

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

April 13th, 2008

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Racism and the Shepherd's Gate
The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

This morning, I speak to you as one exhausted. I spent the past two days, along with one of our members, in an intense diocesan session discussing and deconstructing racism. It was harrowing because of the stories that were told – stories that were personal and also shared as a people.

It brought me to reflect for a time that as Anglicans, we are spiritual children of Empire. My mostly British blood has as part of its legacy the racism of a military and economic super-power of the nineteenth century. While the current turmoil in the Anglican Communion scapegoats our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters and something called by our greatest detractors the “homosexual agenda”. . . The unspoken elephant in the room is the sin of racism: a sin that the Communion inherited structurally from her mother Empire. And there is almost no mention of that from the Archbishop of Canterbury or the loudest voices in the fray.

In the Episcopal Church, how easily we forget that the very framers of our church structure were in the room when the American Constitution was laid down. A hallowed document that, in its original form, acknowledges that all people are created equal, while at the same time allowing the institution of slavery to continue.

How easily we forget that the separate black church has its origins in part because our Episcopal Church over a century ago refused to allow African-Americans to participate in the full life of the body of the baptized.

Some of our members still remember how much trouble there was in these walls over four decades ago, when the rector here, Murray Hammond, left town to join the march on Selma. How many of us remember or ever were taught that millions in this country were glad when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated? That was something I never was taught. I only learned it for the first time this past April 4th as I listened to a scholar speak about his legacy in a radio interview.

Even today, as we watch history being made as an African-American candidate has a serious chance at winning the presidential nomination of a major political party. . . Even today, we swim in the firestorm that erupts when a few words of his pastor – words addressing racism and its painful legacy – are lifted out of context and paraded in the national media.

As part of the training this past weekend, we recounted stories of racism from our own Diocese. When was the last time you heard that in the 1960's, the Chinese Language School of True Sunshine Episcopal Church in San Francisco, was sold by the Diocese of California? 300 students no longer had a place to study. True Sunshine never received the full benefit of the sale of the property.

In the 1980's, a Korean Congregation in the East Bay was moved not once, but twice, as the Diocese sold church property out from under them. The small, struggling, group that remains, called St. Patrick's Episcopal Church, now sojourns at Church of Our Saviour, Oakland, its future far from certain.

In the 1950's, Christ Church – Sei Ko Kai, an historically Japanese-American congregation of this Diocese, was moved out of the re-developing (and primarily African-American and Japanese) Western Addition/Japantown, San Francisco, into Pacific Heights – not exactly a locus of Japanese-American culture. . . The story goes that the primary reason for the move was because

the bishop at that the time “didn’t like the neighborhood they were in.”

Decades later, an eighty-something parishioner of the still struggling Christ Church – Sei Ko Kai told her young, white pastor that it was time for him to start looking elsewhere for a position. That he was, she said in all seriousness, “Too good for them.”

Now, here was someone who had lived through the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. “Mariko” and her husband had lost all their property, rights, and dignity. They had re-built their lives from virtually nothing when they returned to San Francisco. They had raised a family and sustained their faith community with a quiet and remarkable grace despite the painful memory of once being denied their most essential civil rights. And yet this thirty-something white pastor – who had never known economic hardship; who had never been imprisoned simply because of the accident of his birth; who had never been cast under suspicion as an enemy of the United States. . . he was “too good for them.”

I know this story because, as many of you have already rightly guessed, that young white priest was me. It was only yesterday – blinded as I am by the privileges of being white – that I more fully grasped what Mariko had said to me two years ago. Two years ago as I began considering entering the search process for a new rector here at Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley.

I realized this past weekend for the first time that I can travel to my wife’s country of origin without fear of reprisal – even without knowing much of any Japanese. That I can be safe almost anywhere there, unthreatened and well looked after. Yet my wife, who has far greater command of English than I do of Japanese, cannot say the same thing for herself in my country of origin. . . where she now lives. That the color of my skin, the same color of the skin of missionaries and dominant military and economic powers, is as much a passport to privilege internationally as anything else I carry.

Two weeks ago as we prepared documentation to register our son in Kindergarten, I pulled out the hospital record of his birth in San Francisco. Under his birth weight, length, and gender was his racial designation. In big block capitals, it said “UNKOWN.” It stopped me dead in my tracks. My son, who holds a blood claim in Japan as well as the United States, does not fit into any legal racial categories. So he is an “unknown.”

The painful truth is that, the weight of my conscience notwithstanding, I didn’t *have* to share any of this with you today. As a predominantly white community, we have the privilege of not having to think or talk about race. I could have shelved the experience of the past two days with impunity. I had the privilege of weighing the risk of sharing this with you today. Of weighing the risks of the anger it might provoke, the guilt, and the pain that we all have known in unique and shared ways.

But, you see, that privilege of choice is not available to one of my colleagues in this Diocese, whose earliest memories are from living in an impoverished Chinese village, growing rice in leech-infested waters. Nor is that a choice for another colleague who endured FBI wire-tapping because she, as an African-American, knew someone in the Black Panther movement of the 1960’s.

The greatest frustration for me, a white man, who enjoys the privilege of being part of the dominant culture today, is that I can’t “fix” the sin of racism. I am no more than a bleating sheep looking, in the words of this morning’s Gospel, for a shepherd. And how will I know that the shepherd has come through the gate? And how will I know the shepherd’s voice – a shepherd who will lead me towards healing from my own failures, and the failures of my people?

During Eastertide, we have heard a wide range of images for the Risen Christ: Christ who has leapt beyond the clutches of death, mistaken – or perhaps not mistaken – as the gardener; Christ the trickster, who appears and then disappears amongst his followers; Christ the companion on the road who illumines the scriptural traditions and then sits at table with friends; Christ the One who breathes the Spirit of peace over the faithful; Christ who bears the wounds of his suffering in his resurrected body, convincing the seeker, Thomas, that he embodies God; and today, Christ the shepherd, whose voice we are to know as well as any of our beloved.

For the early Christian community in which John was written, the voice of Jesus is often the voice of the Risen Christ – the experience of a small band of Christians searching for identity in a world that was, at best, indifferent, and was often hostile to followers of Jesus. They learned to recognize their shepherd by his entering through the gate, through a set of familiar passages and traditions that had already arisen among them:

Baptism. The Breaking of Bread and the shared cup. The community gathered as we are gathered here this morning so many centuries later.

Yesterday, at the end of the two-day training, we gathered as Christians for Eucharist after sharing some of our most painful stories and memories; after facing down the worst that lives on in our institutions and world. We broke bread and shared the common cup, and reflected.

And I heard, much to my surprise, stories of healing. That people who had for so long been silenced by the racism from which we all suffer had at last been able to express themselves in a safe place. They had faced their oppressors and found compassion. Their oppressors had confessed their blindness and found themselves freed from the clutches of a sin that they had inherited, not created. We had learned that the true way out of racism is to put down all that kills and maims and re-enter relationship. For that is all that racism is to me at the end of the day: broken relationship institutionalized; the reduction of persons to categories, unknowns, caricatures, stereotypes, and shadows.

Then one of the facilitators said to all of us, “You are the Gospel.” The scales fell from my eyes: The Gospel is the gate of the Good Shepherd. And we, each of us, is that gate for one another. And we, together, as a community, are that gate, too.

We are only healed from the pain by entering the hard work of personal and communal relationship – to hear the voice of the Shepherd in each other. To be the voice of the Shepherd. To be present as a Shepherd is present as our flock together deals with its painful legacy. To seek out the lost and marginalized and bring healing – not simply by offering them money or a “fix” to what ails them – but by entering relationship with them. To get to know them. To call them beloved. To prepare for and welcome the coming of the kingdom that Jesus promised, what Martin Luther King, Jr., called, the “beloved community.”

For this is what Christ does to each of us in the here and now. Through us and with us and in us. Christ redeems the problem of racism for this young, white man. I can’t “fix” it. But I can show up and be present. I can confess the privileges from which I have benefited. Above all, I can shut up and listen the stories and God-given lives that have so long been silenced and dismissed. And in doing so I can re-claim and learn to live into relationship with my sisters and brothers. I can stop following after thief and bandit of racism.

May you all endeavor to do the same in the coming days. And may we, as a community, look for ways in the coming days that we may be in closer, restored relationship with our sisters and brothers in this community, in this county, in the Bay Area, in this country, and beyond.

Amen.