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June 15, 2008

Genesis 11: 1-9 Acts: 2

Race – Curse or Blessing?

It was 1990. I was having a phone interview with a church search committee. After several compliments about my command of English, one of the members asked – how dark is your skin? I was taken back. The question was very telling. He did not ask – how light is your skin? Which would have been just as shocking...He asked – how dark is your skin? The implication was – dark skin is a problem.

Dark skin is unwanted or bad. I have lived all my life as an ethnic minority person in different parts of the world. From my outward appearance many ethnic groups can claim me – I cannot tell you how many in Houston speak to me in Spanish assuming I am one of them. In an Indian store I am spoken to in Hindi or Bengali. Some ask me if my name is African. Iranians assume I am Persian. Italians think I am Italian. Jews think I could be Jewish... Diverse Middle Easterners think I am one of them, and many not detecting a particularly heavy accent assume I am American born with some "strange" ethnic background.

I often find those moments humorous, pondering how wonderful it is that our world is becoming smaller, more diverse and more pluralistic, that perhaps one day we will get to the point where there is truly one race on the planet – the human race.

I speak of race today because of the presidential race, our denomination's invitation to hold sacred conversations about race, and my realization that in my 23 years of ministry I have never preached on this subject. I have preached about many controversial or sensitive issues but never on race. So I felt the nudge of the Spirit, especially to approach it from a theological/biblical/spiritual perspective.

The Tower of Babel in Genesis is a mythical account attempting to explain diversity of language and humanity, after the flood of Noah. Babel, meaning the gate or the door to God, signifies how people wanted to connect with the gods, entering the gates to reach them. And since in ancient times people understood the heavens to be the abode of the gods, cities often strived to build the highest tower on the highest mountain to touch the skies and the gods.

So the tower of Babel was such an attempt written by Hebrews, a nomadic, peasant people, about the city of Babylon they abhorred. Babylon was a beautiful city. Its hanging gardens were one of the seven wonders. Writing and science were developing there, while Hebrews were nomadic, concerned with day-to-day survival. So Babylon represented oppression, cruelty and dominance to them. Later, of course, Hebrews were exiled in Babylon and held captive.

In this story, Yahweh is annoyed at the Babylonians for building a tower that can reach his abode. He is angry, so he "curses" humanity, dividing and scattering them all over the globe. People, unable to understand each other, begin to hate and fear one another.

Written by the Hebrews, an ethnic people, who believed that Yahweh chose them and called them to covenant in exclusion of others, the Biblical story can be considered racist. The narratives reflect this human need to be chosen – we are God's chosen people and you are not.

God gave this land to us not to you. God is on our side not yours... I will acknowledge here that at this time Yahweh was only the god of the Hebrews; their tribal god and had not yet become the God of all people and all nations. That understanding develops later in the biblical narrative. The earlier kind of thinking is tribal and reveals childish sibling rivalry – Mom and Dad love me more.

This I believe is at the core of racism, and at the core of its sibling isms, where one thinks they are better than the other. They are the chosen ones. During Biblical times Hebrews were an exclusive people, who considered that anyone who was not one of them, was gentile and unclean. Life was tribal with clear distinctions between clans, as well as friend or foe.

The classification of humans into groups according to race, and other categories, has been a reality in our world for a long time. Today in our country categorization of people by race is so common that many think that racial divisions represent natural, fixed and unquestionable distinctions between people. This leads to discrimination. Yet, any discussion of race inevitably stirs uncomfortable reactions. This is particularly interesting because The U.S. is a nation of immigrants. Most of our ancestors or we ourselves came here in search of a better life. Africans, however, arrived in chains to make life better for others. To this day however, we are unable to discuss the horrors of enslavement, lynchings, segregation without prompting resentment or indifference.

Racism is about dehumanizing and negating the other, and ultimately is about power. Who is in charge? Who is chosen? Who sets the agenda? are the questions.

Cultural racism begins with language, words that belittle, dehumanize, humiliate and demean – *the black sheep of the family, a dark urge, blackening a name, an Indian giver, blackmailing*, are examples. Cultural racism is also based on the phenomenon of a dominant culture in our country that is based on White European American values and worldview. This worldview dominates our culture and institutions determining the norms and standards of our society. Criterion for good music is still European classical. The norm for proper attire is not the African robe, Indian shalwar kameez, Galabiyeh Arab garb, or QiPao Chinese dress. An acceptable formal dinner is based on European culinary fare.

Cultural racism is also about human fear, which is the other side of power. It is the fear of differences, of losing power which especially scares those of the dominant culture... because if all these differences are "us" then who will "we" be? How would we how define "ourselves?" The issue is – will we lose ourselves with all this diversity of the races, genders, colors, creeds?

Racism is a systemic phenomenon built on the belief that races have distinctive characteristics, and that one race is superior to others. This perspective affirms the falsity that because races are different they cannot be equal! "Different" in our society seems to connote "unequal." Most think that if it is "different" it has to be "better or worse." Thus we have a tendency to look up to people or look down on them. Most of our relationships have some kind of power component to them. But let me emphasize. Different does not mean unequal. Yet, the race in power enforces their norms and standards on all.

New York Time Columnist, Paul Krugman wrote recently, ". . . *our country has already been transformed. Mr. Obama's nomination wouldn't have been possible 20 years ago.*" Krugman has a point. It is quite extraordinary that an African American can possibly occupy the White House.

Uplifting this reality however, does not mean that racism is no longer an issue. Today our public schools are re-segregating; racial profiling continues. A total of 1.4 million black men—thirteen percent of all black men—cannot vote either because they are permanently disenfranchised ex-offenders, or because they are convicted felons currently in prison, on probation or on parole. This number itself tells of racism. The number of disenfranchised adults of all races is 3.9 million, three-quarters of whom are not in prison but are on probation, parole or have completed their sentences. Without a vote or a voice these persons do not really exist as citizens with rights even after they have served their time and "paid their debt to society."

I do not forget a study group of mostly white European Americans expressing their frustration about the absence of their members who were of color. As they berated the situation, stating that they do everything in their power to be tolerant and inclusive of all... it became clear to me that they, the white Europeans, owned and ran the group, while the rest of us were just appendages. They were willing to include "the others of color." As noble as it is to be open and willing to include all, many ethnic people of color do not want to be included by those in power. They want to be peers, equal participants. They don't want to be tolerated. For even in the act of inclusion, the dominant is doing the including, and the lesser is being the included. I don't want to be included by the powerful. I want to share the power. I want equal share of the power. I want equality, mutuality, shared power, where no one has the power to include or exclude, but together we become an all-encompassing community where no one is inferior, lesser, or unequal.

After the curse of the Tower of Babel, we find that God shows strong opinions about this issue. Despite the Israelite worldview of "unclean gentiles," aliens, sojourners and foreigners were to be equal in terms of the law, and there was to be one law for all. Foreigners, widows and orphans were to be treated justly, with access to the same justice system, and to fair wages. The Jubilee year that came at the end of every 49 years (the end of 7 times 7 years) was a year to reverse landed property to its original owner, who had been driven by poverty to sell it; and to free Israelites who, through poverty or otherwise, had become the slaves of their brothers. The Jubilee year was a year of freedom, equality, with no distinction between slave or free, Jew or gentile... in the Apostle Paul's words, *there is neither Jew nor Greek, nor male or female nor slave or free. We are all in Christ.*

Of course, Jesus himself was revolutionary in standing with the poor and oppressed, eating with the unclean, and touching the outcast and the rejected.

And most importantly, the story of Pentecost affirms this truth. Remember when the Holy Spirit came and everyone gathered began to speak in different tongues, yet all understood each other? The curse of Yahweh at the tower of Babel became the blessing of the Holy Spirit on that day. What was a dreadful curse was transformed to an amazing blessing. The awful turned into the wonderful. The different languages, the different colors, which divided and scattered all, now in the presence of the Spirit became a blessing and a gift uniting and healing all.

In a world where we know that the human race, all of us, are of the same species, where each of our individual DNA is so similar because we have not lived on this planet long enough to have differentiated... race should be a non-issue. Yet human fear and broken-heartedness do not allow for everyone to be chosen, to be loved... we have to fight about who the favorite is!

Racism is a debilitating and destructive force in human life. It demeans all people, all sides, all colors. For, if one person is hated because of their race, we are all diminished by it. I will make a

few final points in an attempt to share spiritual perspective against it:

- There is enough love to go around. No one has to be afraid to be out of the circle of God's love.
- All colors, all creeds, all genders, all abilities, are gifts and blessings of the Holy Spirit.
- I suggest that our lives happen in order to foster compassion in our hearts. Pain only makes sense if it will eventually be transformed to compassion. When we can learn from pain, when we can grow in compassion, when we can stand with those who suffer and work for liberation...then we are transforming pain into blessing, we are redeeming pain, transforming it into a gift.
- We can live in respect, love and understanding, or we can live in scorn, division and bigotry. The choice is ours. Spiritually however, we are called to shared power, to love and compassion so we can grow into the stature of Christ, and work toward liberation, justice and peace, transforming curses into blessings in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Resources used:

Working for Life: Dismantling Racism by Dody S. Matthias, Fairway Press, 1990

A Black Theology of Liberation by James Cone, Orbis books, 1987

The Black Christ by Kelly Brown Douglas, Orbis books, 1994

www.justfacts.com/racialissues.asp

www.pluralism.org