

Prejudice and Pride – A Broadview UCC Sermon on Gay Pride

June 23, 2006 – Rev. Dan Stern

Jonah 4, Colossians 3:10-11, James 2:1-5

I add to these readings 4 more brief quotations about prejudice –

This first one by Samuel Johnson: “There are, in every age, new errors to be rectified and new prejudices to be opposed.”

And by William James: “A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”

Henry David Thoreau: “It is never too late to give up our prejudices.”

And finally, by that funny man of old Hollywood movies, W. C. Fields, “I am free of ALL prejudice. I hate everyone equally.”

That other funny man, the one from the Bible named Jonah, hated everyone in the foreign city of Ninivah equally too. He didn't KNOW ANY of them personally, mind you; he just hated them in general. Jonah had long projected all his own petty prejudices upon the Ninivites: THEY were EVIL doers. THEY were dirty and did things he couldn't repeat to his mother. He was sure the Ninivites were all pinko commie sub-human terrorists, heretical heathen foreign slime bags. He was “sure” God would smite the whole damned bunch of them. He “knew” all this about them precisely because he had kept them at such a distance. That is, until God made him go right into the middle of them to offer the possibility of God's mercy. And though the messenger was merciless, the message was mercy, and they readily heard the message. God would deal mercifully with them, offering forgiveness, love, sheer grace. But that went completely against the grain of Jonah's ingrained biases! God's mercy infuriated Jonah! His hateful frustration was such that he claimed he'd rather himself die than see such people live. But really, it was Jonah's own prejudices that had to die. And so do ours.

Do some of you remember the day George Wallace, the former governor of Alabama who ran for president once on a southern segregationist platform, publicly repented of his formerly racist ways? Thoreau was right: “It's never too late to give up our prejudices.” There are persons with horribly racist backgrounds who've become strong advocates for equality and civil rights. Our early Sunday adult discussion group is reading an autobiographical book by Philip Yancy. Yancy was raised in the not-yet-dead dying days of overt southern white racism. He was himself very much a part of that world. To him, the Ku Klux Klan was a “last line of defense to preserve the Christian purity of the South.” Everyone Yancy knew called Martin Luther King “Martin Lucifer Coon.” They would make sure people knew they were NOT ‘Open and Affirming’ there by God. That handout said the following: “Believing the motives of your group to be foreign to the teachings of God's word, we cannot extend a welcome to you and request you leave the premises quietly. Scripture does NOT teach ‘the brotherhood of man’... . He (that is, God) is the CREATOR of all, but only the FATHER of those who have been regenerated.” The leaders of Yancy's own white fundamentalist church once prepared handouts to give to any blacks or white civil rights sympathizers who might come around to the doors of their church. Their statement

went on to conclude, “If any one of you is here with a sincere desire to know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord, we shall be glad to deal individually with you.” I’ll bet they were! Yancy’s home church was the kind that knew how to diligently search scripture to justify what their biases already wanted it to say – that God would want them to live in a strictly separate and unequal segregationist society. And yet, in time, for Yancy there came repentance; the genuine gospel of Jesus, as practiced by King and by others, eventually won him over. It’s exciting to read and to hear about how his soul survived and his life transformed.

Some of us who grew up in churches that taught the opposite of what Yancy’s church did may think we are far, far away from the places, times, and ways of thinking that promulgate such detestable racism. But, I came to see and experience prejudice a lot closer to home than I expected. One Sunday in my early teens I watched as an usher, a greeter for the church, no less, turn his back on Ted and Lucille. I’d never seen that usher act like this before. He was fuming. His face was red. His mouth curled up in a snarling sneer. He started mumbling overtly racist remarks to those in his presence – including me. I heard it quite clearly, he meant it to be heard, and it shocked me. How, I wondered, could a presumably Christian man say such profane things about other human beings? How indeed! Lucille, had grown up in this church, had gone away to college at the University of Washington, and there she had met Ted. And they fell in love. Lucille is white. And Ted, is black. They had gone home to Tonasket during their freshman year, and decided to attend Sunday worship together.

Well nothing’s been the same since. Their mere presence together challenged segregationist mindsets I didn’t even previously know existed in my home town. Racism’s ugliness got exposed. M. L. King and those working with him did the same thing – they exposed prejudice for the brutal thing that it was. The violence of bigotry was brought out into the open, and it provoked moral outrage on the part of the people of a nation who believed in something better. I’ll always admire Ted and Lucille for taking that first, hard step in my home community. They are married now and attend a UCC congregation with an African American pastor.

I wanted to find some way to respond. And though I was too young to go march in the South for Civil Rights my older brother Richard was directly involved. He’s the one Sam and I visited during my sabbatical who lives in Italy. Richard graduated from the nearly all-black Howard University in Washington D.C. Once a policeman hit him hard across his shoulders with a nightstick. But that incident didn’t happen in D.C. or in Selma, Alabama. It happened right here in Seattle. Again - I wanted to respond. I wanted to fight the good fight with him. The struggle for Civil Rights seemed so exciting and so genuinely good; here was something of truly Biblical proportions happening in my own generation, and I wished I could be where the action was. It was for me not all that unlike the way it is for so many young people who think they want to go to war. I wanted to join in the fight too, in my case, to sign up for civil rights and volunteer to accomplish what William James called the moral equivalent of war. I devoured everything I could about the civil rights movement, and lived vicariously through my older brother.

I also became increasingly aware of close-to-home prejudices cruelly directed against Native Americans. I became conscious of prejudice directed against women and against those perceived to be gay too – I soon experienced the latter kind directed against my own self – and learned firsthand that not all prejudice has to do with race. I saw it directed also against poor white ‘dust

bowl refugees' who lived on the marginal farmlands of the Okanogan highlands. By the way, *Pride and Prejudice*, the title I borrowed for this sermon, originally a classic novel – also now an excellent film – is about this kind of prejudice, the kind based on economic class. Perhaps, class bias is THE most widespread and destructive kind of all.

None of us are the same once we're confronted head on with racism. Or with war. Or with bigotry and injustice and inequality. At least I hope we're not! We who have founded our beliefs about equality, peace, and justice on solid Biblical principals, we who have taken our inspiration for walking our talk directly from Jesus, cannot help but respond with both outrage and with hope.

We keep our outrage and our hope balanced by doing what antifascist WWII era theologian Carl Barth always counseled Christians to do: hold a newspaper in one hand and a Bible in the other. Doing this has helped me keep relatively in touch and sane at the same time. But it has been the BIBLE, not the newspaper, which has inspired me to march for liberation and kept despair at bay; it is the Bible that still keeps my mind active my feet steady, my legs, working and strong, because there are great things contained therein that lighten my load and keep me true to the task, things that offer perspective on the often-very disheartening news.

Hear again today's brief gem of a passage from the NT Epistle to the Colossians: "Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean NOTHING. EVERYone is included...in Christ." Word. Gospel truth. Hold onto that in one hand. And then – in the other – always new errors to be rectified and new prejudices to be opposed." That's why we're walking downtown this afternoon in favor of the inclusive way of Jesus and in opposition to the kind of prejudice we call homophobia. Some want it to ONLY be a fun-loving parade and party; taking place on Capitol Hill, and all the crowds could support struggling businesses there, and the more, the merrier. Interestingly though: the first gay rights marches in Seattle did take place downtown, and the point was less to celebrate, and more to say something important to the whole world. We from this church hope to have a good time downtown today. But we also go there to show and tell people that there are churches out here that really do believe in equal rights for all, including gay and lesbian people, and are willing to oppose the kind of bigotry we call homophobia with gospel-inspired vigor. My colleague Diane at Alki UCC in West Seattle decided to have their worship service a whole hour early this morning so their entire congregation could go downtown and march together. That seems to me to be a very fine thing.

"It is never too late to give up our prejudices." God is still speaking to every Joe, Jane, and Jonah, saying, "Let go of your resentful prejudices." May we all do that. And may we loudly and proudly and clearly proclaim God's own alternative vision too, even this very afternoon as we walk the talk of liberation and equality that our faith in Christ has inspired. Happy Pride Day! Amen!