**Teaching**

Introduction –

Former Mercy and Justice Pastor at NCF for 11 years

Professor – adjunct with a couple universities

Founder and Operations Director for CCCHC

Treasurer for Rev. Dr. MLK Jr Advocacy for Justice Committee

Board Chair for the Illinois Association of Free and Charitable Clinics

Chair for the NCF Reparations Committee and CU Reparations Coalition

For this teaching, Renee asked that I tell my story. How did I get here?

**4**As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

While the prisoner language strikes me in a negative fashion when first reading it (I tried to find other versions with different wording and they all said prisoner in some fashion), I feel like I understand what Paul is trying to communicate. Prisoner does not have freedom by definition, but it is important to note what Paul is saying he is a prisoner to and for what. He is a prisoner FOR the Lord. As one who has believed and dedicated his life to the Creator of ALL things. So is a prisoner that has access to ALL things really a prisoner? Since God is ruler over ALL, we are the freest prisoners that ever existed. The key/trick is to find the right path in that freedom. A path, because we are prisoners, are compelled to take so we can live a life worthy of our calling.

God has a design beyond our comprehension.

Scripture is our guiding light, but the path is rarely clearly seen. And the parts that are clear are usually up close, often with no idea with what’s up ahead.

There are many guiding principles scripture provides us but a couple of them in particular, has served me as a guiding light throughout my life.

The 2 commandments

Scripture concerning unity

How did these play out for me? Glad you asked.

I learned there was a difference between white and black America from an early age. During my early years, I grew up lower middle class. Poor enough to know what living without looked like, but not so poor that I ever worried about a next meal or not having electricity or water.

This was probably best illustrated with the variations in Christmas gifts over the years. Sometimes I’d hit the jackpot and get a couple toy transformers or a miniature drum set (both of which I was obsessed with as a kid) and other times the highlight was a new pair of church shoes which for a kid was basically not getting anything for Christmas - especially considering that since we went to church ALL the time, it was a practical necessity wrapped in a box with a bow.

And it’s quite likely I would not have noticed two Americas because both my neighborhood friends and church friends were in similar situations. I’m sure there was a spectrum of conditions but those friends were relatively similar to mine. We all could relate to the same things, like hunting in the couch cushions and/or begging our parents for change when the ice cream truck was driving through the neighborhood. Or rarely ever going out for fast food and never experiencing a sit-down restaurant.

But what exposed me to the other world was my schooling. While the town I grew up in was nearly all black, a nearby town where I went to school, was almost all white. For Kindergarten through 2nd grade, there was only one other black student in my grade. While there was a nearby school that served my area, I ended up at a public school in the almost all white area. I’ve had conversations with my mom over the years and was told that was intentional on her part. I can’t recall the details, but it was clear my mom found a way to get me bussed to this school much further from my neighborhood than the local school. This happened again when we moved and I ended up at a much further away predominantly white high school.

It was at that school, I saw and experienced a different world. I quickly made friends and over time, came to see my white friends lived a very different life. I remember spending a night at my best friend’s house from school and being able to note differences. He had the latest ATARI game system (dating myself here), lots of toys (including transformers!), a bigger/nicer house, and other things I never had.

One area of difference that stood out to me was my experience as a Cubs scout with school friends. While my fellow scouts were able to increase their rank and get more and more patches, my track was much slower due to the lack of resources needed to do some of the tasks. I remember becoming a bear or webelo was this far reaching dream. I did good just getting to the wolf level. And 90% of that accomplishment came when hanging out with my white friend and his family. Cubs scouts by itself was a foreign concept in my house and neighborhood.

Perhaps the most significant difference came at school, starting in my music class. One day, the teachers had us sing two at a time for her. In retrospect, she was recruiting for a children’s choir. This was not your typical children’s choir either. This was a choir that sang at the city of Chicago’s Christmas tree lighting, traveled the world, and had a yearly concert at Orchestra Hall in downtown Chicago. My music teacher recommended me and I went to audition. I not only had to sing, but had to show I could read, skip on beat, and a couple other things. The rehearsal itself was in downtown Chicago, right off of Michigan Ave. At my first rehearsal, I came to realize which America this choir was when out of 50 or so kids, there was only one other black person. A black girl a bit younger than me. I was 10 at the time btw. And I cannot begin to describe the new world I experienced at that point. Every two years the choir traveled overseas to do concert tours and my first year they were due for a trip. That year included going to China and Japan. I remember selling (or at least trying) popcorn to everyone I knew as part of the fundraiser for me to go. I’m not sure how much my parents were able to contribute but I’m SURE the vast majority of the cost was covered by the choir.

And of course, yet again within the choir and during the 2 weeks in China and 1 week in Japan, I realized others had more resources than me. In the second half of our concert, we all wore costumes from different parts of the world. My guess in retro, to resemble unity around the world. The other kids had real costumes from all sorts of countries. The best I could do was cut out some cheap bed sheets and dress like I was a Muslim with the headdress and all. When we came out on stage, I was always the last to come in because I was the shortest alto in the choir (believe it or not, I was a short kid growing up). Every city where we performed, I received a hearty laugh from the audience. Till this day, I don’t know if it was bc they thought it was cute or bc how ridiculous my costume was. Lol

Despite my experiences in the other world, I always relished my black world as well. I was good at sports and by default that have one major acceptance in the black world and despite the dichotomy, I did not really place value judgment on the disparities but just figured, that’s just how it is.

I apologize for spending so much time on my history, but I feel that it largely reflects not only the two Americas in my world but to the country as a whole. It also shaped who I am today.

There are vast gaps in resources, in knowledge, in everything in this country. I cannot even imagine the additional knowledge I had compared to my black neighborhood and church friends or even family. I got to walk on the Great Wall of China, sing in Tiananmen’s square, learn how to use chopsticks, and sing songs in Chinese and Japanese. I remember coming back and singing one of my Japanese songs at church. From that day forward, my grandfather was tickled every time he saw me because of that song. I can’t imagine how foreign it was for him to hear his grandson sing in another language in a traditional black baptist church.

I understand my experience was not typical for even my white friends, but I might as well have stepped on the moon to my black community.

These experiences, positive in both worlds, shaped who I am today. Despite the divide, I always felt people of different races could and should be able to coexist and be one.

**2**Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. **3**Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

As time went on, I came to understand the unfairness of these differences, but still felt unity was important. After all, growing up in church and reading the Bible and attending Sunday school never included talk about there being two Americas. It only talked about how all of God’s people were one body.

**4**There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; **5**one Lord, one faith, one baptism;**6**one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

That’s one of the reasons I decided to attend and eventually become a pastor at NCF. When I first came down to U of I, (largely here in part to my exposure and experiences in white America during my school years), I quickly got involved in a campus ministry that my older brother was recently asked to lead. This was not a simple decision btw, bc I had my fill of church growing up and had no interest in organized religion whatsoever at that time. Like my brother had said at one point, he wanted to find out what the rest of the world did on Sundays. But out of want to support him, I went to Bible study on Friday evenings no less. Even though the group met at the Wesley Foundation, it was an African American campus ministry… on purpose. See, at that time, if you were a white student, you had several campus ministries to choose from, InterVarsity, Campus Crusade for Christ, etc. There was even a huge campus ministry for Korean and other Asian students. But before FAITH (the name of the ministry), there was nowhere for a black student to go where he or she was able to experience worship, prayer, teaching, and other worship practices similar to how they grew up. As the ministry grew and developed, we started reaching out to churches for support. We had anywhere from 50-100 students over the years just at U of I alone, with a litany of ministries within FAITH. Matter of fact, our stepping ministry, we called STOMP (which stood for Stepping to Our Messiah’s Principles) came and did our routine at NCF. It was through my reaching out on behalf of FAITH, that I met Ron Simkins. To raise funds for FAITH, I met with lots and lots of pastors, mostly black but some white as well. Despite having been told by all of them that we were doing great work and verbally supported our efforts, very few of them followed words with resources. Again, I was experiencing two Americas. After all, my fellow campus ministries had enough resources to staff their groups with several full-time employees and had other resources. For us, despite our similar size and even spreading to other campuses, we barely had enough for basic functions, let alone having any paid staff. But NCF was one of the few places that put their money where their mouths were which surprised me as FAITH was practically all black and NCF was primarily white. It was through that experience, that provided a runway for what would eventually bring me to attend and agree to come on staff at NCF. I always believed in unity and had my experience of the white world so the thought of coming to NCF was not absurd to me as it would have been for most black people.

While being the mercy and justice pastor was the role I was hired for at NCF, the hope to realize unity and being one body was a goal as well. And I came to believe that if it could happen anywhere, it was at NCF.

I probably experienced this the most down in Clarksdale Mississippi. Every year, NCF would travel to the Mississippi Delta region to help build homes through Habitat for Humanity. During the years I went, we split our group between Clarksdale and a place off of Sherard Rd. Each trip, we would have a joint gathering to reflect on the week and worship together- both NCF and families in Mississippi. I recall so vividly being able to feel completely comfortable singing both NCF songs and the traditional black church songs sung by the families in Mississippi. I was fully familiar with the different styles in praying and with all the people in the room. Something I can say with a high level of confidence, no one else could experience. It was confirmation that God did intend for us to be one body. Had there not been a history of division and strife in this country, this is what churches all over America could and should have looked like.

**Psalm 133:1 How** **good** and pleasant **it** **is** when God’s people live together in unity!

Some may respond to that scripture, asking, “Is it really”? After all, living together seems to bring conflict, difficulties, sacrifice, and at best, being uncomfortable. However, my experience in Mississippi gave me a glimpse of what that scripture really meant. Not to mention, conflict, difficulties, sacrifice, and being uncomfortable is par for the course in Christianity.

I share all this history to say that Unity Matters. While we may not have realized ongoing, consistent unity of racial differences at NCF over the years, there were many other areas where I believe tremendous progress has been made. And even if the outcomes may fall short of hopes, we have found success in the process and in developing the desire and will to build one body. And there have been victories in engaging the process – hiring me was one as there was some hesitance to specifically seek out an African-American to fill the mercy and justice role at that time; we introduced traditional gospel and AA style worship and at one point, hired a person of Korean descent to lead that worship, and today, Renee has led the charge for NCF to take the idea of reparations seriously enough to have birthed some exciting movement in that direction. That heart of unity led me here, which led to me having resources behind me to engage our community in ways that contributed and continues to contribute to the idea of unity.

In the last couple of years, I have focused on issues of racial justice. This is not because I have become what someone called us at the health center after I wrote a piece about my black life mattering, “bleeding-heart liberals”. It’s because I feel God is showing me and that the next step to on the path to unity is through reparations. This a step on the path that I believe gets us closer to resembling the body of Christ. For too long, we have tried to get along just to get along. Now, there is an opportunity to move through a path that brings us genuinely closer to the two Americas becoming one. Granted, that path is a very long and treacherous one, but I believe these are our next steps. This has taken shape over the years in different fashions, such as the big push for reconciliation in the 90s. While this was a step through the path, I believe that experience exposed the need to go beyond building community. Many of those efforts fizzled out bc, I believe, it did not truly take into account the need for repair. It’s great if we could just all get along like Rodney King asked after being brutally beaten by police officers at that time. But getting along requires what our reparations committee has learned- Education, Acknowledgment, and Reparations (EAR). I believe that is the EAR we all need to take the next step on the path to unity.

**11**So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12**to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13**until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

God did not design us to hate one another. God did not draw boundaries on maps or hidden ones in neighborhoods.

God did not plan to see homogeneity during the high point of worship every week.

God wants us to be one body because that’s how we best fulfill our calling to build this kingdom -a kingdom that should exist on Earth as it does in heaven.

My adult life is just one tiny example of what unity can achieve. I can’t imagine what we have missed and continue to miss functioning without it.

Thankfully, God can redeem all and has already done so through Jesus. Because of Jesus, we are forgiven where we fall short and have a hope to move forward and towards unity.