

## “Racism and The Way”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, Florida  
September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Prov. 22:1-2,8-9,22-23

Mark 7:24-37

‘Troublemakers get in trouble, and their terrible anger will get them nowhere.  
The Lord blesses everyone who freely gives food to the poor.’

Prov. 22:8-9

Let us pray... O God,  
Help us to separate the chaff from the grain, the husk from the seed,  
deception from hope.  
Help us to see others as a messenger from you  
challenging our prejudices and hypocrisies.

Amen

Last Sunday, I told you about an Episcopal church I attended in NJ  
that was committed to a broad range of liberation ministries.  
While I was there, I had the opportunity to hear Bishop John Shelby Spong  
preach and teach.  
I also remember another guest preacher – though I don’t recall his name.  
He was African-American and his text was today’s Gospel lesson.  
There was something he said at the very end of his sermon  
that made me angry as I recall – perhaps a quote, in words to the effect that  
“As you [meaning white people]  
have made me [meaning black people] to feel crazy,  
I’m going to make you crazy.”

Being someone who tries to bridge the gulf between people,  
I was really put off by that.  
This was about the same time when the phrase,  
“It’s a black thing. You wouldn’t understand”  
was going around in pop culture –  
and I felt these messages were no help to improving racial relations.

Well, it’s always tough to hear something you don’t like –  
especially when it’s criticism.  
But – if you can, you listen for why it’s being said,  
then you can tell the difference between  
individual arrogance and the cry for justice.

Willard, p.2

That African-American preacher also made the point to say  
that Jesus was unjust in what he said to the Syro-Phoenician woman –  
that Jesus was biased by his own culture.

The Syro-Phoenicians were the remnants of the Greek Empire  
left behind by Alexander the Great.

When the Judeans rebelled in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE,  
the Greeks desecrated the Temple of Solomon  
as they literally tried to wipe out the practice of Judaism itself.

Now we know Jesus had little patience for the nitpicking of the Pharisees,  
but he'd get downright enraged when it came to disrespecting the Divine.  
Yet Jesus listened and heard this woman's cry for justice and  
corrected his own behavior on the spot,  
proclaiming a healing for her daughter.

Jesus respected those who respected him –  
even those considered 'unclean' outcasts by 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish standards.

I believe that preacher helped me to expand my understanding of who Jesus is –  
he helped me to see Jesus' humanity,  
such that he was not above making faults,  
but even under duress, Jesus always chose  
to do the right thing, the loving thing.

Prejudice frequently appears in the Bible as one of God's ongoing concerns  
for humanity.

Prejudice is an exaggeration of what is 'normal' –  
or rather *how* we perceive what is 'normal'.

But if we didn't have 'normal' operating standards in life,  
trains wouldn't run on time – or safely;  
food quality wouldn't be reliable – let alone edible;  
there would be no records to beat at the Olympics;  
we wouldn't be able to go to the Moon;

If we didn't have 'normal' operating standards  
physicians couldn't be relied upon to perform surgery  
or pharmacists to fill prescriptions;  
there would be no controls for dangerous devices  
like automobiles – or guns,

If we didn't have 'normal' operating standards,  
there would be no aspiration to do great art or music –  
there would be no history to see where we came from,  
and no challenge for the future.

Willard, p.3

However, there is danger when standards of what's 'normal' are used to exclude people under the *pretense* of unacceptability – or prejudice.

That's when it becomes an issue of injustice.

When the scales of justice are fixed to favor those in power, this imbalance goes beyond prejudice to persecution.

Racism is such a dynamic...

Now, Webster's Dictionary defines 'racism' as:

*poor treatment of – or violence against people because of their race; and the belief that some races of people are better than others.*

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>

In the summer of 1986, I was introduced to some new ideas including a re-definition of 'racism'.

I was working at the City Mission Society in Boston as a religion intern and during one of our weekend retreats,

I was told that 'racism' only applies to the African-American experience and no other.

The Holocaust against Jewish people, Apartheid against black South Africans, genocide against Native Americans, and violence against gender-specific people, can all be seen as examples of prejudice being the root cause for such atrocities.

However, the explanation I was told as to why racism is uniquely associated with African-Americans' experience is the role of power.

Slavery has existed throughout human history, but it was never so effectively combined with industry and psychology as it had as racism against African-Americans.

Prejudice based solely on appearance served to institute a system of social, economic, and educational oppression.

This imbalance of power has made racism unique.

Yet to say that 'racism' only applies to one ethnic group leaves other ethnic groups – not just whites, without a term to name racial injustices against them – other than the term 'reverse-racism'.

So, we need to find new ways of identifying and talking about these issues before a crisis like the Trayvon Martin-George Zimmerman case occurs again.

Willard, p.4

We need to 'be open' – open our ears and loosen our tongues and  
continue to have meaningful, 'sacred conversations'  
about this difficult subject of race and injustice  
between the black and white communities.

But other groups need to be included in this discussion, too...

Though slavery no longer exists as an institution,  
immigrant Hispanic workers have few rights and  
those who are undocumented are vulnerable to deportation.

Just as Europeans came to the New World seeking religious freedom,  
so have Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs –

yet since the events of 9/11,  
they have often been treated with suspicion and disrespect.

We need to open our ears and loosen our tongues and continue  
to have meaningful, 'sacred conversations' about this difficult subject  
of race and injustice.

In coming to terms with 'evil spirits' like racism, sexism, militarism, and greed,  
you have 'to name it, claim it, and tame it'.

We must be aware that – on whatever side we find ourselves on a particular issue,  
there will always be a traitor in our midst presuming to stand for purity  
while accusing others as unclean, unpatriotic, or heretical.

But that fight to root out the traitor must always begin with ourselves,  
we must begin by examining our own biases  
before we buy into someone else's.

And everybody has a bias, nobody is absolutely objective, nobody is pure,  
because we all *come from* someplace—even Jesus.

If we are to accept this interpretation about him from today's Gospel lesson,  
then he has set an example for each of us  
by being quick to recognize and correct an internal attitude.

We need to open our ears and loosen our tongues and  
continue to have meaningful, 'sacred conversations.

This can lead to a willingness to see that life is richly diverse and  
filled with hope, making forgiveness and love possible.

So, we have to constantly correct our course  
as we seek to become a world guided by justice & peace.

Otherwise, we will continue to make each other crazy.

Amen

*Today's scripture lesson includes selected verses from Proverbs 22  
which are wisdom sayings that also advocate poor people –  
linking wisdom with justice.*

1A good reputation and respect are worth much more than silver and gold.  
2 The rich and the poor are all created by the Lord.

8 Troublemakers get in trouble,  
and their terrible anger will get them nowhere.

9 The Lord blesses everyone who freely gives food to the poor.

22 Don't take advantage of the poor or cheat them in court.

23 The Lord is their defender, and what you do to them, he will do to you.

Inspired by Mark 7:24-37

And from [Galilee], Jesus got up and went into the frontier  
of Tyre & Sidon [what is now called Syria],  
but would not stay at someone's home  
because he didn't want anyone to know he was there.  
Yet he could not avoid this.

For a certain woman – whose daughter had an unclean or evil spirit,  
had heard about him and when she found him, knelt down at his feet.  
However this woman was Greek – an ethnic Syro-Phoenician.

So she asked that the demon be cast out of her daughter,  
but Jesus said,  
“Let the children be fed first. It's not good to throw their bread to the dogs.”  
Yet she answered him, saying,  
“Yes, Lord! Yes, Lord!  
But those dogs will be waiting under the table to eat the children's crumbs!”  
And Jesus said to her,  
“Oy... Because of what you've said,  
go forth and you will find the demon is gone from your daughter!”  
And when she came home, she found the demon was gone  
and her daughter resting peacefully on a couch.

And again, departing from the region of Tyre & Sidon,  
Jesus headed for the Sea of Galilee  
through the region of the Ten Cities [what is now Jordan].  
And people there brought a deaf and stuttering man to him  
and implored Jesus just to lay his hand upon this person.

And getting away from the crowd to have some privacy,  
Jesus spit on his two forefingers and stuck them in each of this person's ears,  
then touched the man's tongue.  
And looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed and said,  
“Eph-phatha!” which means “Open up!”  
And the man's ears were opened and his tongue was loosened  
so that he could now communicate.  
And Jesus urged them all not to say anything.  
But the more he urged them, the more they spread the word.