

Sermon for May 18, 2008

Readings: Genesis 1:1-5, 26-27; “The Creation” James Weldon Johnson UCC Conversation on Race and Confirmation Sunday

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When the controversy about Barack Obama’s pastor and church, Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity UCC in Chicago, was first made into news by networks hungry for a sensational story, many leaders in the UCC came to the defense of Rev. Wright and his church.

And to my great pride, one of those was our own Wisconsin Conference Minister, Rev. David Moyer.

At the same time, the national leaders of our denomination called for what they described as a Sacred Conversation on Race; and they asked UCC clergy across the denomination to preach on race today, May 18.

Because I believe that Racism is a sin that still very deeply infects our society, I want to accept that call.

But neither by experience nor training do I have any special expertise in this area. The one thing I may be able to offer is a reflection on what the Bible tells us. The lectionary texts for today – particularly the reading from Genesis – seem perfect for that.

And it was only a short step to add James Weldon Johnson’s great folk sermon, *The Creation*, to our readings. In *The Creation*, Johnson, himself an African-American, and with his brother the composer of the final hymn in our service today, brought together the two creation stories in the opening chapters of Genesis.

In his great composition, he captures the powerful intimacy and the deep compassion in the relationship God creates, as God creates the first human being. As we think about this story in conjunction with the Biblical text, we just need to remember that all humankind, men and women, are created in God’s image.

Biblical scholar Norman Gottwald translates that portion of Genesis 1:27 this way: *So God created earthlings in God’s own image; male and female God created them.*

Male and female are created in one stroke, and created in God’s image. Gender equality is explicit here, at the summit and pinnacle of creation. Neither female subordination, nor any form of sexism, can be grounded in this text.

Class distinctions are also not justified by these creation stories. God decrees that the goods of the earth are for all humans to enjoy. Here at the beginning, there is no allowance for some human beings to acquire goods at the expense of others – for some to have much more than they need, while others struggle even to survive.

And for our purposes today, the most important thing to notice is that all humankind – every human being – bears the Image of God.

And thus all humankind – every human being – stands in a special relationship with God. The distinctions that we make – and race and ethnicity are certainly among them – are as of nothing to God.

Interestingly, the science of Genetics, in the last few years, has confirmed this Biblical assumption. According to Genetics, race is simply one of the many human differences – like hair color (or even the absence of hair), or height, or the many other characteristics that make us unique physical individuals.

When it comes to race, skin color is literally only skin-deep.

What I am saying is that the God-created differences among us are relatively small in the context of the relationships God wants to have with all of us. And also, as we shall see from the lectionary gospel text in just a moment, these differences are unimportant and irrelevant in terms of the missions and ministries God has for us.

Now I want to be clear. I'm not saying there are no differences. Only one group of people – African-Americans – has been held as slaves in this country. And that still influences the way they are seen and treated, and what is offered to them.

In the 1930's and 40's in this country, only people with certain facial characteristics were part of the yellow peril. My father-in-law, whom I love more than my own father, who taught me how to fish and how to grow roses, and most importantly who gave me permission to court his daughter – this man whom I care about very much, who served in the Navy in WW II and lost many friends in the Pacific – this man calls all people with Oriental facial characteristics “Japs.”

Today, it is mostly people who look Hispanic or Latino who come under suspicion when immigration issues arise.

There was a raid on a meat-packing plant in Iowa a week ago. 300 people were detained, all of Hispanic background. Spouses were separated. Parents and children were separated. There was chaos and fear in the whole Hispanic community, documented and undocumented.

Race and ethnicity matter – not directly to God; but unfortunately, they matter in the way people in this country are treated.

That's why the UCC wants us to start a Sacred Conversation on Race. And that's why Madison-area Urban Ministry is trying to start a local conversation on Race, Religion and Politics. I have been a part of that; and if it proceeds as MUM hopes, there will be opportunities for our church to participate.

It is perhaps at this point that we should consider the lectionary Gospel text for today. The Risen Christ meets the disciples on a mountaintop in Galilee and says to them:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

The world that Jesus knew – and that the early Christians knew when this gospel was written – was a world filled with distinctions among people, and discrimination based on those distinctions.

But the ministry Jesus modeled – and the ministry he gave to the disciples on that mountaintop in Galilee – was a ministry based on God's love for all people, especially the outcast and oppressed.

In our world, that means there are to be no compromises with Racism or other forms of oppressive discrimination. Our ministry is with and for all people; and when we meet structures of injustice and oppression, we are called to witness to God's love in a variety of ways, which may help disassemble these structures of discrimination.

And this is the message I would hope to leave with our new Confirmands, also. You are joining a Community of Faith whose missions and ministries are given to us by Jesus. Those ministries include confronting oppression and evil wherever they exist, based on God's intimate and compassionate love for all humankind.

As God created us all in God's image, and breathed into us the breath of life, we are called to love God and love all our neighbors. This includes neighbors of different races and ethnicities.

As we participate in our Confirmation ceremony today, let us be aware that the ministries which these young people take on are our ministries – missions and ministries of the Christian Church – given to us in the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

Go, Jesus said. May we always go forth in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.
Amen.