

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Race talk. With all of the furor, in recent weeks, over selected sermon snippets of Rev. Jeremiah Wright—democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama’s former pastor—*race talk* has come out of the basement as a hot topic in *election 2008*. In many ways, no doubt, it’s about time.

However, with respect to Rev. Wright, the media have done a poor job of understanding the context before they respond. Immediately, it would seem, everybody is an expert on race relations in America—particularly as it relates to the black church.

Let’s tell the truth. Matters of race have a deeply embedded history in the story of our nation. And whites (Anglo-Americans) do not have the moral *high ground* for offering our judgments and unexamined reflections.

In this regard, context is everything. By context I mean the history of African-American people in America, from the sordid days of slavery down to the present. Illuminating the *context* does not, of course, justify wrongful behaviors. Still, in many instances, it does help explain them.

For purposes of unpacking the truth in all of this, is it seriously surprising to the wider non-black community that many black people, at some point in their life-journey, are angry? How could you be black in America and, over time, not be angry? So, what to do with the anger? It’s got to go somewhere.

In the civil rights’ movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., the anger was transmuted into non-violent protests that, over time, brought break-through civil rights’ legislation under President Lyndon Johnson. Certainly, this is one of the high-water-mark legislative achievements of our nation.

However, earlier on—before Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, during the dark and sometimes brutal period of Jim Crow segregation that followed, and even down to the present day—some of the anger was released in and through life in the black church.

Inside the black church. The black church, since its inception during the days of slavery, has historically been a place where black people (this was particularly important for the black male) could be free. Free to stand tall and lead; free to unpack deep-seeded pain, egregious injustice and dehumanization. Free, if only briefly, to be a man (or woman), a dignified human being.

Couple this with the biblical precedent for strong prophetic preaching (i.e., preaching truth to power), and you have a recipe for the sort of fiery and incendiary language unveiled in some of Rev. Wright’s sermons. In a word, as any of us who have spent

much time in the black church know, fiery preaching is not an uncommon experience. That is not to say we agree with it; but it is to suggest that we understand it.

Not unlike Rev. Wright, the biblical prophets—Amos and Jeremiah come to mind—pulled no punches in their heated indictments of Israel for her idolatrous and sinful ways. Jeremiah almost lost his life for his *Thus saith the Lord* truth telling.

Even Jesus unleashed a list of six *woes* against the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 23. In biblical parlance, you don't want to be *woed* any more than you want to be damned.

The point is that the black church in America has a long history laden with multiple layers of complexity. It's a story that cannot be fairly assessed and parsed out by abstracting selected sermon snippets from a lifetime of preaching and presenting them as a final measure of truth about any particular minister.

Anger and patriotism. One of the more troubling consequences in of all of this is the rush to judgment about patriotism. Always, pronouncements about patriotism ought to be cautious in casting the first stone lest they fail to protect the basic freedoms of all Americans.

We should thank our Founding Fathers every day for their infinite wisdom in providing us with a Constitution that protects our right to dissent. Indeed, there is a sense in which this freedom of dissent becomes a responsibility when the government *of the people, by the people and for the people* seems to have lost its way. That's one reason why we vote and why our voting matters.

My hope in this conversation is that the bar of true patriotism will be raised to the point where we Americans see our great nation in light of our highest ideals—the ideals of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution; and the ideals, too—in these days of increasing global interdependence—of forming a more perfect union.