

# **Trinity United Methodist Church**

**June 14, 2020**

**“More Than Meets The Eye”**

**Pastor Dan Elmore**

## **Welcome**

Welcome to all of you! We're returning to in-person worship slowly and deliberately, according to the requirements set forth by our Conference and our Bishop. So some of those to highlight, to make sure we all keep in the forefront of our minds, as some of you at home might join us in in-person worship in the weeks to come: We are to keep our face masks on at all times. We are to keep them on from the time we leave our vehicles to come inside to the time that we go back into our vehicles to go home. You don't have to be one of these people that drives around with your mask on inside your own car. It's okay to take your mask off then. But we do want to keep them on the whole time especially that we're inside together. We want to make sure that we're maintaining six feet of social distancing between household units, so please help us in that matter.

We also have directions that we are going to enter through the doors off our back parking lot; at the end of the worship service we would like you to exit through the front doors to Cedar Street, again, the whole time making sure you maintain the six feet of social distancing. That is a hard thing for us to do as a church; because we're a church—we like to shake hands, we like to hug. But these are things that we won't be able to do officially as a church for some time to come. The offering plate is there as you exit. We won't be passing things during worship.

Again, thank you. We're glad that you're here. So as we begin in worship, I invite you to follow along in our responsive call to worship.

## **Responsive Greeting**

Leader: This day, Holy God, teach us how to love ourselves

**Congregation: Without selfishness, conceit, or disregard for our neighbors.**

L: This day, Holy God, teach us what it means to stand up confidently for our faith

**C: Without demeaning others in the process.**

L: This day, Holy God, teach us how to forgive

**C: With humility and love.**

**All: This day and every day, Holy God, teach us your way.**

## **Prayer**

As we join in prayer together, in the space of the prayer I'll invite silence, a time for you to lift your petitions, joys and concerns aloud. A name, a situation, whatever the case might be. A couple that I know of, Rebecca Gray—she usually attends the Rivers Service—her mother had surgery today for cancer, so we pray for her. Beth Edwards and her family, Amanda Browder (Beth's daughter)—Beth's father died earlier this week after a car accident. Then Nancy requested prayers for her niece, Leah, as she faces a bit more surgery, which means a delay in taking out her trach, which is no fun. So those are prayer requests that we know of, and I'll invite us to share others as they come to mind in the context of our prayer. Those of you at home, do the same in our prayer together. Let's pray.

God, what a joy and privilege it is to join together in worship wherever we are. Though we may be physically apart, we are indeed united together in your holy spirit, wherever we gather at whatever time. And so we thank you for the modern technology that has enabled us to stay connected, especially in worship, in the recent weeks. And we pray for your spirit to guide us as you guided Israel through the wilderness long ago, by color of cloud by day and fire by night. Lead us in the same way as we return deliberately and safely to in-person worship together.

We thank you for all your many blessings in life, and especially during these days that we face in this tumultuous world around us. We pray for our strategic planning process as we seek your clarity on who exactly we are as a church and how you are calling us to best respond to the needs of our community and our world around us, especially for a time such as this. We pray for all of the many things going on in this world around us, for all the many issues and matters that seek to divide and separate. Whether they are matters of race or class or ethnicity or more, Lord—there is such a spirit of divisiveness all the way around in our country right now. So many voices crying out in pain in so many various ways, ways in which we don't even begin to understand. But Lord, as your people, help us to lead with compassion. Help us to see ourselves and one another as you see us. And help us to be your agents of your grace and your love. Transform us in our hearts and minds so that we might, in turn, transform the culture around us.

As we come in worship, we come with many joys and concerns on our hearts and

minds. We pray for those struggling with cancer. We pray for those facing surgeries and recovering from surgeries. And we pray for those who have lost loved ones. Hear us as we lift to you our joys and concerns aloud or in the silence of our hearts at this time.

Hear us as we pray these things and more in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

**Scripture: Matthew 9:35 – 10:7 (NIV)**

9:35 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” 10:1 Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. 2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. 5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. 6 Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. 7 As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

**Sermon**

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

As I’ve been continuously talking with pastors and other churches in other parts of the Conference, I learned that a church in Northern Virginia, next week they start a new sermon series called *God at the Movies*, looking at different family movies and where God themes of theology might be through them. And I had the idea, “huh. I would love to do a *God at the Not-Safe-For-Families Movies*. And I’d probably start out with a movie like *Scarface*. Have you seen *Scarface*? It’s been a while. *Scarface* follows the

story—and by the way, I want to be clear: **NOT safe for family movies**, okay? Those of you watching at home—it's not. It follows a story of a young man named Tony Montana as he rises from the streets of Miami to the top of the cocaine empire in the early 1980s. I told you it's not safe for families; might not even be safe for church. And then at the end of the movie, it tells the story of his demise. If you've ever heard the line, "Say hello to my little friend," that's from *Scarface*. All right? One of the most famous movie clips of all time, maybe.

Bottom line is, I love a good gangster movie, especially starring the great actors like Al Pacino. By the way, a great movie to watch while we're still on quarantine, kind of, is *The Irishman* on Netflix, if you haven't watched that yet. It's a good movie; not exactly safe for families either. (You're like, "what kind of pastor are you?" If you don't know that by now...)

But *Scarface* in particular sets this main character that you know right away, the minute you lay eyes on him, you're not supposed to like this guy, based on the way he looks, based on the way he acts, his brazenness—all the things that you can see about this guy right away. But the thing of it is, by the end of the movie, you *do* end up kind of liking Tony Montana. You at least feel sorry for the guy as you watch him basically destroy himself. We even might find some aspect of ourselves identifying with characters like that, for we catch glimpses where even Tony Montana has a moral code. Even Tony Montana has things that he's not willing to do.

And how does that happen? How would we come to even remotely appreciate a character like a drug kingpin? He's a murderer. He's a drug dealer. But as the movie progresses, we learn his story. We learn what makes him tick. We learn the soft spots that he does have, especially for his mom and his sister. We learn what's beneath the surface of Tony Montana, which is so much more than that tough guy exterior that we're exposed to at first. There are still a ton of flaws that he has, obviously. But by the end of the movie, we see a more complete picture of the man who is Tony Montana.

We're being *exposed* to so much right now, aren't we? And I used that pun on purpose. There is a lot to see right now. And at the same time, it seems nearly impossible to see the whole picture on any of it. The virus, the economy, the politics, the media, the protests, the looting and rioting, the phases, the *requirements*...and on and on. It's okay to name and to admit that everything that has been and continues to come at us is just too much. In fact, it's important if we need to name that. We are living through the perfect storm that has exacerbated one of our fundamental aspects of our human nature: To only see what's on the surface, what we're initially exposed to. And even then, to only see the side that we want to see. And because that can be so much, *too much*, even, we then refuse to try to see what lies beneath the surface. Maybe we lack the bandwidth, and we're just too doggone tired. Maybe we don't simply see the

need to see anymore. I don't know how many times, with everything going on in the last few weeks, I've heard the comment, "I've seen all I need to see."

But maybe, maybe there's something beneath the surface in us. Something that we would be horrified for others to see. Something we think that we've already dealt with and doesn't even really affect us any more. Maybe something that's so deep that we're not even consciously aware that it's even there.

And let me add a little side note here. There is obviously so much that needs to be addressed with everything going on today in light of our Christian faith. And much of that, I think, is better addressed in a two-way, in-person conversation, not one way, me just preaching at you. So I welcome any and all conversation you want to have with me about these things.

But for the purpose of this sermon: How do we see ourselves? And how do we see others? With all the divisions that have been going on for years and that have now exploded in the perfect powder keg of pandemic, quarantines, racial inequality, divisive politics, crashing economics, and more...could it be that we've lost our ability, at least somewhat, to see ourselves and one another?

Our text from Matthew's gospel for today comes from the lectionary. It's that three-year cycle of scripture readings that some preachers use. I don't often use it, but sometimes I use it, and it's amazing how this lectionary was decided upon years upon years ago, and it's amazing how appropriate it is for whatever's going on in the world at the time. It's amazing the Holy Spirit works that way. And as we enter into the season after Pentecost, it's the season of these lectionary readings in which it teaches us how the early church formed itself. It teaches us how we should be formed as a church. It reminds us what we should be about as a church. So, therefore, many preachers jump straight into Jesus' words about the sheep needing a shepherd and the plentiful harvest with so few laborers, and so it ends with some kind of call with ministry. You might be called to be a preacher. You might be called to be a pastor. You might be called to the mission field. The Lord needs laborers for the harvest, and that is you. Well, this sermon really is no different. We are still called to be the church, now more than ever. And now, more than ever, each of us, each of *you*—I'm not talking about just professional clergy—all of us are still called to ministry.

So let me back up in the text. Before Jesus called the twelve apostles, before He talked about harvest and laborers, before he talked about sheep needing a shepherd, we read that Jesus *saw* the crowds. He *saw* the people. And he had *compassion* on them. That word can be translated as, His heart went out to them. Why? Because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Part of the shepherd's duty is to defend the flock from predators that try to enter in through the back of the flock and

pick them off from the back, and to try to guide the flock from wandering astray. How would Jesus know that's what these people needed? That's not something you can tell with the normal naked eye. It's because Jesus sees beneath the surface. He sees what's really going on, and as fully God, He sees as God sees.

And so we're supposed to imitate Christ in all that we do, right? So how are we doing at seeing how God sees, beneath the surface? Does our heart go out to them?

One time I was in a Walmart parking lot—talk about a place that'll test your sanctification—looking for a parking spot. I spotted somebody with their reverse lights popped on. I zoomed up and another vehicle zoomed up from the opposite side. We put our blinkers on both at the same time and we both held our ground. Who was going to get that spot? Well, the other person just about hit me and muscled their way into that parking spot, and I was *hot*. I was mad. There was already a bunch of other stuff going on that already set me on edge, and I was so mad. So I was ready to give that person a piece of my mind. I went on, and wouldn't you know, lo and behold, I saw that driver walking into the door at Walmart as I was going in as well, and I was ready to give her a piece of my mind, and then I saw—and by the way, this space was pretty close to the door, right?—that she was a young mom with three little kids in tow. And she shot me this look that clearly said, “Try me.” The bottom line is, I failed at seeing this person as God saw that person.

How can we see as God sees? How can we see the fuller picture? There's an image on the screen of an iceberg. And what do we know about icebergs? Many of us are familiar with this analogy—it's a great analogy that can be used in so many situations. The part that we see of each other above the surface is so small compared to what is going on beneath the surface. The part that we project of ourselves, or that others can see of us and really even that we can see of ourselves is so small in comparison to the fuller picture of who we are and who they are. And the problems arise when we begin making judgments about each other based on what we see on the surface, and maybe just a little bit that we can see beneath the surface if the water is clear enough.

So for instance, I'm going to pull my mask down and I want you to holler out, based on just looking at me, what do you see? Be kind. (People call out, “hair, smile.”) Nobody's going to say it? I'm a white guy. I've got a red beard, maybe I've got some Irish in me; I have no idea. But one of the things that we can see clearly about each other, that not one human being on this earth can hide, is the color of their skin. And one thing that can clearly unite nearly every single person together on the face of this earth—I say “nearly” because I'm sure there's some fanatic out there who would say, “No! Judge me by the color of my skin!”—is that no one wants to be judged by the color of their skin.

Now stay with me. Somebody last week clicked the “angry” button on our live feed, and I’m sure that people might be clicking the “angry” button already, because “he went there.” I saw a tweet yesterday that said, “It’s interesting being a pastor in the world right now, right? ‘You’re talking too much about racism. You’re not talking enough about racism. We need to open the church now. It’s too early to open the church. We’ve got to be safe, etc.’” So here we go. I’m going to step in it, because we need to step in it together. All right?

Let’s get back to me. I confess that even still today, if I’m walking down the street and a black man who I don’t know, or especially a group of black men who I don’t know, start approaching me from the other direction, somewhere deep inside, my spidey sense still goes off. That red flag pops up somewhere deep, deep down inside, that for a split second makes that fight-or-flight response start to creep up. And that response is not there if it’s a white man or a group of white men. I hate, hate, hate, *hate* that about myself. But I can’t deny it. Because on my surface, I’m not racist. I try to love everybody. Some of y’all make that really difficult for a whole host of other reasons. But I try to love everybody. Why do I have this response? Though it’s gotten a whole lot better over time, it’s still there. It’s what lies beneath. There’s a part of me that I don’t like to admit is there, that I’d rather just forget.

What lies beneath for you? And how did it get there to begin with? Well, there’s something else about icebergs. What makes up an iceberg? Water. And where does that water come from? The atmosphere above us, rainwater, right? Seawater all around it, right? The water that surrounds that iceberg. And here’s the thing: An iceberg would cease to be an iceberg without the water in which it is floating. Whether that water is clear or polluted, we cannot entirely separate the two. This is what we mean when we hear the word “systems,” that we hear so much about today. It’s an academic word. It’s a word that flies over many of our heads, especially when you hear terms like “systemic racism,” right? And we go, “I’m not racist, so that doesn’t apply to me at all.” It’s hard to grasp. We may be doing our best, so we think, at not being racist. We might be doing our best at seeing others as fellow human beings, being the best that we can be. But here’s the thing: We’re all swimming in the same water. *That’s* systems.

Our political nastiness that’s been going on since America was founded, pretty much, but seems to have gotten a whole lot worse over the last century, certainly. We can say—my wife is one of them—“I just try not to get involved.” But guess what? You’re still swimming in the same water as the rest of us. Right?

Along the ordination journey, I had a friend who was basically verbally and mentally abused by another pastor with whom she was working. And she told the district superintendent this, told the District Board of Ordained Ministry this, and she was flat-out told, “If you ever hope to be ordained to this Conference, you won’t mention this

again.” Now, the only part that I had to play in that was, I was a listening ear when she would get in my vehicle and we rode up to the Wesleyan Seminary together, and she’d burst into tears. But I knew then. I was inherently a part of that system that caused my dear friend harm, because I was still swimming in the water. That’s systems.

I grew up with dear family members and friends making outright racist comments that I and we laughed at. That’s swimming in the system. And that became part of me. And as much as I believe that I’m not a racist, I have been swimming in the system of racial bias, especially south of the Mason-Dixon line. And that has shaped a part of who I am, whether I admit it or not.

Let’s get away from race. Let’s get to something all white people seem to agree on—that not all cops are bad cops. Most white folks seem to at least be able to agree on that, right? So let’s go to that. As much as I fully agree that there are far more good cops than there are bad cops, even the good cops are swimming in the water of their training, which in certain localities has been documented to show that they are trained to escalate situations instead of deescalating situations. They’re still good, but they’re still swimming in that water. That’s systems.

That on the surface and underneath for *you*, you may not be racist. You may be far removed from George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and David Dorn and countless others. But we’re all swimming in the same toxic water here in America that’s blocking our ability to see what’s going on, really, beneath the surface.

Yes, there’s a lot to be proud of. But friends, let’s face it. There’s also a whole lot of pollution, too, that it’s all incumbent upon us to help clean up the water. And so what part of the water in which we swim in America, in *your* part of America, has shaped and become part of who you are, who *we* are as a church?

James Baldwin says, “History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us. We are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways. And history is literally present in all that we do.”

So how does God see us? Friends, God sees us completely. As Jesus saw the crowds, God sees how harassed and helpless we are by the wiles of Satan. And not just us, but everyone. And God sees what lies beneath for each of us. What makes us who we are. What makes others who they are. God sees the systems of sin in which we swim. And it’s easy to think that when he saves us, he saves us to pull us out of those systems of sin—“*I’ll fly away, oh glory*”—it’s a great song, but it’s wrong. But like an iceberg, we would cease to be who we are. Those created in his image, those created to bear his image in the midst of all the systems, good or bad.



So there's one more thing about icebergs. Depending on which scientists you pay attention to, the icebergs are melting, right? As sea temperatures rise, the icebergs melt. And as they melt, the fresh water that they collect from rain is literally changing the water around them. And depending on who you believe, that's also going to lead to our destruction, so that's where the analogy breaks down.

But God purifies us. Not to pluck us out of the water. But God purifies us while we're in the water so that we can purify and change the water around us, good or bad.

Another way that Jesus puts it is, "Before you remove the speck from your neighbor's eye, remove the plank from your own." And it's so easy to think, "I've already dealt with that plank. I'm good, thanks, Jesus." Well, friends, the point of that passage is, keep looking, because there's another plank. And then once you've dealt with that one, keep looking, because there's another plank. And when you think that you've dealt with all of them, keep looking, because there's another one there, until the day that we've graduated to glory. It's going to be there.

Psalms 139 says, "You search me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise. You see my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down. You are familiar with all of my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain." Wow. I don't know that I'm exactly comfortable with God knowing *everything* that goes on in here (points to head) and in here (points to heart), right? But the psalmist ends, "Search me, God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts." Lord, aren't we anxious these days? "See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Friends, if you want to start looking beneath the surface, there's a few suggestions. You may have seen the news that the movie, *Just Mercy*, based on a book by the same name by Bryan Stevenson—it's a fantastic book and a great movie—Warner Brothers has made it available for free. You can find it on just about all the streaming platforms: YouTube, Hulu or Netflix, Amazon Prime. Take a look at it. Another great movie is the movie *Selma*, as well. And then on Netflix, there is a documentary based on one of James Baldwin's books called, *I Am Not Your Negro*. Another opportunity to look beneath the surface of what's really going on.

So as such, one of the things that I've been struggling with as a person of great privilege, as one who people are expecting me to say something, and more importantly these days, *do* something, I'm inviting us to a conversation we're beginning with the PUB group, our young adult small group. We're going to be reading through Martin Luther King's *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, and sitting with it and letting it raise issues with us and wrestling with it. And as we go through PUB with it, we're then going to offer

that conversation to read through that as the church. So be looking for that in weeks to come. Now's the time for us to be having those types of conversations, even and especially here in this little small town like Smithfield.

So go forth with this: Search us, oh God, and know our hearts. Test us, and know our anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting. And as you go, proclaim this message: The kingdom of heaven has come near. Thanks be to God. Amen.