

And So I Ask: What Does This All Mean For We Who Are Church?

Tomorrow, February 1, begins African-American History Month in the United States. Reflecting on this, I thought of a story told by Kelly Brown Douglas, an African-American Episcopal Priest and Professor of Religion, in her presentation at the Call To Action Conference that I had the privilege of attending in Milwaukee, last November. I'm sure a number of mothers in our Assembly today can connect with the feelings conveyed in her story....

*"My son was about two-years-old. I had taken him to play in a park with a Flintstone-like car that was on the park's playground. This particular park was next door to an elementary school.*

*After being in the park about 15 minutes, what appeared to be a class of first graders from the school next door, arrived in park. Two little boys – one blonde-headed and one red-headed – ran down to the car where my son was playing. Seeing them coming, my son immediately jumped out of the car. Soon the two boys were fighting about who was going to play in the car. My son looked on with the fascination of a two-year-old. The little red-headed boy, who seemed to be winning the battle of the car, saw my son looking on. He suddenly stopped fighting for the car and turned toward my son. With all the venom that a seven-year-old could muster, he pointed a finger toward my son and said:*

*'You better stop looking at us before I put you in jail where you belong.'* This little boy was angry. My son had intruded on his space. My son was guilty of being black in the park and looking. I was horrified.

*Before I could say anything to the offending boy, the white teacher approached. She clearly heard what the little boy said to my son. I expected her to admonish the little boy and make him apologize. Instead, she looked at my two-year-old son as if he was the perpetrator of some crime and she said to the little boys:*

*'Come on with me before there is trouble.'* At that moment I was seething with anger. I took my son and left the park. As I was driving home, tears flowed from my eyes. I felt a deep sadness and pain. At two-years-old, my son was viewed as a criminal. At seven or eight-years-old, the link between a black body and a criminal body had already been formed in the mind of a little white boy. If at two-years-old, my son was viewed as guilty of something by the white teacher, I feared what his future would bring as he got older. If at two-years-old, looking like a guilty criminal, got a finger pointed in his face and a teacher hustling kids off to safety, what will the response be to him now that he is a proud, 6 foot tall, 22-year-old man? Unfortunately, I know that response. And so I ask: what does this all mean for who we are as Church?"

+++++

We all know this story:

The date was February 26, 2012. It was a Sunday evening in Sanford, Florida. It was a rainy evening. 17-year-old Trayvon Benjamin Martin was visiting his father. Trayvon was walking back to his Sanford residence from a store where he had just purchased a can of ice-tea and a package of *Skittles* candy. Trayvon was wearing a hoodie. A 'Neighborhood Watch' Captain spotted Trayvon. He called 911 to report a "suspicious person" in the gated-neighborhood. The 911 operator advised the caller to remain in his car, not to follow the person and police would be there. The Watch Captain did not follow the instructions. Armed with a gun, he left his car. Shortly thereafter, shots were fired... and Trayvon was left dead on the Florida sidewalk.

Trayvon was African-American, the 'Watch Captain' was not. Trayvon possessed ice-tea and *Skittles*, the 'Watch Captain' possessed a gun. Trayvon's body was taken to a morgue, the 'Watch Captain' was freed to go home. And so I ask: what does this all mean for who we are as Church?

+++++

The almost unbelievable story continues to unfold in Flint, Michigan – a poor American city with a significant African-American population – where over 9000 young children's health is endangered by lead poisoning in the water the result of a money-saving decision to use water from the river rather than Lake Michigan. I can't help thinking about the Nation's response to Hurricane Katrina, in New Orleans – another city with a significant African-American population. During that incident, the Associated Press published two photos of people in identical situations in the flood waters. The first – of a young black man – carried the caption: "Young man walks through chest deep water after looting a grocery store." The second AP photo showed two white men, with the caption: "Two residents waded through chest deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area of New Orleans."

The people are engaged in *identical actions*, yet one is described as "looting;" the other as "finding." And so I ask: what does this all mean for who we are as Church?

+++++

Brothers and sisters, first of all we must proclaim from our church tops that – despite the massive civil rights reforms of the 1960s, that in the number of ways dismantled legal segregation – we, as a nation, and we, as Church, have a long way to go to eliminate the sin of racism that has been fueled by white privilege, supremacy and superiority. Since the beginning of our Nation to this day, racism – sometimes unconscious – is in the DNA of white America, infiltrating our economic, social, political, and, yes, religious institutions. The first step towards healing and reconciliation is for white Americans to admit that we are racist! Only then can we seek forgiveness and work to make reparation to change the racist systems and institutions and begin reconciliation.

By now we might be asking: this is quite a challenge, but what does it have to do with today's Gospel? Sisters and brothers, it is *at the very heart of today's Gospel!* After being baptized by John and experiencing a 40 day retreat in the desert, the Prophet Jesus returns to his little hometown of Nazareth and enters the synagogue there, and – as we heard in last week's Gospel – begins his public ministry by picking up the Sacred Scroll and reading the passage from the Prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; the Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and new sight to the blind; to free the oppressed and to announce a Year of Mercy!" In that statement Jesus proclaims his vision for the reign of God.

As we see in today's Gospel, at first the congregation in the Synagogue were amazed and impressed by him, ... until he challenged them by pointing out that the Good News of the Kingdom of God wasn't just for them and their families and their congregation and their community, but extended even to those considered foreigners, considered inferior, even ... those considered *enemies*. The Reign of God is for everyone! They couldn't handle this radical message of inclusiveness. They were filled with fury and rose up against Jesus – leading him to the brow of the hill with the firm intent of throwing him off the cliff. Jesus' teaching of God's inclusiveness was just too radical and revolutionary for them to accept. It was because of this radical and revolutionary teaching – that we are all sisters and brothers, even our enemies are our sisters and brothers, we are all, without exception, children of the one God – that Jesus ultimately ended up on the Cross.

Sisters and brothers, racism – conscious or unconscious – blinds us to this vision, the teaching of Jesus which is the heart of the Gospel, and so I ask: what does this all mean for who we are as Church?

+++++

Father Brian Massingale, a black Catholic priest from Milwaukee, a Professor of Moral Theology at Marquette University, and former President of the Catholic Theological Society of America, describes five challenges for the Catholic Church in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and I would say five challenges for our All Saints Parish.

1. The Catholic Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be shaped by and must respond to a seismic shift in the demographics of US society and its own membership. We are becoming a multicultural Church.
2. Our Church cannot adequately respond to these shifts unless it attends in a way that it has not done before, to the ongoing struggle for racial equality.
3. Therefore, if the Catholic Church is to be viable, meaningful and relevant in 21<sup>st</sup> Century US Society it must become a pro-active force for racial justice.
4. The Catholic Church cannot be a pro-active force for racial justice unless its teaching, catechesis and practices forthrightly address the reality of white privilege and embrace an understanding of the racism behind its personal and intentional manifestations.

5. Catholic reflection, witness and action for racial justice will be neither credible nor effective unless parishes and leadership cultivate intentional racial solidarity with and transformative love for black Catholics;

... our Second Reading.

+++++++

Sisters and brothers, in conclusion I would like to share with you that our Pastoral Council will be inviting us soon to a process of reflection on our Parish's Mission: where we've been these past seven years and where the Spirit may be calling us to go as we look ahead. I invite our Pastoral Council and our Parish Community to include these five challenges to the Church as part of the process.

In a work published after his death, the Prophet Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr. gave the final testimony to the struggle and promise of creating a genuinely integrated society:

"There is no easy way to create a world where men and women can live together, where each has his or her job, lives in his or her own house and where all children receive as much education as their minds can absorb. But if such a world is created in our lifetime, it will be done in the United States, by black and white people of goodwill. It will be done by rejecting the racism, materialism and violence that has characterized Western Civilization and, especially, by working toward a world of brotherhood and sisterhood, cooperation and peace."

Amen