

A few weeks ago, I called the office of one of our senators. I urged him to support the Voting Rights Bill before him and his coworkers. I told him it was important that everyone have an opportunity to cast their vote without intimidation. He sent me a very nice letter thanking me for my interest and went on to tell me that he could not vote for the bill because the bill would infringe upon States’ Rights.

I was not surprised by his answer. I did respond with a balanced letter, thanking him for his response, and then said, “Let me tell you a story.”

In April of 1952 I happened to be on a Trailways bus traveling from Water Valley Mississippi to Nashville, TN. I had boarded the bus before dark, but being a timid boy in those days I did not look beyond the first seat two. I am sure I took the second one. To take the front seat would have not been “proper.”—The bus rolled on through the late evening, dark came, and at some god-forsaken place out in the middle of nowhere, the driver announced a ten-minute pause. There was a rest room and hamburger place. I am not sure how I was in and out of the burger place quickly, but I was. It was then that I observed the driver talking with two young men; very well dressed young black men. The driver was saying to them, “The man said if you will go round to the back door he will sell you a sandwich.” These young men had been in the back of the bus all the time. (State Law), they were denied food at the front door, if not by state law, then state practice. It was during the Korean War.

Both young men were impeccably dressed, in uniforms of the US Air Force. Jesus said, ***“Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”***

I. This is Black History Month. Black History is not something we like to look at closely, I think. It can be disturbing, if one is sensitive. It would be great we would find a way to pursue a better understanding of this part of our past. I think it would help us all. It could be that you have already done this. Did you know that slaves had no rights what-so-ever? That a master could beat a slave if he so wished? That a slave had no access to the courts? They had no say over their children? Children or spouse could be sold at any time to anyone, and the slave had no say at all? Did you know that children were born into the status of the mother? And that many masters were the father to many mixed-race slaves? That was true for Thomas Jefferson. I live beside a woman who traces her heritage back to Sally Hemmings.

Did you know that in the early 1860s slaves in the south produced more than five million bales of cotton, valued at more than a billion dollars, and received not a cent for their labors? Did you know the Methodist Church split over slavery? For our fore-parents in Methodism slavery was stronger in the Church than God?

II Did you know that following the Civil War, Blacks were free and Black men had the vote. That there was a Southern Homestead Act that gave land away free, but most of it went to whites? That recent estimates are, ***that about 46 million people, mostly white, from which they can trace the beginnings of***

their wealth? That this was where the black folk lost again one opportunity for equity in wealth?

Did you know that about a dozen black men were elected to the House of Representatives and one to the Senate? Did you know that in 1877, after one of our boys, Rutherford B. Hayes, made a deal with the devil, was elected to the highest office in the land, pulled all troops out of the south and granted them States' Rights? And, that soon all kinds of obstacles were thrown up to keep blacks from voting? And those restrictions continued until the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965? And that our Supreme Court pretty much cancelled out that law in 2013. And that all kinds of challenges to voters are being enacted across the land today?---That is just a few of the high lights of the challenge before us.

There was destruction of the Black; then Reconstruction that gave some freedom; then after President Hayes, deconstruction; and in 1965 Reconstruction; and in 2013 once again deconstruction. And, that a lot of Christians do not really care enough to say, ***"It is time for some genuine Christian, Christ-Centered Reconstruction in the land."*** ***If it happens it has to begin with us.***

III. What would that kind of Reconstruction look like? First it would be important to delve honestly and openly into the history of the slavery practice in the States from 1619 to 1865. I didn't learn anything, really, about it in grade school, high school and college. And not a lot about it in seminary. We need to know, and to know, we will have to dig it out for ourselves. It might be a part of our white salvation.

Secondly, as we study we will need to keep the Golden Rule in mind. I am sure we all know what that rule states: **“Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”** That is the text I have chosen to lift up from the morning scripture. As we look at how power treats people, or how insecurity affects us, we need to keep asking: **Is this the way I would want to be treated?**

Now I can almost hear someone asking, “Is he talking down to us.” And I would say, no, I am talking to myself, but if you overhear something that touches you, just embrace it. For I can be a prejudiced sinner like other white folk.—For when we, in West Ohio, merged with the Lexington Conference in 1968, an all-black conference, I was not feeling gracious. I saw “them” taking positions in the conference leadership that I wanted for myself, and I was not happy.

(Reminds me of an introduction of a Black Student pastor—Tell the story)

It was a small membership church in rural Union County. It had been struggling for a lot of years. And, now, the gracious local pastor who had served them for years was retiring. So, I contacted the seminary and was told there was a student, a woman, a black woman, available. I called the matriarch of the congregation and told her about the available student pastor. She said a woman pastor would be just fine. Then I told her the woman was a black person. Jean responded, “That won’t be a problem at all.” So, we agreed on the day and time I would bring her for the introduction. The day arrived and a group gathered at the church and the student was introduced. We learned she was also musically gifted. So, when we were about to leave, Jean said, “If she is a pianist, let’s gather around the piano and sing a few hymns and then have a prayer before we leave.” As the group moved toward the piano, I kind of hung back to allow the pastor parish group and

pastor to go toward the piano. One older man also hung back. He came close to me and said, "Do we have to take her?" I told Mr. G. that the group had already approved her. He then said, "We ran those people out of this community forty years ago." I don't think I responded to him. But, after the prayer, I was somewhat alone with Jean and said, "Mr. G. is not happy." Her response was, "I know, but he is going to get happy." I once told Jean I wished every church has a major leader like her. Change comes very slowly and painfully for some folks.

And when women came, I was not so crazy about that. I told Pastor Patty recently, that when I saw Shirley Cadle leading a worship procession down the aisle in Hoover Auditorium during Annual Conference, I was not happy. But Shirley was an excellent pastor and leader. Gifted. God knew what God was doing when she was called.—When I was a superintendent, some church leaders would say, "Don't send a woman here." And I would tell them, if an ordained woman is sent by the bishop, I will introduce her. "I then would say, "We have some excellent women pastors." And that was fact.

Sometimes it is easy to forget Paul's' words to the Corinthians: "Make love your aim." And about his words to the Galatian Church:

"There is neither Jew or Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

And we could add: "There is neither black nor white, rich or poor, brown, red or yellow, straight or gay, we are all one in Christ Jesus. We are equal before the Almighty."

Years ago, I knew a woman who said over and over: "I am not perfect, God isn't through with me yet, I am still under construction." Truth is, we are all under

construction, but some of it has to be Reconstruction. We first of all need to unlearn some stuff that has helped to form our thinking and control our behavior. My dear mother was a good woman. But she had an unbalanced attitude toward people of color. She was from WV, that had originally been VA. Many times I heard her say, "I believe Black people (she didn't say Black) are just fine so long as they stay in their place." Is that how some of us feel? When we merged with the Black Methodists back in "68" a story came out of a southern church. A white woman who met for her first time, over lunch, with several women, a mixed-race group, said: "I became sick to my stomach when I sat at table with black women. I had to leave for a while." When she was telling the story, God and she had overcome her fear of people who were different.--- Spiritual Reconstruction had done its work. It is hard work. I don't know whether mother ever fully made it or not. Last time she stated her thoughts on Black people, I said to her, "Mother, where is their place? They are God's children same as you and me." What all have we learned that we need to ask God to help us unlearn? That's the beginning.

The next step toward Spiritual Reconstruction requires us to take inventory. to look deeply at our core information. Is it Christ Like? Does it reflect the Love of Jesus? --- Maybe we could spend some time this week in spiritual reflection? We could ask ourselves:

Where am I not following the rule of Christian Love?

What behavior in my life needs changed?

How can I help God do that?

If you need help in Spiritual Reconstruction. In reality, if we are growing in Christ we need a bit of Reconstruction daily.

Let's pray:

Come Holy Spirit; come and open my spiritual eyes.
Show me who I am, really. Warts and all.

Is there some part of my thinking, speaking, or acting that needs to be changed?
Reconstructed with a larger portion of Christian love?

Lord, Help me to see my needs, then grant me the resolve to begin the journey toward a love that will bring greater life to me, the Church, and ultimately, the whole world.

Help me, O Lord, to discover my better angels; my better angels, that I may think in love and act always in a loving spirit. Amen.