

“Post-Racial America?”

Psalm 36:5-10; John 2:1-11; I Corinthians 12:1-11

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

January 27, 2019

(Today’s message was prepared for delivery two weeks ago, as an appropriate preface to last Sunday’s inspiring testimony of John Bell, Jr., during our observance of Martin Luther King Sunday. News coverage of current events that carry racial overtones demonstrates that what I had prepared to preach then remains relevant now. Sadly, that may be equally true a year from now, or ten, or a hundred. Will that morning come when the world wakes from King’s dream to find that the vision he imagined has become reality?)

A century and a half after the Emancipation Proclamation, the election of America’s first President of color initiated calls for a “conversation on race” in America.

At America’s most revered institutions of higher learning, debate rages over whether the blatant racism of once honored founders and benefactors is cause to banish their association with campuses. Buildings, stadiums, programs are re-named.

The flag long connected with the defeated army of America’s most painful internal conflict, remains a symbol of pride for some citizens, but a symbol of hate for others.

Are we living in a “post-racial America”?

“When the architects of our Republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., Washington DC, August 28, 1963)

I was once blessed to spend a few days as guest of the Cherokee nation in Oklahoma, descendants of the Native Americans tribes forcibly removed from southeastern U.S. to west of the Mississippi River, in the early 1800s. That blight in our history is known as “The Trail of Tears”.

I must confess that until recently I was uninformed about “Slavery’s Trail of Tears”, the coerced march in that same era of one million African-Americans from the “Upper South”—Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky—to the “Deep South”—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama. Edward Ball, in an issue of the Smithsonian magazine, tells the story of this mostly buried but equally repugnant episode in the saga of our nation. It involved a multitude of men, women, and children—black men, women, and children—“deported” as it were, at the mercy of slave traders—human beings sold as premium property for cash, exchanged at the despicable markets of the white establishment. Many thousands, for sure, were exhibited, and subjected to such vile treatment, on the wharves of Alexandria, perhaps twenty-five miles from where we worship. The journey west, from the Tobacco South to the Cotton South, would begin on what was then and is now Virginia’s Little River Turnpike, and continue at a pace of 20 miles a day for up to four months. The trails fashioned then, though silent and overgrown now, are in some places still apparent alongside busy modern highways.

The term “chain gang” originated with “Slavery’s Trail of Tears”. Charles Ball, of no known relation to the Smithsonian author of the same name, ultimately escaped his fate, but gives this account of what he endured: “We were handcuffed in pairs, with iron staples and bolts...I joined fifty-one other slaves bought in Maryland.” (A padlock was added to the handcuffs, and the hasp of each padlock closed on a link in a chain 100 feet long. The chain ran through an iron neck collar.) “I could not shake off my chains, nor move a yard without the consent of my master.”

The last portion of the thousand-mile ordeal would often be on a steamboat heading down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. There, the new arrivals would be sold again to eager bosses, and dispersed to sugar and cotton plantations. The transaction held no regard for family units: parents, siblings, spouses, children could be coldly separated, never to see one another again. The term “sold down the river” originated with “Slavery’s Trail of Tears.”

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“We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now...Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustices to the solid rock of brotherhood...The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright days of justice emerge.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., Washington DC, August 28, 1963)

Columnist Eugene Robinson reveals that the murderer of nine black churchgoers in South Carolina was admittedly influenced by the Council of Conservative Citizens, which declares among its principles that “the American people and government should remain European in their composition and character”, and that “all efforts to mix the races of mankind” should be opposed. The watch-dog, Southern Poverty Law Center equates the Council of Conservative Citizens to the “White Citizens Councils” that so passionately fought desegregation during the civil rights era. It was that first President of color who acknowledged, when reacting to the horror at the Charleston AME church, that slavery and Jim Crow discrimination cast “a long shadow, and that’s still part of our DNA that’s passed on”.

Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners, with whom I worked for five years, advances the “conversation on race” in a book entitled *America’s Original Sin: Crossing the Bridge to a New America*. Jim writes: “The language ‘America’s original sin’ helped me understand that the historical racism against American Indigenous people and enslaved Africans was indeed a **sin**, and one upon which this country was founded....If we are able to recognize that the sin still lingers, we can better understand issues before us today and deal with them more deeply, honestly, and even spiritually—which is essential if we are to make progress toward real solutions...Sin can be repented of and changed, but only when we acknowledge it for what it is...Repentance means more than just saying you’re sorry. It means turning in a new and better direction.”

If you require evidence that the sin still lingers, see the gripping, x Oscar-nominated film “If Beal Street Could Talk”, as Chris and I did yesterday.

The Gospel of John, Chapter 8, verse 32, offers the theological premise for our escape from this sin: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” In facing the truth of our racial past and present, we all become more free, congregations become more faithful, and the state of our union “more perfect”.

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Eight years ago, I was alone for a few minutes in the sanctuary of what is now Dexter Avenue King Memorial Church, in Montgomery, Alabama. I stood at the pulpit from which, between 1954 and 1959, a young Martin Luther King, Jr., preached as the pastor of what was then Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Only four years after he occupied the Dexter Avenue pulpit—though four incredibly eventful years, indeed—King presided from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC as his pulpit, to preach a sermon for the ages to a black and white multitude spread along the Mall’s reflecting pool.

“I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal....I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.’” (Martin Luther King, Jr., Washington DC, August 28, 1963)

The truth...will set us free!