

# Uncovering Anti-Asian Racism & Xenophobia

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Good evening my friends, I am so grateful to the Baraboo Acts Initiative and leadership for the invitation to speak tonight. It is an honor and a privilege, especially on a topic that is critically important to me. It is my deepest hope and desire that we not merely focus on the problem and challenge of Anti-Asian Racism and the larger issue of widespread Xenophobia, but that we will see action steps that we might take to become a more kind, caring, and welcoming culture.

Sadly, there is a long history of Anti-Asian Racism in the United States – as there are many forms of ethnic prejudice and racism in our history – dating back to the founding of the nation. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Chinese laborers worked in mines, logging camps, and building the trans-continental railroad. The camps these workers lived in were atrocious – poor food, poor clothing, poor housing, filthy conditions with poor sanitation, widespread illness, untreated injury and disease, and an extremely high mortality rate, especially among women and children.

In the twentieth century, war was the primary trigger for Anti-Asian racism and persecution: following the attack on Pearl Harbor, more than 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent were moved to internment camps, many staying from 1942 until 1945. Again, the living conditions in these prison camps were extremely poor. Most of the Japanese Americans removed from their homes lost all their property and belongings.

In our own Wisconsin Conference, the United Methodist Church, where I serve, we honor every year a clergy or a laity leader who work for racial justice and reconciliation, named after the Rev. Perry Saito. Perry Saito lived and taught non-violence and respect for all of life. Saito's Christian faith and commitment to peace and justice was shaped by experiences in Japanese internment camps in California during World War I. He helped found the Fellowship of Reconciliation and was a leading figure in justice and reconciliation ministries regarding peace, poverty, and people's rights. He served many congregations across Wisconsin, always championing racial justice.

Acts of violence against Asian people, not just the Japanese escalated from 1942 into the early 1950s, even ending in lynching where some were set on fire and burned alive. Even though the United States supported South Korea and South Viet Nam, aggression and violence against Asian-Americans increased during and following each war.

In the twenty-first century, much of the aggression and violence against those of Asian descent has been the result of globalization and the spread of disease and virus SARS, bird-flu, and the COVID-19 coronavirus.

One of the greatest tragedies of Anti-Asian racism is the in-discriminate and ignorant understanding of what Asian actually means. Historically, European Western culture adopted the designation of the ancient middle east where the term oriental was coined. Ancient peoples used the sun rise to orient themselves, understanding the compass of the world as dependent on the sun rising in the east. Therefore, people from the east were oriental.

The generic stereotype fostered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as the “yellow peril” lumps most Eastern ethnicities and cultures into one indistinct mass. This of course has happened with the multiple and diverse black ethnicities and cultures, Hispanic and Latino ethnicities and cultures, and Native American and indigenous ethnicities and cultures. **It is critically important that the members of the full, wide spectrum of races, cultures, languages, and ethnicities remember that we are not in competition** – there is nothing gained by establishing one race, ethnicity or culture to be more oppressed or more victimized than others. Racism – in all its forms – must be eradicated and replaced fully just and inclusive beloved community and radical acceptance.

The Greatest Challenge we all face is ignorance. As long as we live in ignorance, there is little motivation for positive change. When we learn about those who are different, when we gain understanding about the practices and beliefs of others, when we

seek to know others as real people and valuable individuals, we develop sympathy, empathy, caring, and we expand our circles of who belongs in beloved community.

**Xenophobia** is simply **fear** of the other – of those who are different or foreign or strange to us. There is only one way to make the unfamiliar familiar and that is to enter into relationship and conversation.

A parable in the Hindu Vedas tells of a man entering a darkened room. To his horror he sees what looks like a snake coiled in a corner. Though full of terror at the prospect of a venomous snake ready to strike, he fights the urge to flee and instead moves toward the snake to examine it. Upon a closer look the specter is discovered to be nothing but a harmless coil of rope. This, according to the Vedas, is the purpose of enlightening-to disarm the fearsome-ness of the world by removing the threat of the unknown. Knowledge of the truth about the world renders the world less fearful and more bearable.

When we perceive someone as a potential source of reward rather than threat, we are put at ease, made to feel safe and comfortable, free to consider carefully a variety of stimuli and to think more generously and therefore more clearly.

Being together is the best way to cultivate real understanding, but it takes effort and intentionality. We need to want to learn and grow and relate. Every one of us has invisible boundaries that define “us.” But wherever an “us” exists, there is also a “them,” – those outside our circle of “us.” The will of God is that Christian believers will continuously expand their circle of “us” until such time as “them” disappears, and what is left is **“all of us together.”**

The phrase “you don’t belong here” is one of the most common assaults Asian-Americans hear (closely followed by, “go back where you came from.”). Asian languages are very dissonant to Western ears. Asian foods – an incredibly diverse array of delicacies and favorite dishes that cross a huge ethnic and cultural diversity – employ a distinctive spice palette and pungency very unusual to Western noses. Asian music, in its multiple forms, is traditionally quite different from Western forms – though K-Pop and Chinese rock music are growing in popularity worldwide. The practices and preferences of most Asian cultures’ present challenges to white, Western normativity.

Normativity is simply the practices, preferences, and worldview of a culture; but the reality of normativity is that what is “normal” for a dominant culture takes precedence, making that which is normal for minority cultures “abnormal” from the dominant point of view. Practices, preferences, and worldviews outside the dominant normativity are often denigrated and labeled with racist and offensive terms. In the history of the United States, various Asian groups have been called “Chinks,” “Gooks,” “Slant-eyes,” “Yellow dogs,” “devils,” “demons,” “monkeys,” and dozens of other disrespectful and hurtful names.

What we have witnessed in recent days is an in-discriminate racism against anyone displaying any characteristics considered Asian or Pacific Islander. Even hate crimes and aggressive acts against Hawaiian people have increased since the beginning of the pandemic. Pew Research found in the 1980s that 3-out-of-4 citizens in the United States made no differentiation between diverse Asian ethnicities. Today, this explains why people of Japanese, Filipino, Thai, Laotian, Korean, Indonesian, Cambodian, Myanmar extraction have suffered violence spurred on by such racially insensitive and inaccurate terms as “the China virus,” and the “kung-flu.” People who realize the coronavirus likely originated in China use this as a rationale and reason to attack all Asian people.

Globalization at the end of the twentieth century connected China to the rest of the world in new and significant ways. Growth in global trade and participation in worldwide organizations made China a world class power. The work on the New Silk Road promises to make China preeminent in the global economy. However, with growth in intercontinental travel, some of the most significant health challenges of the Chinese people became global health challenges. It is important to state that China is not responsible for these health challenges – China has not made any of these things happen – but the rest of the world now shares in the necessary responses to what happens in China. We are one world community, and what threatens one part, truly threatens all.

Between 1995 and 2020 – a twenty-five year period – the Federal Bureau(비로) of Investigation Hate Crimes Analysis Division tracked violence against Asian people by non-Asian people. Here are some of their findings:

Death by violent attacks – 442 (approximately 18 each year)

Injury by violent attacks – 7721 (approximately 308 each year)

Homes/properties damaged or destroyed – 11,231 damaged, approximately 450 each year; 4,414 destroyed – approximately 177 each year)

Subjects of “hate crimes” – vandalism, taunting, assault, terrorism, etc. – 56,451 (or 2,258 per year, an average of 6 per day).

The F.B.I. also states that only about 20% of crimes are reported. If we multiply each of these figures by 5, the numbers are absolutely chilling.

Let me share some of my siblings in Wisconsin context: One of significant Asian community in Wisconsin would be Hmong people. We see that Hmong people still struggle to be seen after over thirty-five years in the United States. Whether cast as model minorities or as “failed” and under-achieving Asian Americans, the complex experiences of Hmong Americans are invisible.

Hmong people, often referred to as Miao or Meo in Asia, are an ethnic group that originated from China and Southeast Asia. During the Second Indochina war (Vietnam War) and the Secret War in Laos, Hmong people in Laos were recruited as guerilla fighters to support American troops against the Communist-backed North Vietnamese Army and Pathet Lao forces. After the United States pulled out of Vietnam in 1975, Hmong people became targets for ethnic and political persecution. As a result of their involvement with the US military, Hmong people were forced to flee from Laos to Thailand, the United States, and other European countries as refugees.

In Wisconsin, they migrated to maintain kinship ties and co-ethnic networks, build social and cultural capital, increase economic opportunities, and gain access to different and better educational opportunities. While the Hmong American community’s poverty rate has decreased over time, they remain one of the poorest ethnic groups in Wisconsin and the United States. Racism and the model minority stereotype put them in targeted and invisibility in victimization.

Most Americans do not have a good knowledge of Korean history. Not going too far back in history, Korea was regularly under attack and different powers invaded to control the Korean peninsula. Korea was regularly besieged, and at the beginning of the twentieth century, Japan, China, and Russia fought for control. Japan won and began a colonial period of development, but always for their own benefit. Korea was decimated during the second World War, experiencing a brief period of restoration before Russia and the United States established the division that came to define North and South Korea. In 1950, South Korea declared independence and North Korea, with the support of China and the Soviet Union, invaded South Korea, launching the Korean War. Many Americans are unaware that the Korean War has never ended. An armistice agreement was signed in 1953 after almost four years of devastating war division was established along the latitude of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, and Korea remains divided to today.

Three years ago, an historic meeting occurred between President Donald Trump and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s (DPRK) Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un resulting in the Panmunjom Declaration – considered to be the first big step toward disarmament and reunification of the Korean peninsula. While not much has happened since, many world leaders never thought they would see such a meeting between North Korea, South Korea, and the United States in their lifetime.

One of my spiritual disciplines as a bishop has been to try to spend often with a person who are not Christian. As bishop, I was surrounded all day, every day with no one except well-formed life-long Christians. I was intentionally involved much interfaith communities as possible as I can. I have many friends from Muslim, Buddhist, Hindus, or even non-believers. My gratitude through interfaith journey not only I have learned much about who they are and what they believe, but more they has taught me how I came to be Methodist, and better Christians. They are truly companion in my spiritual journey.

I began asking people how they chose where to live and work. It quickly became clear to me that people were not slavishly following jobs to places. Their location choices were based to a large degree on their lifestyle interests.

Once I was a guest preacher in DC, Foundry Church, I have met with all Asian young professionals in the afternoon. I asked where to live and work. They said, **“it has to be open. It has to be diverse.... It has to have a visible gay community. It has to**

**have lots of different races and ethnic groups. It has to have all people of all ages and be open to young people. It has to have people who look different. “**

It is not enough to reflect on what is wrong in our society today and how it came to be our current reality. The story written up to this day is not the end of the story. It is up to all of us to decide what kind of story we will write for our future. It is never enough to be against something; we need to be for something as well.

I want to turn briefly to three passages of Christian scripture to help cast a vision for true, inclusive, just, beloved community.

- Romans 12:2 – “be not conformed to this world, but by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The way things are today, and the way they have been throughout much of our history, is not the way things must be in the future. Conformity to ignorance, intolerance, prejudice, aggression and violence can be transformed through education, engagement, relationship building, and a regular commitment to reflect on our core Christian values.

- Micah 6:8 – “God has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

God’s people are commanded God’s people to refrain from harm, to do good, and to continue to grow together in a faith of love and grace. We already KNOW what is good – to do justice to all people in all places at all times in all ways; to love kindness and to extend kindness, compassion, mercy, and peace to all people, and to walk humbly – caring as much or more about others as you care about yourself. If the church could do nothing more than work together in humility with infinite kindness to fight for justice, we would see God transform our world.

- Ephesians 2:13-14 – “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, in his flesh he makes both groups one and has broken down the dividing wall; that is, the hostility between us.”

If there are any dividing walls between people, they are of human origin and creation; God through Jesus Christ has torn down all the dividing walls of hostility and unites all races, nations, languages, skin tones, and ethnicities into one glorious body.

Racism is anti-Christian as well as bigotry against a group of God’s people; it is irreconcilable with authentic Christian discipleship. Our first work in The United Methodist Church is to dismantle and eliminate institutional and systemic racism so that we can model such transformation for the world.

One last Biblical image and instruction is so essential for me: Matthew 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called children of God.” I truly believe the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect as Paul writes in the Romans 12 passage – is for the contemporary church to be equipping and supporting peacemakers, peace builders, and peacekeepers. We need to be disciples of the Prince of Peace – all of us, in whatever way possible, that we can use our gifts to cultivate this fruit of the Holy Spirit. Peace is the foundation of beloved community, and Christ is the keystone upon which we build.

John Wesley established what he called The General Rules to guide the people called Methodist in their early class meetings – the small groups formed for spiritual education and faith development. These rules are summarized historically: first, do no harm; second, do all the good you can; and third, attend to the ordinances (instructions) of God; Wesley’s vision is that beloved community is possible in this lifetime if we will all observe these simple guidelines. The people of God are the incarnate body of Christ for the world – to offer healing, encouragement, love, forgiveness, and support to everyone we meet. This is why I believe that there is no place for racism in our churches.