

**Sermon Preached August 24, 2014 – On Racism
Year A, Proper 16
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
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Our help is in the Name of the LORD, * the maker of heaven and earth. Amen. (Ps 124:8)

A teenage boy is getting ready to take his girlfriend to the prom. First he goes to rent a tux, but there's a long tux line at the shop and it takes forever, but he gets the tux. Next, he has to get some flowers, so he heads over to the florist and there's a huge flower line there. He waits forever but eventually gets the flowers. Then he heads out to rent a limo. Unfortunately, there's a large limo line at the rental office, but he's patient and gets the job done. Finally, the day of the prom arrives. The two young people are dancing happily and his girlfriend is having a great time. When the song is over, she asks him to get her some punch, so he heads over to the punch table and he gets some punch. (silence) oh that's it. There is no punch line. (Ha!)

This fall my own teenage son, Duncan, will be starting 11th grade at Masconomet High School. I can hardly believe he is old enough to drive, and date, and is currently beginning his college search! In the past 18 months his voice has dropped and his height has soared. He's now several inches taller than I am! It seemed just yesterday he was a playful toddler.

I remember for his fifth birthday he invited five friends over for a party. It was a diverse group including a black boy, a white girl, a black girl, an Asian boy, and a white boy. The six of them played joyfully together for the afternoon, tumbling around each other like puppies. Gender

and racial differences did not hinder their love and friendship for each other. They were different, yes, but they belonged together. They played happily as one group. It struck me that we are not born racist. Racism is a culturally learned practice.

Over the past two weeks we all have been listening to the news about the protests in Ferguson, MO. A police officer shot and killed an unarmed black teenager. I'm not qualified to comment on this particular case, but I will note that the extent of the protests in Ferguson, as well as the national attention the case has drawn, point to a grave challenge to our country. If this were an isolated incident, there would be no protests. The reason this is receiving national attention is because it underscores the sin of racism that is sadly still a part of our national landscape. People are protesting because this is just the tip of the iceberg of a much larger problem, and because it is so massive and important, they wish to call attention to it. We would be wise to listen and reflect.

Our Old Testament story today is also a story about racism. Two races are living together in one land, the Egyptians and the Israelites. Over time the Israelites become so numerous the Egyptians become fearful. So Pharaoh implements a form of genocide in which all Israelite boy children are murdered at the moment of their birth. The Israelite child Moses is born during this period. His mother, terrified at losing her infant son, manages to hide him for three months. When she can no longer do this, she makes a small basket, places him in it, and sends him into the water. But while Pharaoh himself is racist and fearful, his daughter is not. She finds Moses in the river and is not afraid. She knows he should be killed, but will not do so. In fact, she completely defies her father and goes to great lengths to ensure that Moses not only lives, but is

cared for. She sees in him not an enemy, but a son, and adopts him as her own. Later in life, Moses also opposes Pharaoh, and guided by God, he liberates the Israelites from the racism and oppression of the Egyptians.

There are several things we learn about racism from this passage:

- 1) At its core, racism is about fear. Pharaoh's racist policies come about because of fear of the Israelites.
- 2) God does not sanction racism or injustice by one group of people against another. God had Moses lifted up in order to free the Israelites from racism and slavery.
- 3) We are called to oppose racism whether we are a member of the oppressed race, like Moses' mother. Or a member of the elite race, like Pharaoh's daughter. Or one who walks between the two, like Moses. And all who oppose racism have God on their side.

I find myself sympathizing with Moses' mother. I imagine Duncan's life being threatened by an unjust system simply because of his race, and I know I would move heaven and earth to protect him. As a mother I would risk my own life to save his. I applaud Moses' mother's courage and ingenuity to protect her child.

But I then start to think about all the African American mothers in America whose sons are at risk because of their race. If I were black mother in Ferguson, knowing I have a 16-year-old boy-child, who on the outside looks like a man, I would be terrified. I would be leading the protests to demand that justice prevail, for fear of what might become of Duncan just because of

his race. Then I think back to the sweet five year old black boy at his birthday party 11 years ago. I suspect that this black boy now, like Duncan, is the height of a full-grown man. However I suspect that over the course of his young adulthood he, unlike Duncan, will likely face unfair encounters with the law.

Some of what I am saying may sound odd. What am I talking about, inferring that there is a double standard to our law? That black people are treated differently than white people? Surely if a black person is stopped or arrested it is because they deserve it! To those of us who are white, we likely have not ever encountered a double standard so cannot see it. Certainly I haven't seen it, or frankly thought about it a whole lot. Over the years I've suspected some and looked at it some, but this week did some more extensive research and came up with some sobering statistics. Here is a very small sample:

- 1) African-Americans comprise 14% of the drug users, but 37% of the people arrested for drug-related offenses in America and 56% of the people in state prisons for drug offenses.¹
- 2) Studies show that police are more likely to pull over and frisk blacks or Latinos than whites. In New York City, 80% of the stops made were blacks and Latinos, and 85% of those people were frisked, compared to a mere 8% of the white people stopped.²
- 3) Once convicted, black offenders receive longer sentences compared to white offenders. The U.S. Sentencing Commission stated that in the federal system black

¹ Quigley, Bill. "Fourteen Examples of Racism in Criminal Justice System." The Huffington Post. Accessed March 1, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bill-quigley/fourteen-examples-of-raci_b_658947.html.... quoted from the 2009 Congressional testimony by Marc Mauer of The Sentencing Project. (Bill Quigley - Law Professor, Loyola University New Orleans, CCR Associate Legal Director).

² U.S. Department of Justice. "The Reality of Racial Profiling." The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. Accessed March 1, 2014, <http://www.civilrights.org/publications/reports/racial-profiling2011/the-reality-of-racial.html>.

offenders receive sentences that are 10 percent longer than white offenders for the same crimes.³

- 4) 80% of defendants sentenced to death in federal courts are people of color.⁴
- 5) The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics concluded that an African American male born in 2001 (a child who is currently 13) has a 32% chance of going to jail in his lifetime, while a Latino male has a 17% chance, and a white male only 6%.⁵

Duncan was born in 1998. If he were black and facing those odds, my heart would be in my throat every time he left the house. No wonder there are mothers in the streets of Ferguson. As well as fathers, and brothers, and sisters, and clergy, including many Episcopal clergy, including the Episcopal Bishop of Missouri, marching with the protesters. This is not simply about 18-year old unarmed Michael Brown who was shot and killed. There is injustice in our legal system, in our nation, and if as Americans we believe in “freedom and justice for all,” and if as Christians we uphold our baptismal covenant to “strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being,” we are compelled to act. We are called to overhaul our system, stand up against racism, and seek fairness and equality. I don’t want America to go down in history as another Egypt. Where we are so fearful of the “other” that we allow our fears to permit a double-standard in the law. We have come a long way since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. But we haven’t yet arrived at the Promised Land.

³ <http://www.southerncoalition.org/mass-incarceration-people-color/>. Accessed August 23, 2014.

⁴ <http://www.vsb.org/docs/vlawyermagazine/dec00dunnville.pdf>. Accessed August 23, 2014.

⁵ Bonczar, Thomas P., and Allen J. Beck, Ph.D.. "Lifetime Likelihood of Going to State or Federal Prison." Bureau of Justice Statistics. Accessed March 1, 2014. <http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/Llgsfp.pdf>.

As we learned from Pharaoh, fear is at the heart of racism. We are afraid of those who are different from us, and we seek to control and put down that which we fear. Pharaoh did it to the Israelites. There are many whites in our country who do it to blacks. We as Christians are called to be part of the solution. Can we be like Pharaoh's daughter and see in these young black men our sons? At the same time, I want to remind us that while Jesus himself opposed oppression, he loved both the Israelites as well as the conquering Romans. He loves us all, black and white, and red and yellow and green. He loves both Michael Brown and the policeman Darren Wilson. This sermon is not meant to be a scolding for privileged white people, and by-the-way, we ARE privileged white people. This is meant, rather, as a call and challenge to us as Christians and followers of Jesus to use that privilege in the pursuit of the Kingdom of God. In the words of the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentors, not the tormented. Wherever anyone is persecuted for their race or political views, that place must become the center of the universe."

Not only as a priest, but as the mother of a teenage boy, my heart breaks over what is happening in Ferguson and in communities across our nation. Racism is a sin. We owe it to the country we love and the God we worship to oppose it, that all God's children may be treated equally and with respect. We can do this through prayer, through contacting our elected representatives, through informing ourselves more about the issues, through modeling racial acceptance to our children, through having frank conversations with people we know of color and getting their perspectives, and through standing up against racism whenever we encounter it among family and friends. We can even go one step further and join action groups which seek to

work with the government and elected officials to bring true equality to the legal system and our country.

And this IS good news! There is a light at the end of the tunnel and we have a role in its fulfillment. As Christians we pray and work for the Kingdom of God. A vision of which was described well by the Rev. Dr. MLK, Jr. “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

Amen.