

“Continuing the Conversation on Race”

John 8:31-41

Rev. Rob MacDougall

1/15/12

This past fall many of us were present for the dedication of the Habitat for Humanity house that we helped build. The dedication was a powerful experience for me. Much of what made it powerful was the family and friends of Tou and See whose house we were dedicating. Tou’s mother cried as she expressed her gratitude for all the people that were generous with their time and resources so that her son and his family could have a nice home. See expressed her gratitude as well – her sense of good fortune was offered in words, hugs and lots of great food. The dedication and celebration was one of those grace filled moments that restores ones confidence in humanity and gives rise to the realization that this is exactly what God’s kingdom looks like.

Because I don’t have much contact with families from the Hmong community I was particularly glad that Tou and See were to be the owners of the house. Their presence made me feel less isolated in our predominantly white community. Sometimes I feel like I won’t remember how to relate to people who don’t look a great deal like me. I fear that I won’t remember how to speak and act based on the notion that everyone have the same assumptions about life that I do. Some of my concerns proved justified at the house dedication.

When everyone was still gathering at the house and See hadn’t yet made it back from picking up Tou’s mother, a Hmong woman was walking past me and said, “hi Rob”. I said hi back to her, recognizing that I knew her but forgetting how. I thought it must be See because I didn’t know but a couple of Hmong women. I made a few comments to her indicating that I thought she was See. She looked at me somewhat disappointingly and said, “I’m not See, I’m Pang from Stepping Stones.” Then she walked away. Though I have thought of a hundred justifications for my mistake, some of which are in part credible, what I felt was communicated to this Hmong woman is that all women of your race and ethnicity look the same to me.

This was not the first time I put my foot in my mouth, nor will it be the last. While I have deep convictions about ending prejudice in its many forms, I have actually

had few conversations in the past 20 years that address racial prejudice in our time. It is not hard for me to go along, day by day without encountering any compelling reason to talk about matters of race, so I don't. As a consequence, I become inattentive and oblivious to people of color near and far.

Our gospel passage for this morning reveals a great deal about the obliviousness of people who are established and largely dominant in their community.

Jesus is speaking with the leaders of his own religious community. These leaders are comfortable in their positions. They have plenty to eat, they have status and they have a deep conviction that God has chosen them, making them unique among the people of the earth. While Jesus does not deny their chosenness he challenges how they interpret its meaning. Jesus says even though they are heirs to Abraham's covenant with God, they do not live as free people. Jesus says their freedom does not come as a birthright, it comes through claiming their freedom by living feely as Abraham did. Their status, comfort and dominance are not the marks of freedom, how they treat others and what they proclaim about God's kingdom of justice express their freedom.

Jesus is shifting the understanding of accountability. Instead of chosenness ending accountability, Jesus says it expands it; instead of authority and wealth freeing leaders from concern about the needs of people, they are meant to free them to be compassionate toward others. The danger of being the dominant race, religious body, income class or culture is that we can convince ourselves that we aren't accountable to others, that we have no part in them nor they in us. Jesus makes it clear that accountability to God means being accountable to others. We are not free if we believe our privilege exempts us from reaching out to others who don't fall in our same categories of privilege.

The most recent census data indicates that in a few years people of white European descent will no longer constitute more than 50% of the U.S. population. We in Menomonie, along with a few other pockets around the country continue to be significantly white regarding our racial make-up. Many other portions of the U.S. have greater racial diversity and parity. In significant ways I believe other parts of the U.S. are better prepared for healthy racial diversity than we are. Because we do not think about or engage in conversations about race with any

regularity we may not pay attention to even the basics of who is and will be in our community.

The topic of the WI Council of Churches Annual Meeting that I attended in December was “Healing and Race”. While 75% of the people in attendance were white, the chair of the board of directors was a black United Methodist Bishop and we voted to welcome the African Methodist Episcopal Church into full membership of the Council. With great intentionality the WI Council of Churches is looking toward the future and new realities for the WI faith community. While it would be entirely possible for the Council to avoid conversations on race, they have chosen to actively engage the Christian community in the conversation.

Because many of us that attended the meeting were from parts of the state that are largely white in racial make-up, those leading the program handed out the sheet of paper that I have included in your bulletins. While it isn’t exhaustive and it is a few years old, it offers some basic information about how we might refer to others racial or ethnic background. The heading for the insert reads, “What you say matters”. Part of being in dialogue with people of diverse backgrounds is learning how to speak respectfully about one another.

How we refer to each other recognizing their particular heritage and identity is deeply important. I did find it interesting that in the column of preferred terms under the Asian designation, they included an “s” to make plural those whose ethnicity is Hmong. That is inaccurate, Hmong is plural and singular. So I would suggest using the sheet, but also taking time to check out it suggestions with the people you are talking to.

The two women who engaged us in the conversation on race at the Council of Churches meeting began by showing a video lecture from the website TED.com. This is a very interesting website, it is a library of speakers addressing a huge variety of topics. The speaker we listened to was a Nigerian woman who spoke about the “Danger of a Single Story”. What she meant by this is that it is destructive to think that a person has only one dimension to their life. She told the story of a boy who came each day to work in her family’s home in Nigeria. Before his first day at their home this woman’s mother told her that the boy was poor and lived in a poor neighborhood. For several months this young woman

didn't speak to the boy much thinking that his poverty also meant he was not very bright or interesting.

One day the woman had gone to a library to get a book and to her surprise she found the boy there, reading. She said hello to him and asked what he was reading. It turned out that he was very bright, interesting and ambitious.

As this woman grew older she has reflected on her own limited way of seeing others and how others see only one dimension of her life. She concludes that there is danger in knowing only a single story, a single dimension of people's lives. Knowing only a single story allows for stereotyping – poor people are not smart; single stories can strip people of their humanity – when speaking of migrant workers it is said that the U. S needed labor and what we got were human beings with families and hopes for a good life.

Our world is a complex place and as I look at the list of racial and ethnic groups on the bulletin insert I recognize that there is much to learn about the diversity of people around us. When I went to the Pine Ridge reservation I began by speaking of Native Americans, then I learned to speak of the Lakota people, then I learned of the Oglala band. When we invaded Iraq I began to learn about the Kurds and Shiite and Sunni Muslims and their differences. I often feel overwhelmed by the world's complexity and people's need to be known for their/our particularities. But being known and being known in all our uniqueness is one of our deepest spiritual needs. We need to be more than just a category of animal – maybe this is why some people are so offended by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. When Martin Luther King, Jr. said he had a dream that someday children would be known by the content of their character and not just the color of their skin, I think he was talking about the importance of knowing more than a single story about a person.

I believe that our continuing conversation on race will require that we see in each other many stories. When we think about and approach people of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds it is vitally important to listen to what they say about themselves, knowing that much of what they say will not fall within our stereotypes of each other. People want to be known not as categories, but as unique and complex human beings. To see each other in this light will set us free to be more fully God's own loving people.