



## Engaging the Conversation on Race Relations in America

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
Sunday, May 4, 2008*

*Acts 1:6-14*

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

You have a bad fight with someone, one of those really cruel exchanges in which damaging words sear deep into the flesh. Afterwards, you patch it up, but only sort of; the feelings too raw and painful to do the needed cleansing work. So you move on and henceforth tip-toe round the topic whenever it comes near. In time, you may even forget. All it takes, however, is one sharp little jab, and all the hurt and puss and anger comes oozing and screaming back out, enveloping you in unresolved pain.

Racism in America is alive and well; all it takes is a sharp little jab. Over the years, we’ve swabbed the wound and applied fresh gauze bandages. We’ve even dismantled some of the legal and social structures that inflicted the wounds in the first place, but only some of them. In *Race Matters* (Vintage Books, 1993, p.19), Cornel West writes: “We must delve into the depths where neither liberals nor conservatives dare to tread, namely, into the murky waters of despair and dread that now flood the streets of black America. To talk about the depressing statistics of unemployment, infant mortality, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, and violent crime is one thing. But to face up to the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America is something else.”

Most of us here this morning are white—Caucasian. So I will hazard a guess that most of you, like me, think about race relations in America occasionally, but only occasionally, when we’re reminded of it through some personal or public incident. Only in the past few years have I come to understand that the ability and the inclination to not think about race relations is a consequence of being part of the dominant group with power; it is a reflection of our white privilege. Most people I know who are black or people of color think about race relations daily; it is a necessary thing to negotiate with power, a matter of daily survival.

“What are the truths we are taught not to know?” asks sociologist Peggy McIntosh. As a white male, I was taught—I don’t know how I was taught, but I was taught—that my experience, my circumstances are normal, normative; the standard. Dr. McIntosh—who is white—would have me consider that my life came with white privileges, unearned privileges. She began a deceptively simple list: “conditions of daily experience which [she] took for granted” (From an article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”). Here is a sample:

- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- I can be accepted at a university or take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
- I can choose bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.
- When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization" I am shown that people of my color made it what it is."

If I care to, I can probably trace a significant portion of my own ancestry. Her list is long; you can add to it.

In my sermon two weeks ago, anticipating the Philadelphia premier of my cousin Katrina Browne's documentary film, *Traces of the Trade*, I told the story of my ancestors: the DeWolfe's of Bristol Rhode Island who were the largest slave-running family in this nation's history. Our scripture included the Psalm verse often quoted by Jesus: "the stumbling block has become the chief cornerstone." We each have a racial narrative: perceptions and behaviors taught and learned, implicitly or explicitly; suspicions, fears, injustices deeply embedded in our family fabric. Our temptation, born of shame and self-deceit, is to bury those stories, forget them, unlearn them, keep them ever secret. Yet is not our liberation and reconciliation to be found in the very telling of those secret stories of our past? The secrets themselves are the stumbling block. Might they then become the cornerstone? Must the secrets not be brought to light and air, however uncomfortable it makes us, in order for healing to take place?

Regardless of whom you might like to see in the White House as our 44th president, it is abundantly clear from recent events that the barely concealed wound of racism is festering and needs to be addressed. In his speech at the National Constitution Center, Senator Obama called in even tones for a conversation about this nation's original sin, for the sake of our individual and corporate souls. Although offensive and arguably destructive and/or self-serving in his tactics, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright also makes visible this need, employing the language of liberation theology. It was evident too in the words of Governor Rendell—speaking obvious truth many of us would prefer he concealed: "there are some whites here [in Pennsylvania] who are probably not ready to vote for an African-American candidate." If the word were not coming from prominent voices in the midst of a national election, there would be no less urgency. Daily accounts of homicide in this city, of a struggling public school system, lack of medical benefits, and incarceration—all cry aloud of the racial divide.

I am struggling with what to do. I feel compelled to participate. Yet I feel isolated in a world of my own design, here with nice people in a nice church in a nice neighborhood—with a seething cauldron just out of sight. It is safe here and safety is good, as long as safe is not synonymous with insular. A friend once said that the church needs to be a safe place in which we do dangerous things. This is a safe place; I believe we need to do some dangerous things. I believe we need to step out of our privileged insularity and find ways to engage the racial divide within this nation.

As I have been wondering what this might look like, I have been immersed, reading and reflecting on the post-Easter lives of the disciples of Jesus who were living with a lot of uncertainty during some hard times—which is why they turned and followed Jesus in the first place. In these weeks since Easter, we've been hearing about Jesus' presence and work among the disciples following his resurrection. The time is come and we now hear of his departure from them and his Ascension, to sit at the right hand of God. Surely the time has come at last, think the disciples, so they ask: "are you going to restore the kingdom?" "Are you going to make it right once again; gather the community together; restore the equity and justice now missing?"

Jesus' initial reply sounds elusive: "it is not for you to know the times that God has set." An open-ended project. They may not receive clarity about the timing, but there is no mistaking the location of responsibility. They ask what Jesus will do; Jesus turns and tells them: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses – in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." You will be the ones to restore the kingdom; the Holy Spirit is poured out upon you to do this work; the grace and the power are yours; the restoration of justice shall be of your doing. As they were watching, he was lifted up; a cloud took him out of their sight. They returned to the city, devoted themselves to prayer, and when the Spirit came upon them as Jesus promised they got cracking.

I see three things to do. They are modest, yet they are a means to participate, they shall lead to action not yet seen, and they are concrete steps so that all who wish can join me in these:

First, following the disciples, is to pray: to pray for guidance and courage from the Holy Spirit that we may witness to the power of God's love; to pray that we may know ourselves to be loved and already forgiven by God. This is so important lest we become snared in guilt. Forgiveness is not the reward that will follow upon our honesty; forgiveness is the gift already given that precedes our honesty and makes it possible to do what is needed.

Second, is to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge of the history of racism in America, to grasp the scope of the legislation that has been passed and reinforced over many, many years that has effectively embedded racism in our political, economic and social structures. To achieve justice, we must focus less on personal attitudes and individual prejudice, and focus more on institutionalized discrimination and economically perpetuated evil. Coupled, and in tension, with knowledge of this national narrative is the narrative of black liberation theology with its roots in the experience of an enslaved community.

Third, is to tell and share our own racial narratives; name our experiences, fears, hopes—white among white, black among black, white and black and yellow and red and orange and brown together. We need to speak and we need to listen—to the injustice, the anger and the pain. For we need to grieve. And we need to stand together.

A couple of weeks ago, at the National Constitution Center, after the first screening of my cousin Katrina's film in which ten family members delved into the grim details of our ancestor's involvement in the slave trade and the implications for them, for us, today, a woman stood to speak in response—an African-American woman about my age. She, too, had been learning about her family's past: about her great-grandfather who had been known to everyone as "the tree" because of the marking of the scars the whip had left on his back, and about how her great-grandmother, while fleeing north was raped by the white man she was with, and that this woman at the Constitution Center was the progeny of that rape. And she asked if Katrina and our family were going to be seeking those descendents, too, the ones who are just as surely our cousins, yet whose skin color more likely resembles that woman's than my own. Cousins, from one blood who share one cup. To the ends of the earth the Holy Spirit sends us to witness to God's love, to bring about the kingdom, and to be—ourselves—restorers of the justice for which our hearts long.