

18 May 2008

The UCC has been getting a lot more press lately than we're used to receiving. We've gone from being confused with the Church of Christ to being "that radical black church," which is interesting, considering the UCC is 95% white and most UCCers identify themselves as moderate. At a recent meeting of the Committee for New and Renewing Churches, which I chair, we heard of some of our new churches where folks, unclear on the concept, demanded of the minister why the national UCC doesn't censure Rev. Wright. But that's not how we work. We don't tell preachers what to preach. Rather, in typical UCC fashion, the national church invited (that's not an order!) local congregations to hold a sacred conversation on race on May 18. That's us! We don't censure. We don't order. We invite and we dialogue.

Again, this sermon is not about defending or condemning Rev. Wright. There are things I agree with him on and things I don't. And that also is part of who we are as the UCC: we may agree or disagree, but one thing I do want to stress is that Rev. Wright is not anti-white. He's not a reverse racist. If he was, he wouldn't be part of the UCC. Not only is he a member, but so is his church. And they aren't idle members either. Trinity UCC gives half a million dollars to OCWM every year, they send members to Chicago Theological Seminary, my *alma mater*, they send leaders to participate in the denomination. That's what disturbs me so much about the media's depiction of him. They don't even really talk about Rev. Wright's ideas. Instead, they make blanket accusations that he is anti-white, anti-American. Rev. Wright may be brilliant. He may be crazy. But he is not a reverse racist, and that makes me wonder about his accusers and what bias they have.

The whole difficulty with any charge of racism is that it instantly shuts people up. The conversation screeches to a halt. We know that racism is really bad, and we all want to distance ourselves from it. But that leaves us unable to have an open and honest conversation about the subject. And we do need to have a conversation about it.

Of course, what I'm doing today isn't really a conversation anyway, and certainly not a dialogue! I'm one white chick up here talking to you. But it is something that needs to be addressed from the pulpit, and I don't usually talk about it, aside from the general "Racism is bad!" comment – which isn't saying anything we don't already know.

But something has changed in my life. As a child of the post-civil rights era, I've always repudiated racism. But I have also been rather naïve about it. Racism was something I learned about in books and history lessons. It had never touched me personally. But now I have a son who is a different race from me. Now I have a son who, when he gets to be a teenager will fit the racial profile of a drug dealer. That is, he'll be a young black man. And now suddenly racism has become personal for me in a way it never was before. Race does not exist, but racism does.

We tend to think of racism as a personal belief, the belief that some people are better than others because of their skin color. If we reject that belief, we tend to think, "I'm not racist," and that's the end of the discussion. But racism isn't about personal beliefs. It's about a system that privileges some people over others because of their skin color, and the thing is, the system can be racist even when the individuals within it personally reject racism as an attitude.

I want to give you two examples of this. There are many, many others I could give, but I think these two will sufficiently demonstrate the point. The first is about race and the death penalty. The death penalty has been challenged by many

people with the claim that it is administered in a racist way. I had always assumed that was because black people were more likely to be sentenced to death than white people. But it turns out that's not exactly true. Rather, studies have found that what determines the death sentence is not the race of the murderer, but the race of the victim. In other words, if a black person is murdered, then their killer – whether black or white – is unlikely to receive the death sentence. But if the victim is white, then their murderer is likely to get the death sentence – regardless of their own race. Think about that. It is a subtle form of racism that jurors and judges and lawyers could be completely unaware of. But it means that white lives are valued more highly than black lives.

Another example of human value, and this one translates into actual dollars: it is cheaper to adopt a black baby than a white baby. And that's true across the board. Ethiopian babies cost less than Ukrainian babies. In domestic private adoption, white babies cost more. And in foster care, a white child is not considered “hard to place” until they are six years old, but a black child is considered “hard to place” by the age of two. And the cheapest baby you can get, the baby that is least in demand, is a black boy. Now there are lots of reasons why that is so, and it operates independently of the personal views of parents, judges or caseworkers. The economics and the racial politics of adoption are very complex, but when you come down to it, black babies are at a discount. Believe me, that is something I've thought an awful lot about over the past two years. It is a conversation I'll have to have with Sam someday. It won't be easy. But it can be sacred.

And so we get back to the topic at hand: a sacred conversation about race. Such a thing is extremely difficult, and it is fraught with emotional landmines. But it is possible. And the place where I have most often experienced such a sacred conversation has been in the UCC. Nationally, the UCC is committed to giving voice to historically underrepresented groups. It makes for complicated math when it comes to deciding on synod delegates. It makes for people of color represented at the national level out of proportion to their numbers in the pews. It makes for extremely uncomfortable conversations, but also extremely holy ones.

The truth is, the holy is uncomfortable! I don't know why we equate “holy” with “easy” and “serene.” Jacob wrestles the angel and gets a permanently dislocated hip. Isaiah can only become a prophet when a live coal is touched to his lips. And Jesus gets nailed to a cross. The sacred hurts! It costs us! But when we emerge on the other side, we know we've been touched by God.

So as difficult as the conversation is, it is one we need to have, and our faith can help us in that task. Our scriptures of the past couple of Sundays point the way: unity through diversity, and the need to listen to one another. Our passage from Paul today continues the theme. One translation reads, “aim for perfection.” Perfection is not something that can be achieved or grasped. We mortals are always going to mess up. Especially when it comes to issues of racism, which so permeates our society that we as individuals may not even be aware of it. We won't be perfect, but we can aim for perfection. We can make a non-racist society our goal.

Other translations say it as, “put things in order.” This is also good advice. So much of racism today is invisible to the naked eye, as it were, as in the way it plays out with the death penalty, and because of that we need to put things in order by understanding how they are out of order. We need to learn what's wrong in our society. A lot of well-meaning people, because they have not experienced overt racism themselves, tend to think that, therefore, racism itself is dead and gone. But it is very much still here, and therefore we need to listen to one another.

Which, it turns out, is the next part of Paul's exhortation. “Listen to my appeal.” I hope the apostle will not mind me expanding that to say “listen to the appeal of those who decry racism.” This is very hard because those of us who are

white tend to get defensive on the subject. If someone says that a comment we've just made is racist, we think they are calling our very character into question. If someone accuses our society of racism, we think they are being un-American. So we get defensive, and the conversation goes nowhere. We need to bridle our pride and listen to the perspective of others who see things that we might not. Here are two examples: (eenie meenie, and AIDS)

To listen does not mean you admit to wrongdoing. To listen does not even mean you will agree. To listen means to hear what matters to the other person, to show respect for their point of view. To listen means to establish a relationship with another person, and isn't that what combating racism is ultimately all about? To listen is to acknowledge that you have something to learn, about yourself, about another person, about our world.

And that leads to the next step, "agree with one another, be of one mind." We tend to think this means we have to agree on everything, but over the past couple of weeks I've talked about how we don't have to be the same to be united. The "one mind" we need to have is "one mind in Christ." That is, committed to Christ's mission of reconciliation and peace in the world. We don't have to see eye to eye, but if we are of one mind in Christ then hopefully we will remember that while we may see things differently, we are all working toward the same goal. Indeed there is no one solution to racism. It takes each of us acting in our own way, and the right path for me may not be the right for you. That's okay, as long as we're headed toward the same destination.

Finally Paul calls us to live in peace. Following from the previous post, peace doesn't mean the absence of conflict. Rather it means harmony. We will have our conflicts over racism, but those conflicts themselves can be part of the sacred conversation so long as we have one mind in Christ, so long as we share the same goal of ending racism.