

Faith & Race Relations: Learning from Mistakes - Our Own & Others
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Our denomination joins others in naming today as Race Relations Sunday. Our text from Colossians opens the door for us to talk about the holiday in a faith context as tomorrow we will be celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr. day. Paul in his letter to the Colossians names the divisions of his time and declares that in Christ “there is no longer Greek or Jew, slave and free.” In his letter to the Galatians Paul includes “there is no longer male or female.” Paul challenged those hearers and continues to challenge us to overcome our divisions by acknowledging we are all made in the image of the creator. In the Creator, we are all the same, the beloved sons and daughters, children of God...but like the people of the first century, we the people of the 21st century are facing our divisions and learning from mistakes ~ our own and others.

What we've learned is that the world is not what it was in 1955 when Martin Luther King, Jr. led the Montgomery Bus Boycott or what it was in 1964 when Martin Luther King, Jr. became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his work to end racial segregation and racial discrimination through civil disobedience and non-violent means such as marching. What we've learned is that the world is not what it was in 1967, when racial tensions were raised in the controversial film Guess Who's Coming to Dinner. This film took on the subject of interracial marriage which had been illegal in most of the United States at one time or another and in the year the movie was released was still illegal in seventeen states until June 12 when the U.S. Supreme Court legalized interracial marriage—although it would take decades for the decision to be accepted. What we've learned is that our forefathers dream in declaring a democracy where all men are created equal would take centuries for that dream to be shared with men and women of all races. What we've learned is that a man of a different race than our forefathers re-declaring that dream on the steps of one of our national monuments in the 1960's can be a living dream in a bi-racial man's election by the people ~ for the people as President of this nation in the first decade of the 21st century. We've learned all these things, but we are still learning...

Before we get to specifics of some of what we are still learning let me just name some tensions, acknowledging that not everyone approaches this day in the same way, even here at Covenant. Although most Americans are pleased to celebrate the holiday tomorrow...still dreaming the dream...there are others who resist it. Questioning why Martin Luther King, Jr. is the only American for which there is a legal holiday. Even Presidents Washington and Lincoln have had their days combined into a generic Presidents' Day. My response, I believe that our nation needs this holiday as a marker of what we have learned...and what we still need to learn.

There are some who challenge that powerful, poignant “I Have a Dream Speech” because the very sentence that we remember most, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character” has been challenged. The character of Martin Luther King, Jr. has been scrutinized, nationally as late as January 9, 2006 on cover of Time Magazine, titled “The Agony of Martin Luther King, Jr.” In it, the stating of King's marital infidelity and questions over the 1977 federal court order sealing the FBI records of King until 2027. My response, behavior can be seen as a dialectic. By definition, human life is complex enough that two seemingly opposing

and contrary things can be true at the same time. Yes, King did not use discretion in all of his relationships and yes, King was an instrument of proclaiming in words and actions that we are all created in the image of God! So as the children of God, living our faith in this time, what are we still learning? Many things, of course, but specifically this morning, I want lift up three areas that directly connect to race relations although we recognize not exclusively: they are power, poverty and a pathway to equality...education.

First, power: By definition power is the ability to act or to produce an effect. Most will agree with that but then the avalanche of rock hard realities cascade down our thoughts and shake our hearts. We've learned from ours and others mistakes of not answering these questions honestly, prayerfully, non-defensively and courageously. What questions? Whose power? What kind of power? Power used for the promotion of humankind or power misused for the oppression of others. How can power work to change what needs to be changed and how to exercise wisdom to know what to leave alone? When to work from within the structure and when to attack the status quo to shake the structure or even destroy it so that a new one on a new foundation can be built. And we've learned from successes, our own and others.

One of the most powerful leaders of our time, and remember we are using the definition of power as the ability to act or to produce an effect, is another Nobel peace prize recipient, Nelson Mandela. Mandela brilliantly, inspirationally led his country on a most incredible uphill journey, the end of apartheid in South Africa. The recent movie, *Invictus*, portrayed the brilliance. As a Black South African imprisoned for twenty-seven years, after his release and election as President of that country, Mandela did not retaliate and oppress those who oppressed him...no, he did not give into what was an understandable temptation to play tug-of-war with the teams of Black and White pulling the country apart again. Instead, he humbly and courageously led that country to play and watch and support a different game...Rugby! The focus was not on Black and White but on the colors of the country being flown in the 1995 World Cup for all to see. Of course, it did not fix all the problems but it held up for a time what they had in common, that they were all South Africans. Inspired to use power in new ways, Mandela established The Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a healing opportunity for his country, Black and White. From there, he used his power as President to introduce reforms to improve housing, education and economics for Black South Africans.

About power, Martin Luther King, Jr. said "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice." The demands for justice are seen in the next two areas we are looking at in connection to race relations, poverty and a pathway to equality...education.

The facts about poverty are daunting and a lot to absorb but stay with me. In a Washington Post article from September 11, 2009, summarizing the US Census annual report, we hear that the recent recession has plunged 2.6 million more Americans into poverty and pushed the number of people without health insurance up to more than 46 million. In all, nearly 40 million Americans were living in poverty in 2008. The last time there were this many poor people in the United States Martin Luther King, Jr. was alive. Included in the overall numbers, I want to pull out that the poverty rate for single-race Blacks, was nearly 25% and 19% of black residents in the US do not have health insurance.

But we know it's not just the US, worldwide, over three billion people, half the world's population live on less than \$2.50 a day. Almost eighty percent of the world's populations live on less than \$10/day. What do these statistics really look like? From a tragic situation, we've been looking at pictures all week. On Tuesday, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti, was struck by a devastating earthquake. The pain and suffering of fellow human beings has stirred the world to respond in compassion with money, food, water, medical and other supplies...but we all know that the journey to healing and wholeness will be long and hard.

That long and hard journey is one we join the Haitians on and also one that we continue to walk on in our own and in other countries around the world as we rise to the challenge of addressing poverty with a true motivation of compassion.

Guilt is the worst motivator which has been employed by some to get us, the rich, to contribute to the poor. Love is the best motivator; it is the one Jesus used most. Summarized in the great commandments, first love God and then love others as you love yourself. We love in our attitudes and through our actions. We love with our voices and our votes. We love with our eyes, minds, and hearts open. We've learned we cannot make the mistake of keeping ourselves closed off from others and we've learned we cannot make the mistake of judging how others open up! We all open our eyes, minds, and hearts in different ways, some in mission, some in advocacy, some in mentoring, some in contributing, some entrepreneurs as philanthropists, some in working within systems and some challenging systems to change...all created in the image of God, reflecting God's light and love...serving as we can as instruments of justice.

The third way we are going to lift up looking at race relations is that pathway to equality, education. Contrary to the saying, Ignorance is not bliss; it is deadly...to individuals and to nations. Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Every country in the world needs this weapon! Equality of power and equity in the distribution of the world's wealth are connected to the pathway of education. Equal education has not been achieved in our schools; there is divide in our schools between various races' levels of success. And like the challenges surrounding poverty we open our eyes, minds and hearts to addressing those challenges in different ways. Some volunteer in schools. Some work on policies. Some work with literacy programs. Recently through the work of some in our congregation and others in our community, Madison voted on the creation of K4 program to begin in 2011. And then there are the informal ways to educate or not. For example, I was talking to an African American Pastor about the movie, Avitar. I asked him if he liked it. He said, "No, what we don't need is another movie to teach us that the white man needs to come in and save the blue race." The pathway to equality through education, formal and informal is another long and hard journey.

We've named the areas of power, poverty and the pathway of education but the answers are found together as we continue the long, hard journeys. We've learned from our mistakes and the mistakes of others but we still have much to learn. There is still much to do to improve race relations. So we keep marching. With big and little steps, we march. Big steps, like changing policies that discriminate. Little steps, when was the last time you invited someone of a different race to dinner? We still have a long way to go! The march goes on; we are marching in our world, in our country, in our schools, in our communities, and in our churches.

And we know that the issues inherent in race relations go beyond black and white. A teenager at Memorial High School once told me, that since 9/11 he has told people he was Hispanic because everybody hated people from his country. And in the democratic primaries in the last presidential election, someone said what others were thinking: "I'd sooner vote for a half-Black man than a white woman!" We still have a long way to go! So we march, each in our own ways, we march.

The US Census bureau has projected that by 2050 there will not be a majority race in the United States; we will have become the true "melting pot." This challenge is all a part of the dream...the dream of our forefathers [and I'd like to believe fore-mothers,] and the dream of others like Martin Luther King, Jr. who marched before us. The dream that Paul named as reality thousands of years before our country was founded that is yet to be fulfilled, that one day there will no longer be Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female...we will all be one in Christ...children of God. It's not yet, but it is our dream. So as people of faith, we are still marching...marching, marching to live the dream, because what we have in common, what we want the world to see, is our love for God and our love for others, building race relations in the boundless love of Christ who sees us as one. Amen.