

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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During the holidays I had the chance to attend the Christmas program at a middle school. As part of the program, the choir danced and sang "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." (Yes, it was a public middle school). Neither the music nor the choreography was perfect, but there was something perversely pleasing about that multiracial choir of boys and girls singing an old white European tune with a distinctive African-American beat and dance moves adapted from the Hood.

For an aging "white boy," who had attended segregated schools and gone on to a recently-integrated state university (thanks only to generous financial aid), it was a moment of both hope and sadness.

Not long ago I read an article that described what was happening to my cadre of Baby Boomers. Those of us who had been deeply involved in the social upheaval of the 60's, driven by an irrepressible idealism, were now falling prey to cynicism and/or despair as we were coming face-to-face with reality. We may have had a dream, but things haven't turned out as we imagined.

The prophetic reflections of the Bob Dylan tune, "But I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now" cut deep. Things were so clear then. It was black and white (in more ways than one). We were certain what the problem was, and we were even more certain that we could solve it once and for all. Fifty years later a hurricane named Katrina exposed our arrogance for all to see. It was no longer the dirty little secret that no one mentioned in polite company. Racism is still alive and well in America. The widespread animosity toward the poor of any color is startling.

In the midst of recalcitrant racism and cancerous classism, multi-colored children dance and sing "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." Naïveté? Hope? Defiance?

Like a lightning bolt, joy comes unexpectedly, lasts all too briefly, and cannot be held. When I came to the Great Rivers Region nine years ago, the first preaching invitation I received came from Pastor Leroy Mitchell and the New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. Since then I have been privileged to preach in most of the African-American churches in the Great Rivers Region and/or to be present at significant points in the lives of those churches.

As wonderful as those formal opportunities have been, I believe I have cherished most those unexpected, undeserved, unplanned moments when I have found myself as the only white guy at a small table of sisters and brothers, accepted as just another member of the family. I am clearly aware that I am there only because I have been invited by some trusting, risk-taking friend or pastor, not because of my own worthiness or initiative.

What happens then is joyfully authentic because we don't deliberately dialogue about "the issue" or sculpt political strategy. We simply share what matters to us and what is going on in our lives and our ministries. In the course of those unguarded conversations our prejudices, presumptions and pains are confessed, and then we move on.

“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.”

Time and circumstances have not been kind to many of us. The Sixties left me with a lot of baggage that I didn't even know I was carrying. Twenty years ago, Will Campbell first began loosening the load of my old white liberalism. I was oblivious to the fact that I carried a distinctive form of racism and classism that in many ways is more pernicious and more destructive than open hatred.

We (meaning “old white liberals”) were correct in identifying institutional racism. We were foolish in thinking we could talk tough to our government and businesses, but ignore our churches. We were naïve in neglecting the depth and deception of personal racism—even in ourselves, regardless of our race or class. Consequently, our arrogant, legalistic approaches to “solve the race problem” fell short.

Like most really important issues, confronting racism requires deeper personal transformation than we willingly embrace. We must be “born again.” This is a work of God, not ourselves. Liberals get uncomfortable with this kind of talk. But I have come to believe it is a major, unspoken divide between typical white and typical African-American Christians despite their shared concern for social justice.

In my experience, most (not all) Christian African-Americans firmly root social justice and equality in a robust, unapologetic confession of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. For them, the fundamental question is: “Do you know Jesus?” Everything else flows from that, including prayer in the Name of Jesus. For too many (not all) white conservatives the identity of Jesus is the first, last, and only question. For too many (not all) white liberals Jesus Christ is an embarrassment that needs to be dismissed as soon as possible.

Both conservatives and liberals need to learn something from our African-American brothers and sisters. White conservatives need to learn that they have far more in common, theologically, with most African-American Christians than they imagine. They also need to learn that “knowing Jesus” has inescapable social consequences.

White liberals need to learn that they are not above racism. Often their approaches to “the race problem” are shadows of yet another form of racism. They also need to learn that concern for social ills that is not firmly rooted in and bounded by Jesus Christ runs the risk of degenerating and dissipating into mere ideology that seeks the benefits of the Kingdom without the person of the King.

“Father love is reigning o'er us, brother love binds man to man.”

Christian communities are inescapably Christ-centered and Kingdom-driven at the same time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer learned that during his visit to Union Theological Seminary in New York (1930-31). His critique of American theology at that time was brutal, despite his personal affection for the faculty at Union. But he found vitality, hope, and authenticity in the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem. One cannot help but be in awe of trusting church leaders who allowed a German Lutheran to work with the youth of the church, including teaching a children's Sunday School class. Did they have any idea of the consequences of this risky ministry?

This experience had a profound impact on Bonhoeffer's later work. For him, a robust Christology informed, energized, and sustained community (ecclesiology) and ministry. The idea of church in mission /ministry rooted in anything other than Christology was sinking sand. At the same time, Christology that did not result in life with and for others was a lie.

If Christ reigns in our lives, then racism and classism—in any form—has no place. Yet both persist in our churches as surely as they persist in our society. Even American Baptists are not immune. While

we take pride in the unequalled racial and ethnic diversity of our denomination, there are times when we glimpse what lies just beneath the surface—and it is ugly. We are like whitewashed sepulchers.

The answer is not another resolution, study commission, resource, or contrived dialogue. The answer is to repent, confess, turn to Christ and fully live out the consequences of a Christ-centered life. I am persuaded that repentance is something that needs to be done again and again, both personally and corporately.

The repetition of repentance is necessary because racism and classism is both persistent and evolving. We get tired, lose interest, and want to move on to “more important things.” We live in a dynamic context that cannot be reduced to black and white (it never could, but the scale made us think so in 1960). Growing Asian, Middle Eastern, and especially Hispanic communities (not to mention biracial children) challenge our static understanding of racism. It has gotten more complicated, not simpler. But most of all, we arrogantly delude ourselves thinking that others might be racists, but “not me.”

True repentance will lead to some risky behaviors. All of us must take some risks with one another. As long as we depend entirely upon laws and other political means to achieve the goal of justice, equality and equal opportunity racism and classism will continue to lurk right beneath the surface. We must take the risk of personal relationships with persons of other racial/ethnic/socioeconomic backgrounds. That will not be easy.

Christ-centered faith is full of risky business. God seems to have a predilection for taking chances on human beings.

“Teach us how to love each other.”

Jesus said we can enter the Kingdom only by being born again and coming as children. We must become vulnerable and learn all over again. We come one at a time, but we never come and remain alone unto ourselves.

The irony is that, in this season, we are remembering and celebrating the fact that God came to us as a child! God had promised that a little child will lead the way. We cannot come as a child until we come to the Child.

Like middle school children, we may not sing or dance perfectly, especially when it comes to race or class, but I still think it is a pleasing offering to God.

May it be so in 2006.

“Melt the clouds of sin and sadness.”

