My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God who reveals truths to our Spirits and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Today’s scripture talks about the juxtaposition between the law and the greater righteousness. Both the law and the prophets testify to God’s work in history and the world—they are not at odds, but nor are they complete. Jesus comes in the middle of all of this and says that God’s Kingdom has opened and is beginning but is not yet complete; he embodies God’s teachings, yes, but also the definitive WILL of God. Jesus’ chief point is that the only final authority is God, not the Torah, not Elijah, not Moses. And so he gives us today these six examples of what was said in ancient times and what is being said now. Jesus relocated authority from earthly written text to himself; to God; to God’s presence in life, teaching, death, or resurrection. Jesus points toward not arguing about pronouncements; he transcends them. Transcendence is about bending the arc of justice to the future and seeing God’s will in that distance.

But communities and individuals struggle to see that arc, and I think lots of people are having a harder time in the arguments of specifics versus transcendence. Today is Racial Justice Sunday in the United Church of Christ, and we recognize that it’s Black Heritage and History Month also. So in order to understand what that is, and why it is, let’s take a look back before moving forward.

Carter Woodson was a public school teacher, a child of slaves, who earned a doctorate from Harvard in 1912, only the second Black person to do so up until then. As a public school teacher, he established the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and in 1926 launched Negro History Week. Woodson studied education in America and, through study and observation concluded that the violence Blacks experienced was directly tied to systematic processes of mis-education of all Americans, which were primarily taught through scripts which justified violence against blacks and created an enduring social problem.

Black culture has been distorted systematically through schools and social representations. Remember some of those things? We may no longer have black-face performers, but even now we talk in certain ways that denigrate intelligence of blacks, make assumptions about living conditions of black households, crime in ethnic neighborhoods, and economic mobility in black cities. That stuff is with us today, connotations that have little basis in fact, but which negatively affect our views and opinions about God’s brothers and sisters of ours.

 For Woodson, back then as today, schools, education, and the system of knowledge collectively are key battlegrounds in the struggle for equality and freedom. Woodson wrote an influential book called, “The Mis-Education of the Negro” in 1933, and it identified anti-Blackness in education as the fundamental problem at the heart of the Black freedom struggle. So Woodson brought focus to this by naming History week back in the 1930s, the fore-runner of our modern day Black Heritage and History month.

The central aim of Woodson’s naming a Heritage and History focus was to infuse education for students with critical knowledge about racial domination, not just through the KKK and lynchings, but more subtle things. Over-representation of European and white American history, and under-representation of black culture and accomplishment. White suspicion of black independent thought in the sciences, literature, and other venues. White philanthropists’ paternalistic approach to urban and educational issues and educators. It was as if there was, and is, 12% of the population that magically appeared as a permanent underclass in America, and is unable to move. It’s what slavery intended when blacks were first brought here, and for Woodson then, and many today, things haven’t improved much as blacks still struggle with institutional roadblocks to both economic and social mobility.

Woodson’s book demands that we re-defined the goal of education with the KIND of education opportunity for black students to prepare them for life to come rather than quantifying progress among a few black elites. Woodson wanted the education of people to begin with the people themselves—that blacks should be educated about their history, their race, their communities and imitating those role models—rather than ancient Rome or Greece and trying to imitate white Western Europe. And that starts at a very young age.

Since the publication of that book, it’s been reprinted a lot, and as a tribute to our own education on where we think we’re at on racial equality, let’s maybe read that book. Penguin Classics has put out a new edition that’s circulating in the pews right now. Just write down the ISBN number, and give it a try.

The point of that book, and the point of the systemic racism awareness projects that we hear about, is that racism affects entire institutions, from private enterprise, to the church, to the schools, to the government, art and music, and to other events in the public sphere, and unless we begin talking about it, we can’t even see it.

The beating of yet another young black man in Tyre Nichols brought this forward again, as police pulled a young black man from his car for no reason, and over the next 31 minutes, killed him as 5 local police officers helped participate and firefighters and sheriff’s persons also did not intervene. The reason why I’m bringing this in is that police violence happens disproportionally to blacks in numbers at least double to their community presence. The first thing the newspapers focused on in the Tyre Nichols story was that the officers were black. They should be focusing on the fact that another young black man minding his own business was killed by police.

If we cannot register one another’s painful history and struggle, how do we move forward? Do we not see we’re not changing our perception of black experience from slave to free? We change out of hoods and cloaks to deny basic rights, education, and social action and into suits and ties which trade the baton for the fountain pen. We are much more polite about racism these days when legislatures and courts act to keep black and brown folks down and blame them for their own suffering. Let’s be perfectly clear: hiring black officers or electing a black president doesn’t suddenly make us a post-racial nation.

The arc of justice is never having to fight for your life at a traffic stop in the first place. That’s something that you and I don’t ever have to even think about much less experience in our lives. Do we ever enter into that reality of lived experience of others among us? That experience that Jesus enters into with each person he meets? Can we do that in the person of Tyre Nichols? I’ll leave us with these final thoughts.

Our scriptures talk about transcendence. We, as a nation, need to keep talking about God’s will just as we act to keep society’s injustices in the light so that they are never re-enacted and their victims never forgotten.

But right now, we are a nation that is armed to the teeth, and we are taught to win at all costs, be right in every disagreement, to “go for the kill” in everything we do. The only transcendence that kind of teaching fosters ever more violent action in our lives, letting it sprawl outward. For there are no enemies; Jesus tells us to love all folks into our circle of brotherhood, even when it hurts to do so or is uncomfortable to encounter.

To honor black history month means to engage in black life and acknowledging our role, for until we choose love and liberation, it’s hard to see how this cycle will end. And we need for the violence and the hate to end. That’s the transcendence Jesus taught us in today’s scriptures, that it is God’s will that ultimately prevails. The will of justice and dignity, but through love and peace. And that all who hear will make it happen.

I hope we will see Dr. Woodson on the best-seller list sometime soon. That would be progress indeed.

Thanks be to God, Amen.