



## Racism in the Church: Discerning the Work of God

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
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Acts 10: 44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

John 15: 9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

I am co-convener of the Diocesan Anti-Racism Team. We are charged with the modest task of dismantling institutional racism in the Diocese of Pennsylvania. It is not a matter of simply getting a few more people of color elected to positions of influence, although this will be part of it. We are beginning with a power analysis: examining the diocesan constitution and canons, the governing structures, the preservation and use of endowments, guidelines for clergy salaries and pensions, historical patterns of mission strategy, the role of attitudes of benevolence and victimization. We are in it for the long haul; we recognize that our work will take decades - given the fact that it has taken over three centuries to get where we are.

We have a mixed record but, for the most part, this Diocese has been forward thinking when it comes to race; we took bold steps during the era of civil rights, and there are a couple of strong predominantly African-American parishes. As individuals, I imagine most of the 60,000 souls who comprise this diocese would claim that each want no part in perpetuating racism. Yet we know that racism is alive and well and thriving in this Diocese.

Perhaps this surprises you; the Diocese is racist? Yes. Ask any Pennsylvania Episcopalian of color - if you really want to know. A simple example: White clergy earn more than black clergy. How can that be? There are many thriving affluent congregations in this diocese, like St. Peter's. With the exception of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas none of them have been, are, or likely shall be any time soon, served by a black rector. They could, but they haven't. (Not many women or gay rectors either - a different but related topic). The Diocese guides the norms by which clergy salaries are set, using a simple formula based on size of congregation - in terms of members and annual budget. Clergy in larger parishes are paid more than those serving small, poor mission congregations. So, presto: a black or Asian or Latino or female or gay priest who is just as bright and able

and well-trained as I invariably receives a significantly lower salary and, in time, a significantly lower pension. Was this arrangement intentional? Was it done with malice? Was it designed to accomplish these ends? Well, that's hard to answer; this is where it gets difficult. We need to face into the truth, even if we don't like what we see

I appreciate praying with a variety of liturgical rites, because different words and prayers awaken new understanding. The alternative confession we now use with some frequency has us pray: "We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf." The evil done on our behalf. Divisions based on religious difference, racial prejudice, ethnic roots, skin color, sexual orientation, fear, hatred, prejudice against the other: these evils are carried out by individuals, yet are the creation of social constructs far larger than our individual inclinations or behaviors. These are evils done on our behalf.

I find myself compelled to engage this work of anti-racism. It is important to me. The first and most obvious reason for this is because it's a matter of justice. And, within that context, I find myself amazed by the human capacity to not see the truth, to deny and deceive ourselves about the offenses we commit and the injustices we perpetuate. And I am even more amazed when we experience moments of epiphany and revelation, and are able to act with integrity, love, and justice. So, a critical part of this work is about seeing – seeing the truth. And that to me, feels holy. Moments of awakening and insight come to us as gifts, as holy wisdom, the working of the Holy Spirit.

As I continue to grow in my awareness and understanding of the forces of racism in our society, I find it critical that I focus both within – coming to terms with my own fears and motivations, and without – engaging the socio-economic systems we live in – those evils done on our behalf.

White privilege is not something I get to decide whether I want to keep. Just like the diocesan salary structure, every time I walk into a store at the same time as a black man and the security guard follows him and leaves me alone to shop, I am benefiting from white privilege. The paradox of privilege is that it is given to certain people regardless of whether or not they want it. Says Harry Brod (in Paula Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, p.104): "Privilege is not something I *take* and which I therefore have the option of *not* taking. It is something that society gives me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to *have* it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions." "... There is no such thing as giving up one's privilege to be "outside" the system. One is always *in* the system. The only question is whether one is part of the system in a way which challenges or strengthens the status quo."

Our Scripture this morning reveals that Jesus has blessed us with the gift of awareness and knowledge, that by the work of the Holy Spirit we are able – perhaps only in fleeting moments, but able nonetheless – to see the good, to see what is just, and to act in ways to bring it about. This capacity for reconciliation is the heart of God's desire for humankind and all creation.

"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." In these words from John's Gospel, the passing of the baton is nearly complete. The authority and responsibility which has belonged to Christ alone is now given by Christ to his disciples. You have been servants (the same word also translated as slave); you now shall be friends.

For years the disciples have been trailing along with Jesus; watching carefully, observing the master, listening to his instructions, noting how he handles himself in various situations. Sometimes confused, sometimes awed.... "How did he do that?!" At long last, all is revealed. As if the magician shows how the trick is actually done, the cook reveals her secret ingredient or special technique. "It's done... this way." But it's not just a matter of doing tricks; it's a matter of seeing life and the world as Jesus does. Jesus contrasts servant and friend; the difference is not in the task to be accomplished, but in the knowing, in the awareness. God taught me; now I am teaching you. I do not call you servants any longer; I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from the Father.

As Jesus gives this capacity and knowledge to the disciples, we anticipate that it may be given to us, and to all who are children of God. What then? What happens for those disciples? We see it unfold for the disciple Peter in the Book of Acts.

Acts, of course, recounts the events and activities of the disciples in the period following Jesus' resurrection and ascension, as those disciples tried to make sense of their new relationship with God and one another, and they began to give shape to the Christian church. What we just heard read from the Book of Acts is that while Peter was speaking to a crowd, the Holy Spirit "fell upon them," and that the circumcised believers who were with Peter were astounded for this was a crowd of gentiles. Perceiving what had happened by the power of the Holy Spirit,

Peter said “Can anyone withhold the water of baptism from those who have received the Spirit just as we have?” And he baptized them then and there in the name of Jesus.

The crowd to whom Peter was speaking was made up of the family and friends of a guy named Cornelius. (cf. Acts 10 ff.) Cornelius was a good and devout man in his own right, but he was a Roman centurion. Not only was he not a Jew, he was not from there – a different race, and he was an agent of the oppressive foreign power that occupied the land. In terms of wealth or strength, Cornelius was to be feared. In terms of caste or belief, he was to be despised, avoided at all cost as unclean. Being in his very presence was an offense in Jewish law.

Peter had had a vision in which the Holy Spirit prompted him to respond to an invitation from Cornelius to come and meet with him. Peter went – with – we might imagine – plenty of reluctance, plenty of disgust, and no small amount of fear. A face to face with Cornelius alone might have been alright, but here the man had gathered his entire family – his aunts and uncles, nieces, nephews, great grandparents – and all the neighbors too, the whole stinkin’ lot of them – all this great unclean.

And they all wanted to know about Jesus. As Peter told them about Jesus – and specifically about how the love of God was not limited to any people or tribe or race or nation, about how the love of God was to spread from Galilee to the ends of the earth – what should occur? But the Holy Spirit came upon the whole lot of them. And Peter knew it; so he baptized them then and there.

When Peter got back to Jerusalem, the little community of Christians gathered there had already gotten wind of what Peter had done – and they were none too happy about it! “What did you do that for? Why did you go and eat with them?!” they demanded. In reply, Peter did not give a theological explanation for his action, did not suggest that he was responding to a grand vision of human-divine fellowship; no lofty ideals. Peter simply recounted what had happened to him, told about his experience. First the vision, then the response, meeting Cornelius, and all the others, one thing after another. ‘I was just doing what I thought I ought to, and the Holy Spirit came and ... did the rest.’ Peter concluded: “If then God gave them the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (11:17)

Clearly, for the early disciples, the inclusion of all people in God’s embrace was a work in progress – more of an acquiescence to the will and the power of God, than some long-desired warm, loving circle of unity. Peter had watched as Jesus befriended the scum of the earth, those whom his mama had taught him to stay away from – harlots, thieves, and cripples; and the ones about whom the priests in the temple had told him never, ever to engage – except as required by law – enemy soldiers and government agents.

The disciples themselves were no fleecy white bunch, they – like people in every tribe, in every generation – had found ways to separate themselves from those who were “other.” Religion, sex, ethnicity, race – the privileges and evils done on our behalf. We set up division – an offense to God. Thus does God send the Holy Spirit – the one and the same gift upon them as upon us. And our role? With the knowledge we have as friends and disciples of Jesus, is to do as Peter did: to go when called, to respond to the invitations we receive, to attend to the winds of the Spirit – and, for heaven’s sake, do not hinder the works of God!