

A Sacred Conversation on Race

July, 2008

For a *Sacred Conversation on Race* to take us to the high ground of truth, greater freedom and a more evolved society, unavoidably, it will take us to places many of us would prefer not to visit. This is particularly the case in the historical relationship between African-Americans (blacks) and whites.

Stories on both sides of the racial divide run deep. And along the way, they unpack painful memories laced with horror, fear and an anger that at times doesn't know where to go.

For black people, it's about survival and rising above the blows of dehumanization and the denial of human dignity. For white people, it's the deep shame of being linked to the hand of the oppressor and the institutionalized evil that hand has wrought over the centuries.

Understandably, blacks want justice and equal opportunity in all realms of public life. Whites, for their part, want freedom from the guilt that continues to tear at their heart and burden their spirit.

All of us—whites and blacks, along with Hispanics, Asians, Arabs and countless others—want continued movement toward the day when we are all one people at the foot of the one Creator God. Towards that end, may our conversation be directed!

Biblical context

The starting point for *a sacred conversation on race* is in Genesis 1 and 2, in the dawning of creation, when the God of the universe calls us to life.

Then God said, *let us make human kind in our image, according to our likeness ...so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them;*

... and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. (Genesis 1:26a, 27; 2:7b)

The *life breath* God breathed into humankind is the sacred energy that God passes into our human situation. Always, for God, life is sacred. For it is *life* that sustains God's spirit in the world.

Later, in an effort to sustain the sanctity of *life*, God called us into *covenant*, first with Noah; and later with Abraham (and Sarah) and with Moses at Mt. Sinai (the holy mountain). The underlying impulse of *covenant* was to sustain life.

With the problem of evil forever hovering nearby, God struggled to work out a relational understanding through *covenant*, where human kind would be moved to *choose life* and therein exalt God's purposes in creation.

In sorting out the ongoing tension between good and evil in the human spirit, God resolved, finally, to call us to *commandment* obedience. Indeed, the intent of the commandments God gave us through the Mosaic covenant, down to the Great Commandment announced to us by Jesus, was to sustain and honor life.

Again, life is sacred.

A *sacred conversation on race*, therefore, has this biblical understanding as its spiritual backdrop and context. For in the larger sense, *racism* is always a violation of the sacred. It is both a stain on the *life* force and a distortion of the divine purpose of our Creator God. In this sense, it is sin.

As Walter Brueggemann has reminded us, *violation of Commandment truth introduces a distortive element into reality*. And along the way, all of life is reduced and rendered less holy.

Historical context

Always, a *sacred conversation on race* must take seriously the historical context. We must seek to understand the violations of the sacred that have taken place.

- With Native Americans and their long history of being violated and dehumanized—to the extent, even, of marginalizing their culture almost to the point of extinction.
- With African Americans and the long, dark period of slavery marked by almost inconceivable dehumanization. While the process of liberation and healing has made considerable strides, we still have a long way to go in the restoration process.
- With Asian Americans and memories of the Japanese internment during World War II.
- With Hispanic Americans—particularly the poor and the destitute. Those who, amidst serious risk of violence and deportment, labor every day in our agricultural industry and other work places.
- And recently—particularly since 9/11—with Arab Americans and the prejudiced profiling that takes place as global Islam seeks ways of reining in Islamic extremists and achieving greater understanding and harmony with the West.

These are the most obvious of examples where questions of racial identity have come into play in our wider American culture. Each above-noted ethnic group (and others, left unmentioned) has a story to tell, a story that the dominant culture (the culture that deals from strength ... i.e., White culture here in the U.S.) needs to listen to.

Whites in the United States must go the second mile in the listening process, in a non-dismissive spirit. They must rise above any *too easy* denial of the racial divide that lingers and the consequences of that divide for equity in the market place and for opportunity in general in our wider culture.

When we take seriously the historical context, old wounds may be reopened; real pain may be shared and real tears shed. But reconciliation and a new day are born out of the pain and tears.

Reframing the BIG PICTURE

The wider problem of racism, in addition to working against the purposes of God, is that it serves—in the BIG PICTURE scheme of things—to diminish us all. It makes us all less human, working against our inexorable movement to higher spiritual ground.

A sacred conversation on race holds the BIG PICTURE values of our planet in mind. In the BIG PICTURE, every nation, every ethnic group, and every religion has a voice. And every voice has an inherent right to be heard and valued.

In the BIG PICTURE, every group or nation understands itself and its own desires in light of the needs of the planet. Implicit, here, is the understanding that—at the end of the day—we are all one (John 17:21). However, for this BIG PICTURE vision of the world to be realized, the strong and the powerful—with humble and grateful hearts—have to lead.

Process of discernment

For *a sacred conversation on race* to take us to higher ground, a process of discernment is imperative. Such a process, to be effective, asks something of us. It's hard work.

In this process, all parties need to be able to talk openly. We need to be able to share what's in our hearts and spirits—our fears and anxieties, our anger and resentment, our regret, shame and humiliation.

In other words, we need to be able to openly talk. Processes of discernment take time and patience. They require sincere repentance and forgiveness.

Moving forward in hope

A sacred conversation on race understands, with compassion and humility, that we have a long journey before us. It understands, too, that this journey of liberation and renewal is a process. It is not something for which there are easy answers. It's a process that can only unfold over time.

Still, the process itself overflows with hope. Hope that the power of God's love and forgiveness can take us to higher ground. Hope that all ethnic groups and races can continue to grow and evolve and to use their innate gifts and uniqueness to honor God and to consecrate the holiness of life.

This is God's overarching hope and dream ...

*And God breathed the spirit of life into
man/woman. And God saw that it was good.*

As we continue this sacred conversation, may it be so!