



“SEEING YELLOW”
SCRIPTURE: 1 JOHN 3: 1-7
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, April 18, 2021
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

1 John 3:1-7

3:1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

3:2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

3:3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

3:4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.

3:5 You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

3:6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.

3:7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

Video - Butterflies

This past Monday I went to Bent Creek for a walk. I spent a lot of my walk enchanted by all the butterflies--all of them flying in the same direction--one after the other, in single file, like runners in a race.

They seemed to know exactly where they were going.

They were so vivid, so beautiful. The sunlight reflecting off their yellow wings sent energy through me--like little bolts of life force.

(stop showing butterflies)

It got me to thinking about seeing yellow--and all of what it kindles in me.

Sidney's room when he was born in Chicago was yellow. John's mom and I drew little butterflies and bees on the wall with sharpies.

And after a miscarriage and a very difficult pregnancy he was a bolt of life force--he was a new beginning for me.

I didn't know it at the time when I chose the colors for his room, but the third chakra emanates yellow and is about birth and new beginnings--and the strength and courage within.

The first flowers of the Spring I would see at my childhood home in KY were yellow--a patch of daffodils near the swing set my dad put up for us with all my sisters' and my name painted on the poles. And the forsythia bush that bloomed at the bottom of the driveway where I would ride my skates--the kind you clipped on to your shoes. I remember watching the bees work the blooms.

Image - (split screen with dandelion picture)

The dandelions come up without human help--even causing human consternation--some places we have lived people have been obsessed with not having any dandelions on their lawns. I've learned to be fine with the dandelions--and see their beauty.

Yellow is the color that best attracts the early pollinators--mostly flies and some bees.

Image off

Yellow stands out and is easily detected by the insects that help to feed the world by transferring their pollen.

Yellow flowers are the early adopters of Spring--the first responders--the ones with the courage to go first.

Somebody has to go first, right!

And it can be dangerous to go first. Yellow flowers can get killed by the late freezes. Yellow flowers can languish in the March or April frosts. They can get fooled by premature warm temperatures.

Yellow is courageous--yellow is a color that says "I'll take my chances to live as fully as I can!"

What comes up for you when you see yellow--the color of the sun, the color of fire, the color of the first flowers in the Spring?

Those yellow butterflies at Bent Creek just kept coming and they took me deeper into memories and associations.

The color John and I painted the kitchen in the house we lived in when we were newly married.

My favorite Easter dress when I was a little girl--a buttery yellow color.

Image - (split screen with buttercup picture)

Then I thought of yellow buttercups. Every year my anxiety level goes up when I see all those buttercups out there in the pasture for a few weeks because it is toxic to horses. Cows are fine eating it. But not horses. Somehow horses tend to know not to eat it though.

(take down buttercup picture)

Then I remembered the yellow LEGO Jesus from a few weeks ago during worship--on Palm Sunday.

Image - (split screen with lego picture)

Do you remember the LEGO Jesus in the video we showed during Faith Sharing?

The one that had Batman in Jerusalem laying down his cape as Jesus rode by on a donkey and Star Wars Storm Troopers and Polly Pockets lining the streets.

Why was Jesus yellow in the LEGO video?

Image off

LEGO has used yellow for some of what they call their “generic” figures for a long, long time. Lego is a Swedish company and they thought using yellow signaled a color that no humans really are.

The Lego makers put it this way on their website:

When we invented minifigures almost 40 years ago, we chose yellow because it's a neutral “skin colour” – nobody in real life has bright yellow skin, so LEGO® minifigures don't represent a specific race or ethnic background and nobody is left out.

While we've made some minifigures that aren't yellow, they're usually based on characters we didn't create. We try to make them look just like those characters so kids can play out the story at home.

There's so much here--LEGO wanted us to see yellow as something outside the racialized world we live in. But the truth is that we don't really have that ability, do we? --the ability to extract ourselves from the racialized ways we have been taught to see and to feel.

Those yellow butterflies, they just kept coming on my walk on Monday--and the Holy Spirit was using those ethereal creatures to provoke me to go deeper about what it means to "see yellow."

3:1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

That is... because the world did not know Jesus.

We don't see each other as children of God and the world does not see all of us as children of God, because the world did not really see Jesus for who he is.

So when my thoughts on my walk got to the yellow LEGO Jesus, I knew I had to keep going--that there is more here for us, Grace Covenant.

Because the truth is, that LEGO Jesus brought up a lot of stuff--a lot of stuff that I am still feeling about how God is calling this community.

You might remember that during the video, there was a brief discussion on the chat. Our sister, Phyllis Utley, named what she saw--a white Jesus in the LEGO video.

I knew that staff had noted that Jesus was the LEGO yellow since it was a video we didn't make ourselves. The superheroes and make-believe characters made it a kind of whimsical and fantastical telling of the story.

I could feel the tension around that dissonance, that LEGO wanted us to see something outside the parameters of human experience--something outside the parameters of white. But maybe that's an imaginary that is not possible for us.

After worship I went back and read the chat--I couldn't really engage in it during worship. But after the fact I noted that some of you reached out to support Phyllis and when you saw the LEGO Jesus in that framework, you wanted it to be different, too. Some of you thanked her for pointing that out. Some of you agreed. Our sister Carol Hovis said, "we need a do-over on the LEGO Jesus."

It's hard to say how we could have navigated all that was coming up from the yellow LEGO Jesus had we been together in a room--seeing each other face to face, reading body language, feeling the energy fields in the room.

What's important to me is the way we navigated it in our current mode of worship. I would hazard a guess that many of you didn't notice a thing--you didn't think twice about why Jesus was yellow or even notice that he was yellow or notice what was happening in the chat.

The important thing for us to consider is not that we had different experiences of the LEGO Jesus and that seeing yellow evoked some dissonant feelings and reactions. The important thing to sit with is what impact did it have on us as a community seeking to eradicate white supremacy from the planet.

I don't think we need a do-over of the LEGO video, I think we need a go-deeper with each other about what this work of eradicating white supremacy culture actually means for us.

And what I see in the way this all played out is that we are learning to trust each other, but we are still struggling to trust each other.

If we are about the work of eradicating white supremacy, then we are bound to move in and out of such dissonant moments over and over again. And we shouldn't kid ourselves into thinking the goal of our community is to avoid that dissonance.

The unique thing about this work is that it really requires muscles and habits and sensations that none of us have had the space to use much at all--especially in spaces taken up mostly by white people.

So moments like this one--where we touch into a place of tenderness and vulnerability that hits people in all sorts of different ways, moments like this one are often missed opportunities for truly loosening the grip of white supremacy on us. In fact, moments like this one often tighten the grip that white supremacy has on us.

It sounds so simple: “seeing yellow.” But it’s not simple at all--it’s loaded with all sorts of things that we’re not sure how to navigate together. All ways of seeing yellow are not equal in terms of their truth or their capacity to dignify and liberate. And whiteness has socialized us with defensiveness, and with atrophied muscles when it comes to acknowledgement of dissonance without trying to resolve it.

The other thing about yellow is that it’s got its own racial history--deployed by white supremacy to fuel the machine of colorism--the deadly architecture of racial hierarchies that white supremacy depends on to survive. Without colorism white supremacy would be exposed for the lie that it is--because whiteness really means nothing when we take away all the lies it tells us.

Whiteness was invented to protect the wealth and power of the landed gentry who came to this country in the 16th and 17th centuries to capitalize on the resources that were here in such abundance. Creating a system of advantage based on skin color was their answer to the problem of too many people getting to cash in on the bounty they knew was here.

And inventing whiteness has worked better than any other system of oppression this planet has ever seen. It has proven its ability to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few over the long haul at the same time it entrenches lasting delusion in the ways we see each other.

White body supremacy is ingenious really--it takes something that is not even there--because literally white is the absence of color--and it creates a whole universe of meaning based on color. Colorism is one of its nonsensical tools: light skin and dark skin and ethnicity and identity weaponized by whiteness to divide and conquer all those who whiteness wants to push to the margins one way or another.

“Yellow” can be a slur used against people of Asian descent.

In 1735, Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish physician and botanist, also known as the “father of modern taxonomy,” separated humans into four groups, including Homo Asiaticus — Asian Man. The other three categories, European, African and American, already had established — albeit arbitrary — colors: white, black and red. Linnaeus, searching for a distinguishing color for his Asian Man, eventually declared Asians the color “luridus,” meaning “lurid,” “sallow,” or “pale yellow.”

In the 60s yellow was reappropriated by some Asian American advocacy groups to signal their collective power to advocate for themselves, like the Black Power movement. But it remains a complicated and loaded term.

“Seeing yellow” can be a way that white supremacy divides communities of color against themselves. Because that’s what whiteness wants more than anything. It was born to divide. It was born to traumatize and break trust. It was born to make us all doubt that we can ever really be ourselves in the company of others. And there is so much pain there--so many stories of hurt, betrayal, and trauma.

Seeing yellow has had violent consequences in the history of this country.

3:2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Will we ever be able to be together and talk honestly about everything that white supremacy has taken from the human race? Will we ever be able to share that grief and feel that pain together? Will we ever be able to see God’s face when we see each other? Will we ever truly feel seen? Will we ever be able to see ourselves the way God wants us to see ourselves?

There is such violence in the way white supremacy breaks relationship and breaks trust. There is no subtlety to how this violence persists and activates and debilitates and inflames and destroys.

The United States of America has fashioned itself as the world’s greatest democracy--the go to model for self-governance and freedom. That lie is intentional--because it is cover for the fact that the United States of America is most superlative in its capacity to build a society based on supremacy and violence.

Yet, in our country we are taught more in school about Nazi Germany and India than we are about the true history of this country. We use India’s caste systems and Nazi Germany as cautionary tales and as foils to our land of the free and home of the brave. But the truth is, America provides the template for how to most effectively oppress people for the benefit of the ruling class.

Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origin of our Discontents* unpacks this truth in chilling detail. And she paints a compelling picture that can reframe the way we understand ourselves as a nation.

Video - (Caste video) (4:00)

If you have not read Caste I hope you will. We will be exploring it together on the last Sunday in May at 9am during the Sunday School hour.

Color is the superficial cover overlaid on the deeper system of caste- the hierarchy of wealth and power that race has been deployed to maintain. And it is so deeply soaked into us that we can struggle to see what is right in front of us.

The main goal of white supremacy is to uphold a hierarchy of human beings—to build the toxic architecture of dehumanization that says some humans are less human than other humans. And therefore violence is a justified means of keeping everyone where they should be on the measuring stick of superiority.

And Jesus's main goal was to tell us that supremacy itself is a lie—and a deadly one. It kills to protect itself. And it tried to kill God to protect itself. Jesus showed us the poison of superiority and the violence it depends on.

He was not a generic human being, he was a man living on the edges of a world made for new life but captive to death dealing violence.

Images - (scroll through Black Jesus Pictures during the next paragraph)

Jesus would be driving a car with air freshener hanging from his rear view mirror, murdered by an officer of the law who has the power to turn a traffic stop into a death sentence. Jesus would be a Fed Ex worker gunned down at work by his own co-worker. Jesus would be a 13 year old shot in an alley when he complied with orders to put his hands up.

(Images gone)

He wanted us to see the hard truth about ourselves so that we can finally come home to each other—and come home to the divinity that defines each and every human being.

When we see Jesus for who he really is, then we see each other for who we really are—God's beloved creation—each unique, but none superior.

Superiority is the definition of lawlessness—because it breaks the most important commandment—to love one another as God loves us.

Superiority is the antithesis of righteousness—because it destroys the most fundamental requirement for being righteous—and that is being in right relationship.

Jesus came to go into the bones of the skeleton of oppression and dominance--and show us that dominance and violence are not what God made us for--and that dominance and supremacy and violence are killing us--the eternity, the new life he invites us toward is the true body of the cosmos--our interconnected, interdependent multiverse where we find balance and equilibrium together by the way we honor each other and the world that we share.

3:7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

And maybe us seeing yellow on Palm Sunday in all the dissonant and different ways we saw it, is a sign of new life, new birth underway here. But only if we let any truth the yellow told us lead us back to each other.

Some community needs to go first--some community needs to take a chance on finding a new way to be together in a world struggling to free itself from the chains and the delusions of whiteness.

Some community has to be courageous--and like the yellow flowers of early Spring say, "We will take our chances to live together as fully as we can!"

Why not us, Grace Covenant? Why not us?

Thanks be to God.