranged for volunteers to be there each afternoon. They sat on the porch and said hi as people passed by. The neighbors were wary of their motives. But these people kept showing up, day after day. They built trust, relationships. Then they had dinner. They started having the hard conversations about what life apart is like. Those church members hurt with them. And together they helped each other make a safe space where needs were met in both directions. A church was born on that front porch that became a thriving worshipping community that burst the seams of that house. The gospel was preached.

Friends, we given the ministry of reconciliation. Where will we preach the gospel now?

Amen.

1. Zenitha Prince, “Eleven o’clock on Sundays is still the most segregated hour in America,” Lousiana Weekly.com, June 15, 2016, http://www.louisianaweekly.com/eleven-oclock-on-sundays-is-still-the-most-segregated-hour-in-america/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BoC, 10.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. BoC, 10.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. BoC, 10.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)