

A Sacred Dialogue on Race and Pacifism

"An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr

Sample Sermon 18 May 2008



Sermon for April 13, 2008 – Easter 4A

1 Peter 2.19-25; John 10.1-10

Grace be to you and peace from the one who was and is and is to come.
Amen.

Today's second lesson comes from 1st Peter. This is a small book that we don't read very often in the lectionary, in which someone – probably not Peter the Rock himself – is writing to Christians that have been scattered throughout Asia Minor. In the time of 1 Peter, Christians were facing continuous persecution and ongoing harassment. The author's point in this particular lesson appears to be that when we put up with suffering, we are fulfilling our religious duty. Considering that context, it makes sense that the author would share a message of perseverance in the midst of unjust suffering.

In verse 20, the author of 1 Peter writes: "If you endure when you do right and suffer for it [for being beaten], you have God's approval." While I have real problems with that mindset, I can't just stop there. It's bad enough to give a general commission to everyone to accept unjust beatings in order to receive God's approval. How many times have those words been misused to send someone back into an abusive relationship? But let's go back to the verse before our assigned lesson picks up. From 1 Peter 2:18: "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh."

Does this offend anyone else? Sure, we could have conversations about how slavery was just part of the social fabric that day. Yeah, we could talk about how we can't expect that the biblical writers would be looking for a revolution. It was revolutionary enough that there are biblical writers who told slaveholders to treat their slaves with respect and concern. I know that was a big deal in biblical times, and we can't judge the scriptures through our contemporary sensitivities.

But I can't read this passage, or consider its context, without imagining how many years this passage was used to subjugate African slaves in America. Just put up with the abuse, oppression, and pain of slavery because your suffering is righteous suffering. In fact, your suffering makes you more like Jesus. Imagine how this verse might sound to a slave: "If you endure when you do right and suffer for it [for being beaten], you have God's approval." Even if it wasn't quoted by slaveholders, but was overheard by the slaves, what might this have sounded like to them?

We envision a church where all people are equal, at all levels, as God intended!

“Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.”

The slavery in the New Testament and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade of African people were somewhat different. But the scriptures written about slaves, encouraging slaves to endure harsh treatment and to stay with their slave masters, was used to justify both types. African slaves brought to the colonies were considered to be non-human, without any rights whatsoever. Many were subjected to a seasoning process during which the slaves were tortured for the purpose of "breaking" them and conditioning them to their new lot in life. Even when the United States organized as a country, African male slaves were considered 3/5ths of a person, treated as property, not employees (Article 1 of the US Constitution).

By now, you may be wondering why you came to church today. Perhaps you think this conversation on slavery and race has nothing to do with the gospel. I hope you'll hear me out before you completely write my words off. Whether you believe it or not, this message feels genuinely Spirit-inspired to me.

It's possible that you think that I'm too touchy on race. But in every place I've lived, I've witnessed and observed numerous examples of negative racial bias against African-American people. I'd call it racism.

I believe we in the US have reached the right time to have a more open talk about race than we've been able to have previously. Sure, there are people saying, "I could never vote for a black man for president." Sure, there are people watching Barack Obama with a morbid interest, trying to find some way to write him off as a black radical leader with nothing to say to the white community. Sure, political pundits and commentators alike have scoured the sermons and records of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's now retired pastor, and selected some out-of-context sound bites which have been liberally slathered throughout the news media.

In spite of that, I hear a lot of people ready to engage in a respectful conversation about race and what it means to us today. We have to tread carefully, because emotions are just below the surface on every side of this conversation. But we can have conversations that begin with respect and a deep willingness to listen to one another's experience and stories. Our Metro Chicago Synod assembly may be facing a resolution this year, put forward by the Synod Council, asking us to begin intentional conversations on race this year. It's not as though race is the only issue in Chicago right now, but to be silent on this topic and have no intentional conversation makes us appear to be like an ostrich putting our head in the sand and ignoring the world around us.

In this respectful conversation on race that I envision, color-blindness is not the desired outcome. Color equality is. There's a big difference between noticing someone's race and coming to quick conclusions about their personality, competence, or intelligence based on their racial background. I don't have all the answers, but I know we need to talk about race, culture, ethnicity, and real life more than we do now.

In the gospel lesson, Jesus says that he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Jesus does not want us to live happily with our racial biases, using scripture and religious teaching to back it up. Jesus does not want us to remain silent about the racial divide, too fearful to engage those who are different than us. Jesus does not want us to underestimate the pain and reality of racial bias in our world. Jesus wants to give us abundant life.

Abundant life doesn't mean that we'll never have difficulty. Abundant life doesn't mean that we'll never be poor or in need. Abundant life means that there's enough to go around, plus more. We don't have

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to act as though only white people are important or only people of color matter. Jesus gave us life, and life more abundantly. Instead of starting our conversations on race from a mindset of scarcity... "why won't they give us more of what they've got?" (could be spoken by EITHER side)... What if our conversations about race started with the idea that Jesus has already given us abundant life - more than enough to go around?

Jesus said, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly." We have already been given new life. We have already been given a safe pasture in which to graze. We have already been fed and cared for by God. But we insist on bickering with the other sheep about who is most important, who gets to make the important decisions, and who gets to have all the power. Jesus has already given us abundant life! Abundant life means an overflowing, over the top, excessively good life. That's what God has in store for us, if we can just believe the promise that Jesus has already made. Jesus, the good shepherd, came that we may have life, and have it abundantly! And that, brothers and sisters, is the best news of all!



Sample Sermon Prepared by
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