Race Matters

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Acts 10:44-48

This morning's text from Acts offers the final chapter in the story of Peter and Cornelius. Peter was a devout Jewish man, shaped by the deep divisions that existed between his community and Gentiles. Cornelius was a Gentile and officer in the army that occupied Peter's homeland.

Earlier in the story, God sent Peter a vision of a blanket filled with foods that Judaism declared was unclean. God commands Peter to eat, teaching Peter not to declare unclean what God has declared clean. Immediately after, Cornelius called Peter to his house, and Peter went.

The juxtaposition of these two events is profound for Peter. In verse 34 he says: "I begin to see how true it is that God shows no partiality – rather, that any person of any nationality who fears god and does what is right is acceptable to God."

Ultimately, the Holy Spirit descends upon all of the listeners, and "the Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter were surprised that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also, whom they could hear speaking in tongues and glorifying God."

"Then Peter asked, 'What can stop these people who have received the Holy Spirit, even as we have, from being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.'"

The story reveals more than that social divisions based on race are not what God has in mind. It shows us Cornelius and Peter, whose work with one

another breaks down their social divisions, which in turn provides a new understanding of God.

I am speaking this morning after nearly two years of meeting with other members of our community on issues of race. We refer to our meetings as “Race Matters” meetings, and I’m sure you’ve heard our announcements throughout services.

So far, our work together has included an evening event with the Center on Justice and Peacebuilding, a movie discussion and small monthly meetings.

Our initial gathering, almost two years ago, has stuck with me. It became clear very quickly that each of us had long-standing journeys thinking about and engaging racism. It seemed difficult to find a way to work together from such different individual paths. Nothing clear rose to the top of the idea heap, and we didn’t seem to find much common ground as to where we wanted to go with this.

It left me with a question that I have yet to answer: What does it look like for us to honor the journeys we have been on as individuals, while looking forward together as a community?

That these diverse perspectives exist are a testament to the fact that we are, in fact, engaging in issues of race on a regular basis in our work, in our homes, in our schools. How do we offer a shared blessing for these different paths, while recognizing that we are a community living in a society still profoundly shaped by our historic structural and individual racism?

That meeting did serve as the catalyst for an adult ed series on Walter Wink’s book *The Powers that Be*. In that series last fall, we looked at Wink’s

ideas about worldviews, power dynamics and at Biblical sources for viewing 'the powers' not as spiritual forces alone, but as systems and structures that we interact with daily.

One prime example of "the powers that be" is the criminal justice system, which exemplifies the way our society has fostered racial discrimination.

About two decades after the Civil Rights Act was passed, the criminal justice system began to expand, often for nonviolent drug offenses and for mandatory minimum sentences. Longer sentences mean larger prison populations, leading to the 1990s boom in prison growth; the "prison industrial complex." Today, despite representing only 5 percent of the global population, the United States houses 25 percent of the world's prisoners – 2.3 million incarcerated individuals.

Growth alone doesn't necessarily make the criminal justice system racially suspect. But we don't have to dig much deeper to find out which communities are affected most by the system.

While African Americans are 12 percent of the U.S. population and 14 percent of monthly drug users, they are 59 percent of those convicted of drug charges and 74 percent of drug offenders sentenced to prison.

As of last year, Hispanic men became the most represented group incarcerated for felony offenses. Most of this increased representation is due to immigration crimes.

But let's go further than just disproportionate sentencing, because a conviction in the criminal justice system comes with more than a jail sentence.

Many individuals who enter the system lose access to sustainable livelihoods because of limitations placed on formerly incarcerated individuals for work, housing and food assistance, education and even lose the right to vote.

No access to housing, food or education has a direct impact on a person's family. For children who have a parent who has been incarcerated, and may have less access to a quality education and basic needs because of that, their chances of being incarcerated in their lifetime go up significantly. The criminal justice system and the long-term social disenfranchisement that results from it, can affect generations.

Systems like this are a key reason why definitions of race and racism have become important – addressing racism does not only mean individual prejudices. Many anti-racism materials use the definition of racism as race prejudice plus power.

In his book *Enter the River,* Tobin Miller Shearer, who has studied race in U.S. Mennonite history, says this about the definition:

To be sure, the point of defining racism as race prejudice plus power is not to bandy about a whole new set of emotionally charged and guilt-laden labels. The twin demons of labels and guilt spawn only immobility and hopelessness....

He goes on to say:

> I do not believe it is ultimately crucial whether or not members of the dominant culture use the term racism to describe the combined effect of their race prejudice and power. It is far more important that members of the dominant culture seek healing for themselves and for the systems that

deny power to people of color. Only by actively seeking ways to challenge the assumptions behind 'white is right' [*or, to editorialize, white is legal*], can we hope to be healed of the affliction of race prejudice plus power.

To be sure, institutions can maintain the status quo because individual prejudices and misinformation still exist. It's the normalization of systems like the criminal justice system that allows racial segregation and disenfranchisement to also be normative. Continued misconceptions and stereotypes bolster these institutions.

Where does Hyattsville Mennonite Church fit into this? At the very least, we can say that our own history (as with the majority of Anglo churches) has been shaped by the country's racialized history. In the 1960s, the community that was to become Hyattsville Mennonite Church moved to this area from Northeast DC when their neighborhood shifted from a majority white community to a majority African American community.

How are we shaped by this history, or by current racial patterns, today?

When I think about all this – about our own history, about the systems that can perpetuate racial disparities, about individual prejudices or normative divisions – I wonder how it fits into that first meeting we had as a Race Matters group.

What would addressing racism mean for our community?

Would being more integrated racially jeopardize practices that are central our community's worship experience? What would happen to four-part

harmonies? What about our welcoming community and the role of women in the church?

I've seen some similar questions come up for other communities in multi-faith partnerships. For example, I've heard from more than one Jewish or Christian community that they want to partner and have dialogue with a neighboring Muslim community, but that these hoped-for Muslim partners don't necessarily have interest in interfaith dialogue. This can lead to increased misconceptions that are incredibly harmful related to exclusivity and the way Muslims might view non-Muslims.

From some Muslims, I've heard that this may be rooted in a concern that dialogue would expect compromise on core issues of their faith.

What's worked has been serving together. This can include things like interfaith health clinics and food drives. It's through shared service that these communities build relationships and are changed by one another, oftentimes leading to safe space to share and discuss those closely-held, and often very different, aspects of each others faiths.

It also has helped shed misconceptions about Muslim communities. Far from being exclusive, many Muslims might see multi-faith service as a natural extension of their religious practice, making much more sense than dialogue alone, since Islam encourages a society built upon justice.

I wonder if this model can be of help to those of us with such different perspectives on race and racism, and with different individual goals for addressing racism.

Perhaps this work begins with the gift of partnership in light of God's commandment to love, and to love one another, as with Peter and Cornelius.

With the hope of beginning a conversation together, two members of our community will begin our time of responses. While they respond, I ask you to consider the same question as they have:

Think of a time when a relationship with someone different from yourself changed you for the better. Who was that person? What was the context? How did you change?