

SERMON PREACHED AT CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER, MORRISTOWN

By the Rev. Canon Gregory A. Jacobs

SUNDAY, JUNE 16, 2013

TEXTS: Race Matters by Cornel West; Luke 7:36-8:3

“Reflections on a Black Father’s Experience”

What a daunting task you have given me here this morning. To be asked to Preach a Word in the stead of Ed Rodman is a little like being that guy in the ESPN commercial who keeps getting confused with **the** Michael Jordan because his name happens to be Michael Jordan.

Ed Rodman must be acknowledged above all things as a prophet in this age where truth-tellers are so desperately needed. In the tradition of the prophets of old--Samuel, Elijah, and Amos--Ed most assuredly speaks truth to power with the justice and compassion that we prayed for in our collect for this morning. He is the real deal.

So with the fear and trepidation that comes with having to fill big shoes, I have humbly accepted Cynthia’s invitation to preach here this morning. Truthfully, I am grateful to be asked to be a part of your year long celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Let us pray.

**O God, Source of our Life, the One who calls us past race and nation, clan and creed, to be one people in Christ; who has gifted us with the power of love that we might fulfill the law. We have ignored your gift, turned from the way, and deferred the dream. Awaken us to the evil we are doing to our brothers and sisters, and embolden us for the great good we have yet to do together;
in the power of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
--Philip S. Krug**

President Barack Obama delivered a remarkable commencement address recently at Morehouse College a few weeks back that stirred up some controversy in the black community. It was a speech that focused on the responsibilities of the young black men who were about to seek their fortunes in the world as graduates of one of the leading black educational institutions in this country. The young men were exhorted to take personal responsibility for their lives and to resist blaming this country’s racism for the obstacles that they may encounter in the future.

The President said, “There is no longer any room for excuses... nobody is going to give you anything that you have not earned. ... Nobody cares how tough your upbringing was. Nobody cares if you suffered some discrimination.”

The newly-minted graduates were told to be role models for others, to “keep hustling, keep on your grind, and get other folks to do the same”.

Now, despite these lofty preachments in the President’s speech which played well in White America, many in the black community were concerned that his words harkened back to the days of Jim Crow segregation, when Booker T. Washington admonished black people to

lift themselves up by their bootstraps. It was not lost on some that just like those early days of the 20th century, this century still finds too many Black Americans without boots.

Disturbingly missing from the President's address to these young men, was a warning of just how dangerous it is to be a black man in America today. There was no mention, for instance, of Trayvon Martin, a black teenager shot down outside a gated community in Florida by a white self-appointed vigilante.

No words of warning about the reality that young black men are more than three times as likely to be stopped on suspicion of having engaged in criminal activity than young white men. Nothing was said about the reality of mass incarceration of black men at a rate that defies rational explanation.

The President also did not draw attention to the fact that in the very city in which he presently resides, Washington, D.C., 3 out of every 4 young black men can expect to serve some time in prison. [1] No warning was issued that in some cities, over 80% of young black men have criminal records which will most certainly lead to a lifetime sentence of hopelessness and poverty.

My brother has three sons. And as a black father, these are the realities that he has found it necessary to teach his sons. That regardless of how many privileges they enjoy. Regardless of what prep and Ivy League schools they may have attended. Regardless of the fact that they are the offspring of two highly educated parents who regularly attend a white professional and upper middle class Episcopal Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. At the end of the day, those young men cannot escape the fact that they are and will be the object of an irrational hate, fear, stereotype and discrimination that they played no part in creating.

This is after all, presumably the Year of Our Lord 2013, and not 1913. So we gladly congratulate ourselves that we have come so far in matters of race in this country. Many believe that we no longer have a race problem in these United States. When we see Barrack Obama in the starring role as this country's Wizard of Oz, we believe that all is right and fair in the land.

No one dares to ask what is going on in the land just behind that curtain that we really don't want to see?

No one questions why our schools and neighborhoods are more segregated now than they were in 1954.

No one demands to know why the gap between black and white children's educational test scores has not narrowed significantly.

No one condemns the environmental racism that systematically locates toxic waste sites in our poorest urban neighborhoods where black people disproportionately live.

No one wants to confront the realities of racial profiling, the mass incarceration of untold numbers of black men in our prisons, nor the persistence of a system of racialized social control known as the criminal justice system that is every bit as pernicious and destructive of black lives as Jim Crow ever was.

What Martin Luther King called the “congenital deformity” of racism is still embedded deep within the American psyche.

In our second lesson this morning Cornel West speaks of historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes that inevitably lead us in discussions on race to begin by systematically identifying black people as the problem—thereby creating an “Us” vs. “Them” dynamic and framework within which we explore race relations.

Such conversations usually culminate in identifying scapegoats for the nation’s poverty and crime, who are variously identified and labeled as the scourges of the black community. The point is abundantly clear: “If you would only do something about “those people”, we [essentially white America] would not have this problem”.

In the 1980s, it was the Welfare Mamas and the Cadillac Queens. In the 1990s, it was the Willie Hortons and the Rodney Kings –the violent, out of control, criminally-inclined black man. And now, it is the absentee, irresponsible black father who is singled out and cited as the root cause of all the social ills in the black community.

Somehow we must move beyond these all too convenient labels that mask a deeper, darker reality that we do not want to admit---our innermost fears, prejudices, and intolerance.

We need to confront, for instance, the undeniable social construct that continues to bestow the privilege upon white men of being presumed as competent, hard-working and responsible, but does not accord that same presumption to black men who are still viewed as incompetent, lazy and not to be trusted.

And until we look deep within ourselves and wrestle with some of our own demons that reside there, we will remain what David Shipler so aptly called this nation --- A Country of Strangers. We will continue to condemn and sentence to life on the margins of our society those who we have judged to be beyond hope and redemption.

But here’s the Good News (of the Gospel)—the last time I checked my Bible, it identified us who proclaim and call ourselves Christians as the persons who should be profoundly engaged in God’s work of reconciliation and redemption.

And in case you missed it, that’s the point of this morning’s gospel: Reconciliation and Redemption for all of God’s people.

What better place to carry on God’s work than in our own congregations--our faith communities-- To move beyond our expectations that the “Other” must be culturally assimilated and made to conform to our norms and our value systems. Instead, we should endeavor to create a “beloved community” of all God’s people.

Notice, my friends, how in today’s gospel, Jesus moves beyond convenient stigmatizing labels like “sinner” to offer this woman hope and new life.

Notice, how Jesus eschews the opportunity to join Simon, the Pharisee, in condemning her for her past life. Also note, dear brothers and sisters, how Jesus does not hesitate to call his host to account for his judgmental behavior.

There is real truth-telling going on in today's gospel.

So the gospel proclaims that we have work to do. That our calling as followers and imitators of Christ is to first release one another and then this country from the chains of intolerance that we ourselves have forged.

-The chains of fear that separate and estrange us from one another.

-The chains of intolerance that so easily allow us to demonize or blame those who do not share our values.

-The chains of prejudice and stereotype that prevent us from valuing the uniqueness and dignity of every Child of God.

-The chains of oppressive and manipulative systems that promote our dehumanization and exploitation of one another.

Within our church communities, we must be about the work of restoration, reconciliation and justice--working tirelessly to realize God's ancient call to live in a just and caring community--

-To embrace our inter-relatedness,

-To confess our interdependence

-To acknowledge our sameness and worthiness in the eyes of God [Do the words, "Made in the image of God" sound familiar?]

-To reconcile the world-- seeking to restore all things to right relationship with the Creator, and with one another.

So the question of the moment quite simply is what kind of church shall we choose to be?

We begin by taking the words of our own baptismal covenant to heart and then vowing to live by them every day of our lives:

- To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as we love ourselves
- To strive for justice and peace among all people, and
- To respect the dignity of every human being.

We begin by recognizing that loving our neighbors means loving **all** of God's created humanity-- and not just those that look like us, or think like us, or have the same socio-economic status that we enjoy, or even share the same values that we do.

That when we say that we truly want to practice **radical hospitality**, we also recognize that there is a price to be paid for that engagement.

- We will have to truly welcome people into our midst that are markedly different from us-- whose manners and customs and experiences are unknown to us.

- We will have to listen to their stories without judgment and accept them as their truth.
- We will have to give up those privileges and presumptions that we have not necessarily merited, but nevertheless enjoy.
- We will have to bear the “uncomfortableness” of learning of our own complicity in the oppression of others.
- And we will have to be willing to do something about the inequalities and injustices that we learn about, even at the cost of giving up some of our precious advantages, so that others may be empowered and enabled to meaningfully participate in this society.

And now the hard question: Are we willing to devote our hearts, bodies, minds and souls to make this church truly a place of God’s redeeming and reconciling grace?

Can the Church of the Redeemer, Morristown indeed be transformed into a holy place doing holy work? Can this be the place...

- Where we can safely examine our prejudices and fears and actively work to amend our lives?
- Where we can tell each other our stories and devote ourselves to listening to the “Other” and indeed to one another without judging?
- Where we can work to first discover and then, at last attain, true forgiveness and absolution for our sins of omission and commission?
- Where we earnestly pray for the conversion of our own spirits and strive to love our neighbor—the Other-- and not be obsessed with counting the cost for doing so?
- Where we can devote our life’s work to being instruments of God’s equality, justice and reconciliation, and boldly proclaim God’s truth every time and everywhere we see discrimination, injustice, and oppression?

In the popular vernacular, can this be a place where we not only “talk the talk” of diversity, equality, and acceptance, but where we expectantly “walk the walk” as well? May it be so. And a blessed Father’s Day to you all. AMEN.

[1] [The New Jim Crow](#) by Michelle Alexander.