

The Sin of Racism

A Pastoral Letter from the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church

March 1994

Preamble

To all the baptized of the Episcopal Church, grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. For decades this church has issued statements, passed resolutions and taken actions which have addressed many aspects of racism and racial justice. While positive changes have occurred at certain times in various situations, racism not only persists in our world, but in many places is powerfully resurgent. The most recent comprehensive attempt to deal with endemic racism in our church and society was initiated by the 70th General Convention in Phoenix three years ago. Among a series of resolutions directed specifically to the church, one required the House of Bishops, in its teaching role, to issue a Pastoral Letter prior to the next General Convention on the sin of racism. In preparation for this responsibility, we have devoted part of the agenda at each of our interim meetings since Phoenix to this pressing concern. As we have sought to sharpen our personal and corporate consciousness, we have discovered that we ourselves have much to learn, relearn and do. Therefore, what we write here speaks not only to the church at large but to us, your bishops, as well.

This Pastoral Letter is the first in a series of teachings addressed primarily to Episcopalians in the United States. It does not attempt to touch on every aspect of racism, but rather to initiate a continuing discussion on a spiritual malady which infects us all.

In this introductory message, we evoke words and images sacred to our tradition. We share with you an analysis of the current dynamics of racism, confess our complicity with that evil, declare a covenant with each other to work to eliminate racism wherever we find it in church and society, and invite all Episcopalians to join us in a mission of justice, reconciliation and unity.

Analysis

*Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an everflowing stream.
(Amos 5:23-24 NRSV)*

Cries for justice in our land and around the world inevitably confront us with the sin of racism. Those cries have not gone away -- not from the far corners of the world, not from the communities in which the Episcopal Church ministers, nor from our beloved church itself. Ethnic cleansing in central Europe, apartheid in South Africa, murder of indigenous people in our hemisphere, ethnic violence in the Middle East, India and other Asian nations are all variations on the theme of racism.

Escalating violence in America illustrates the complexity of racism. At the heart of the matter is fear. We fear those who are different from ourselves, and that fear translates into violence which in turn creates more fear. Institutionalized preference, primarily for white persons, is deeply ingrained in the American way of life in areas such as employment, the availability of insurance and credit ratings, in education, law enforcement, courts of law and the military.

The definition of racism from Webster's Dictionary sharpens the focus for us.

Racism [is the] abuse of power by a racial group that is more powerful than another group and the abuse of that advantage to exclude, demean, damage, control or destroy the less powerful group; a belief that some races are by nature superior to others; racial discrimination based on such belief. Racism confers benefits upon the dominant group that include psychological feelings of superiority, social privilege, economic position, or political power.

The handbook of the Episcopal Church's Commission on Racism gives further definitions:

1. **Racism**-- the systematic oppression of one race over another. It occurs at the personal and institutional level.
2. **Prejudice**-- a judgement or opinion about others, made before one has the facts.
3. **Discrimination**-- any kind of action taken to deprive members of a certain group or a person of their civil rights.(1)

The essence of racism is prejudice coupled with power. It is rooted in the sin of pride and exclusivity which assumes "that I and my kind are superior to others and therefore deserve special privileges." In our religious tradition the

people of the covenant have frequently expressed this attitude. Often we have been challenged by prophetic witness to turn from a life of privilege to a vocation of responsibility and moral rectitude. Jesus, in his time, clearly called the people of God to lives of discipleship and servanthood without boundaries of race or class.

Racism perpetuates a basic untruth which claims the superiority of one group of people over others because of the color of their skin, their cultural history, their tribal affiliation, or their ethnic identity. This lie distorts the biblical understanding of God's action in creation, wherein all human beings are made "in the image of God."⁽²⁾ It blasphemes the ministry of Christ who died for all people, "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."⁽³⁾ It divides people from one another and gives false permission for oppression and exploitation. While our generation is not the first to experience it, racism has surfaced with particular intensity today because pluralism -- the inevitable result of a shrinking world -- exists on a scale not known before. The challenge of people with differing backgrounds having to live together has never been greater.

The sin of racism is experienced daily in our society, in our church and its institutions, in the House of Bishops. We have listened to first-hand accounts from brother and sister bishops who, in the face of racial prejudice and discrimination, have struggled to maintain a sense of integrity and personal worth. The church in your community is filled with such stories. They are there to be told and heard.

God's response to human sin is to establish a covenant in Christ Jesus that overcomes division and isolation by binding human beings to God and each other in a new way. For Episcopalians, the implications of this new community in Christ are spelled out in the baptismal covenant.⁽⁴⁾ Our ability to live into that covenant, personally and in our life together in the church, witnesses to the power of Jesus Christ, with whom we have died to sin through baptism and risen to a new life of joyful obedience.

The House of Bishops and the General Convention as a whole have long rejected the evil of racism and have supported full civil rights for people of color among all races. At the same time, a new appreciation has developed for the plight of all oppressed people and the need for equality in the laws of the nation and in the governance of the church.

Various resolutions in the past have proposed ways for victims of discrimination to participate in the prevailing system. Many have challenged the system itself to become more inclusive. The unspoken assumption of these resolutions is that victims will adapt and assimilate into the existing system. Their message, in essence, has been: "You are welcome to become like us."

Such efforts may have represented progress in their time, but they are seen by many today as the product of a dominant racial attitude, which is at the heart of institutional racism.

Racism may be manifest in any race when it is in a position of power and dominance. In the United States our primary experience is one of white privilege, even in places where whites may be a minority in the surrounding population. This comes as a surprise to many white people, because they do not think of themselves as racist. They may even see themselves as victims of various violent reactions against the dominant culture. Yet there are many in our society at all levels who seem to find a certain security in racially restricted communities, schools, clubs, fraternities, sororities and other institutions.

Questions abound. Can the old melting pot image of assimilation, be replaced by a better metaphor that reflects the value of difference? How can the inherited privilege and unearned advantage of some people be used to bring about the reconciliation of all? How can the church offer all people the "supreme advantage of knowing Christ,"⁽⁵⁾ when too often it is itself a bastion of separation? How can the Episcopal Church, which reflects the dominant culture, be a factor in changing destructive racial attitudes and behaviors? Are we ready to find new common ground on which all may stand together? Will we trust the grace of God to enable us to bridge our many unhappy divisions?

Confession

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? I will, with God's help. (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 304)

As baptized Christians and as bishops in the Church of God, we recognize that racism is endemic in every aspect of society, including the church. A poster spotted on a university campus put it this way: Racism is just about everywhere. It is in our language, customs and beliefs, fears, work, schools and sports. It is virtually everywhere except in those places where people deliberately choose to remove it...on this floor in this hall -- on this campus.⁽⁶⁾

One diocese in the church has adroitly adapted this poster for local use by substituting the concluding words with: in this pew in this church -- in this community.

We have found the exhortation of an African-American priest of our church to be compelling:

If racism is to be overcome, and our culture attain true inclusivity based on plurality and diversity, there is a great deal of confessing that must go on on all sides: confession that relates to our complicity in the genocide of native peoples, confession by whites of their continued advantage based on unearned privilege, confession by blacks of our co-dependence and participation in that corrupt value system, confession by both blacks and whites of our collusion in the racist dynamic which excludes Asians, Native Americans and Hispanics, confession by all of us of our dependency upon violence as a means of controlling others and settling disputes.(7)

What this observer discerns and diagnoses in a North American context applies, we believe, to every interracial setting, each with its own particular dynamics. Whoever uses power to suppress and demean people of another racial group stands in need of confessing the sin of racism. We recognize that no conscious actions need to be taken to perpetuate this sin. By virtue of its own institutional and systemic character, racism runs on its own momentum. The rooting out of racism requires intentional and deliberate decisions, prompted and sustained by the grace of God. The fundamental Christian rhythm of resistance, failure, repentance and returning, well stated in the baptismal covenant, reminds us that all stand in need of honest self-examination and continuing discipline to enable us to become converted and convinced anti-racists. Therefore, we the bishops of the Episcopal Church, confess our complicity with racism and pledge to make necessary changes in our personal lives, in our diocesan structures and in the church as a whole.

Covenant

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in our flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

(Ephesians 2:13-14, NRSV)

In the past, through a variety of resolutions and programmatic offerings, the church has attempted to deal with racism in its own life. Now, we believe, a new moment of choice is upon us. This moment is shaped by a fresh understanding of our baptismal calling, as it is expressed in The Book of Common Prayer. This moment is shaped by the persistent and pervasive racism of our day, an evil that clings so closely that it seems to be part of our very flesh. Determined to move beyond pious but easy resolutions, we, the bishops of the Episcopal Church, commit ourselves afresh to combat racism in church and society and to hold ourselves accountable to this new covenant.

1. As a personal investment in the task at hand, *each one of us will make an inventory* of racist attitudes in our feelings, habits and actions toward others. We will use this inventory as a basis for transforming our lives through reflection, meditation, prayer and action. Among specific personal commitments we make are the refusal to participate in racially discriminatory clubs, or other institutions, and the refusal to engage in racially denigrating stories and humor.
2. We recognize that *we are part of a body that is itself infected with racism*, which endangers our spiritual health. Those of us who are white acknowledge that our advantaged position inevitably reinforces the racism we seek to dismantle. What gives us hope and courage is our sure knowledge that all people are created in the image of God and that Jesus Christ breaks down every wall that divides, restoring all to unity and wholeness.
3. We believe that the time has come for us in the dominant culture to be still and listen to those on the margins of society. Attending with care may help us realize that people of color must expend endless energy as they contend daily with the consequences of racism. Sensitive listening may help us understand our complicity with a system that discriminates, oppresses and demeans. To that end we *commit ourselves to be better listeners*.
4. Many people, including members of our own church, live in *de facto* segregated communities with increasingly segregated public schools. Many barely subsist in an economy which affords declining opportunities for many people, most especially people of color. We are particularly challenged by the despair of the young in our society, faced with a culture of drugs, sexual abuse and violence. In the face of these realities, *we believe that our mission involves not only changing hearts, but also engaging ourselves in seeking to transform a socio-economic system that drives many into poverty, alienation and despair*. In the regular exercise of the episcopal office and at the time of our pastoral visitations to our congregations, *we will share our experiences of racism and will encourage others to do the same. We will teach and preach the gospel in ways that sustain a vision of justice and peace among all people*.
5. *It is our apostolic and pastoral responsibility to proclaim the vision of God's new creation in which the dignity of every human being is honored*. As we are about that task, we discern an emerging new context for mission.

The lingering image of the Episcopal Church as essentially white and Anglo Saxon does not serve us well. We are affected by continuous shifts in the domestic population and by the constant arrival of new waves of immigrants. The church's missionary strategy must take seriously the changing complexion of its broadening constituency.

6. In a church which is increasingly diverse, racially and ethnically, *we will place a high priority on the development of strategies for the recruitment, deployment and support of persons of color*, including Native Americans, Asians, African Americans, Hawaiians and Hispanics at every level congregational, diocesan, national -- and their inclusion in decision-making positions throughout.
7. As leaders of the worship of the church, *we will encourage the development of liturgical expressions that reflect the church's racial and ethnic composition and articulate clearly the good news that in Jesus Christ every barrier that separates God's people is broken down.*
8. Finally, in order to be accountable to one another and the church at large, we will *establish a standing committee* of the House of Bishops to implement and monitor the fulfillment of this covenant.

Invitation

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? I will, with God's help. (The Book of common Prayer, page 30)

The catechism declares that the mission of the church "is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."⁽⁸⁾ Through baptism all Christians are called and empowered to participate in a ministry of reconciliation and unity. Central to this mission is the intentional transformation of all structures, systems and practices in the church and elsewhere that perpetuate the evil of racism.

Racism in the church subverts the promise of new life in Christ for everyone. Racism stains the church and contradicts the reconciling power of Christ's death and resurrection. Racism is totally inconsistent with the Gospel and, therefore, must be confronted and eradicated.

May God give us the will to engage in this task together and the power and grace to accomplish it.

Notes

1. Episcopal Church Center, 815 Second Ave., New York, NY 10017.
2. Genesis 1:27b.
3. John 3:16b.
4. The Book of Common Prayer, pages 304-035.
5. Philippians 3:8.
6. Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.
7. Rodman, Edward W., *True to Our God, True to Our Native Land*, Episcopal Urban Caucus, 1993.
8. The Book of Common Prayer, page 855