

Sermons from Park Hill: May 18, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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Genesis 1:1 – 2:2 “Beginning a Sacred Conversation”

The first time I noted that the lectionary text for today was the creation story from Genesis, on the same day that the United Church of Christ designated for all of our churches to begin a Sacred Conversation on Race, I struggled to find the connection. Maybe it could be that God created human beings, all human beings, without regard for race. “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our image.” I like how this translation emphasizes God as a “we,” and if the God of creation is not alone, hence “reflecting our image,” all of our images, like those in a mirror, reflect God. There is clarity that no one image is more divine than another. We are all in the image that reflects back at us from the mirror that is God. That’s one possibility.

The creation story is also one for me that speaks of stewardship – that human beings

were created to be responsible for creation. Immediately following the statement “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature,” the very next line continues, “SO, they can be responsible for the fish in the sea...” and so forth. Being responsible stewards of everything in creation certainly implies care for human beings, as well. All of them. We would not be faithful to God’s intentions in creation if we did not take care of one another according to our needs, hence no one should be left behind. No one is better than another, for we have received equally and we are made equally responsible for the whole of creation. That’s one possibility.

For a church such as Park Hill that identifies its history so strongly in the struggle for racial reconciliation and peace, and as I speak to you with just six months of history, I find myself somewhat at a loss because we are not, as the UCC has asked of us, “beginning” a sacred conversation on race. The pride of Park Hill is its resistance to racist realtors and frightened neighbors in the 1950s and 60s, and support for African Americans seeking to live in safe, stable neighborhoods. Sometimes I do wonder whether such a strong identity with a formative time in the churches history makes it difficult to similarly identify where God is calling us next.

And perhaps that is the point of the Genesis story. To skip back past all the history and begin again at the beginning. To get past the temptation to think that we have moved beyond the issues of race. The Collegium, the five officers of the United Church of Christ, prepared a “Pastoral Letter on Racism” for these sacred conversations and rightly identified that “there may be those who would object to these conversations, who would cry, in the words of the prophet

Sermons from Park Hill: May 18, 2008

Jeremiah, "peace, peace, when there is no peace" or that we live in a "post-race" society. Or a post-race church.

I could cite many obvious examples of the fact that race as a conversation is not complete in America: calling undocumented workers "illegal *aliens*" or "illiterate peasants;" continuing movements for "English Only;" racial profiling and a "war of terror" against Muslims and Arab Americans; charges of reverse racism and claims that jobs for white Americans and being taken away by "less-qualified" minorities; charges of "playing the race card" or claims of an unfair playing field because you can't publicly criticize a Person of Color; or the reality, as the Pastoral Letter identifies, that despite "the rise of a Black middle class over the past 40 years, the average net worth of white families in 2008 remains 10 times greater than the average net worth of Black families" and that 50 years after *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, racial segregation is now *condoned* by the Supreme Court. Things have improved and little has changed.

Perhaps, it's back to the beginning. So that we can find our way on a less travelled path, a place where we have never been before, undeterred by success or failure. Before we say, what are the solutions, do we really know what are the problems? And it comes back to listening. Listening to one another. And listening to our own questions and struggles, the ones we really don't want to ask. "What do you really mean?" Listening to our own discouragements from all sides of our experience – white, black, Asian, Latino. I'll admit to you that there are things I don't want to know and there are things I don't dare to ask. But can our conversation really be genuine? If the persons you love are not persons you can also trust, listening has to

go back to the beginning. All the way back to listening first for the voice of God. We are not just encouraged to have a conversation on race; it is a *sacred* conversation. While I was writing this, one time I mistyped the word sacred and I looked down and saw a "scared" conversation. And in fact this might be a little scary. But only if we try to do it alone. To not invite God into the conversation, to not acknowledge that God is both the source of life and the source of reconciliation, leaves us – as the church – without the ultimate key to transformation. We don't engage in this by our own efforts, but by participating in God's efforts for peace and reconciliation. It's about God's intentions for human community. So, back to the beginning. So that we can find our way on a less travelled and perhaps more vulnerable path.

This reminds me of a story about Ben climbing a glacier. He tells that 20 years ago, "two friends and I climbed Mount Lyell, the highest peak in Yosemite National Park. They were experienced mountaineers; I was not. Our base camp was less than 2,000 feet from the peak, but the climb to the top and back was to take most of the day because of the difficulty of the glacier we had to cross to get to the top. The morning of the climb we started by chattering and cracking jokes.

As the hours passed, the other two, more skilled mountaineers, opened up a wide gap. Being competitive in nature, I began to look for shortcuts to beat them to the top. And I got lost, stuck on sheer ice.

It took an hour for my experienced climbing friends to find me. Standing on the rock I needed to reach, one of them leaned out and used an ice axe to chip two little

Sermons from Park Hill: May 18, 2008

footsteps in the glacier. Then he gave me the following instructions: Ben, you must step out from where you are and put your foot where the toehold is. When your foot touches it, without a moment's hesitation swing your other foot across and land it on the next step. When you do that, reach out and I'll take your hand and pull you to safety.

That sounded good to me – really good. But it was the next thing he said that made me more frightened than ever. But listen carefully, he said: as you step across, do not lean into the mountain. If anything, lean out a bit. Otherwise, your feet may fly out from under you, and you will start sliding down.

I don't like sheer drops. When I am on the edge of a cliff, my instincts are to lie down and hug the mountain, to become one with it! Not to lean away from it! But that was what my good friend was telling me to do. I looked at him real hard. Was there any reason, any reason at all, that I should not trust him? I certainly hoped not! So, for a moment, based solely on what I believe to be the good will and good sense of my friend, I decided to say no to what I felt, to stifle my impulse to cling to the security of the mountain, to lean out, step out, and cross that ice to safety. It took less than two seconds to out if my faith was well founded. I'm telling the story, so obviously it was. But it taught me, sometimes God tells us to do things that are the opposite of our natural inclination to remain safe right where we are."

There are things I like and don't like about that story. But what speaks to me is that I believe our natural inclination has become to stay safely in our place about race. We know about the difficulty of conversation

about race. There seem to be so many potentially dangerous places to step. In reaching out, we could in fact feel hurt. But what is the higher calling? But what contributes to the greater good? What will change the stalemate in our country and our city and our neighborhood? What will make a difference and transform your personal relationships?

So consider these a way to begin again. Therefore, listen again and then speak with honesty. Accept hard answers and keep going, though don't be satisfied with what you don't understand. Find common ground from pursuing truth together, not the least common denominator. Seek healing that is lasting, not quick. Never stop listening, but often stop assuming you know what they are saying. Don't compare your experience to theirs but hear how theirs is different. Like I said last week, everybody just getting along is not enough. God wants to transform our relationships, not help us endure those we have no choice about. Or ignore those who challenge our patience. Never forget God is with you in pain and God is with you in hope – hope that is eternal, unlimited by human impatience. That is some advice for a sacred conversation on race.

But, I would like for you hear that again, but this time, think about one person in your life who is particularly challenging – not because of race but for any reason. A close relationship or a difficult person in your family, at work... Someone you're ready to give up on because it would just be easier. So, first, listen again and then speak with honesty. Accept hard answers and keep going, though don't be satisfied with what you don't understand. Find common ground from pursuing truth together, not the least common denominator. Seek healing that is lasting, not quick. Never stop listening, but

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We are long way from creation but not from creating a new path. There is something God is still creating in us that is transformative – that will transform a powerful history into a way for us to be part of the change going on around us, and we pray, that is God changing within each of us. What it is we will have never done before.

And it will be good. It will be very good.
"It was evening, it was morning."
It's time for a new day.