

“Why Can’t We All Get Along?”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

August 9, 2009

Text: For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” (Ephesians 2:14)

Two weeks ago an event happened in Cambridge, Massachusetts that has sent a ripple across our country and reminded us of deep wounds not fully healed. On July 20, 2009 a well-known Harvard Professor, Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was arrested at his own house by a member of the Cambridge Police, Sergeant James Crowley, and charged with disorderly conduct. The incident has raised a lot of questions about racial profiling and about the continuing problem of race in this nation today.

Several years ago Benjamin DeMott wrote a book entitled *The Trouble With Friendship: Why Americans Can’t Think Straight About Race*. In this book the author notes that if one were to judge simply by the movie industry, it would appear that American’s problems about race are for the most part solved. Hollywood has produced a number of movies over the past years that paint a very positive picture of race relations. One thinks of movies like “Driving Miss Daisy,” “Forest Gump,” “The Shawshank Redemption,” “Sister Act” - just to name a few.

But as DeMott points out, there is quite a gap between Hollywood and Harlem. Black infants die in America at twice the rate of white infants. One out of every two black children lives below the poverty line (as compared with one out of seven white children). More than 50 percent of African American families have incomes below \$25,000. Among black youth under age twenty, death by murder occurs nearly ten times as often as among whites. The net worth of the typical white household is ten times that of the typical black household. In many states, five to ten times as many blacks as whites age eighteen to thirty are in prison.

Now, of course, there have been many comments made about this incident ranging from those who accused the Cambridge Police of using unnecessary force to those who blame Dr. Gates for not cooperating with the police. But, in the end, the enormous reaction to this event

leaves us with the troubling aspect of racial divide in this country and the haunting question: “Why Can’t We All Get Along?”

I.

The divisions that affect our nation are not new. They are as ancient as the story of “Cain and Abel” in the Old Testament, as well as the story of the “Tower of Babel.”

It was certainly a fact of life in the New Testament. In Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, he speaks of Christ as the one who has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us.

One of the walls that divided people in Paul’s day was the religious barrier between Jews and gentiles. The Jews of Paul’s day believed that they were the chosen people of god, and all of the people who lived outside the law and promises of Judaism were gentiles who were viewed as ungodly.

There were also walls between those who were slaves and those who were free. Slavery was a given in the New Testament. On more than one occasion Paul urges those who are slaves to obey their masters.

There were also great divisions between males and females. In the world of the Old and New Testament women had no legal rights. Men could divorce wives but wives could not divorce husbands. Women could not own property.

And yet Paul was insistent that Christ had broken down the walls that separate people from each other. On another occasion he wrote, “In Christ there is neither Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female.” (Galatians 3:28)

Paul Tillich once defined sin as “separation.” It is our separation from God, from one another, and from ourselves. For Tillich sin is a “condition.” Before it is an act it is a state.

II.

We are first of all separated from God. That is the presupposition of the New Testament. It believes that the gap that separates us from God is so wide that there is no way that we can bridge that chasm. The separation from God comes not when we reach out to God, but when God reaches out to us.

In Ephesians, chapter two, verse nine Paul gives us a very succinct understanding of the Christian gospel. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the results of works, so that no one may boast.”

Several years ago I came across a remarkable book by Frederick Buechner entitled *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. I remember reading the book and being fascinated by the content of the book. It was only later that I learned that the

book was about preaching and that in fact, the book was a series of lectures that Buechner had given at the Yale Divinity School as part of the Lyman Beecher lectures on preaching.

One of the points that Buechner makes is that before any of us can hear the good news of Jesus Christ we have to understand the bad news of the human situation.

Paul makes no bones about it. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. There is none righteous, no not one."

That of course is the point that Paul is driving home in this passage of Ephesians. "By grace you are saved through faith," writes Paul, "and not by works, lest anyone should boast."

I don't think Paul wrote those words just to be sentimental or even because he wanted to put a happy ending on what he had written. I think he wrote these words because they describe the most overwhelming event in his life. In the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him on the road to Damascus, he found himself accepted in spite of being rejected. And when he found that God had accepted him, he was finally able to accept himself and other people.

That is what we mean by grace.

III.

There is another form of this separation and it is our separation from other people. I wonder if there is not any of us who have not had the experience of being lonely even in the midst of a social event, surrounded by other people.

We live today in an age of "connectedness." People today have the power to communicate to each other through cell phones, email, twittering, and a host of other remarkable technological avenues. And yet, to be honest, as I see people walking down the street with their cell phones, and even talking to people in the grocery store and in restaurants, I wonder whether technology is really a sign of our connectedness or a sign of how separated we really are.

Certainly this is true with social groups. Will Willimon, who was for a number of years the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, once related a time when he went to a movie theater in Durham to see the movie "Boyz n the Hood," which was directed by John Singleton. Willimon noted that he was watching the movie in a section of Durham that was predominately African American. In fact, having taken his seat, he quickly realized he was the only white person in the theater. The movie is about a group of young black men growing up in the inner city of Los Angeles. There is a scene in the movie where a group of these young men are working in a pizza parlor for a white man who treats his employees with utmost cruelty. At one point one of these young black rises up in anger and beats the white owner to death with his fists. Willimon said at that point everyone in the theater rose to their feet, clapping and shouting their approval. Willimon said he was so stunned he couldn't even move and for the first time he understood some of the anger that some black people feel toward whites for the way they have been treated.

IV.

There is another dimension of this separation and it is our separation from ourselves. Some years ago a prominent psychiatrist, Dr. Karl Menninger, wrote a book he entitled *Man Against Himself*. In that book Menninger noted that often we speak about “self-love” but there is such a thing as “self-hatred” as well and it is this mixture of selfishness and self-hatred that often prevents us from loving not only ourselves but others as well.

Menninger goes on to note that it is only when we learn to love ourselves that it becomes possible to love others as well.

Long before the advent of modern psychology the Apostle Paul expressed this strange split in our personalities. Paul put it like this, “For I do not do the good I desire, but rather the evil that I do not desire.” Then he goes on to say, “Now if I should do what I do not wish to do, it is not I that do it, but rather sin which dwells within me.” The Apostle sensed that there was a split between his conscious will and his real will. He was estranged from himself.

“Where sin abounded,” Paul observed on another occasion, “grace abounded even more.” That is the gospel we proclaim, for if sin is the condition in which we find ourselves, that grace is the way out, for grace offers to each one of us the one thing we so desperately need, the love of God in Jesus Christ which allows us to be at one with God, at one with our neighbor, and at one with ourselves.

John Hope Franklin in his book *The Color Line Legacy for the Twenty First Century* wrote “Perhaps the very first thing we need to do as a nation and as individual members of society is to confront our past and see it for what it is, it is a past that is filled with some of the ugliest possible examples of racial brutality and degradation in human history. We need to recognize it for what it was and is not explain it away, excuse it, or justify it. Having done that, we should then make a good faith effort to turn our history around so that we can see it in front of us, so that we can avoid doing what we have done for so long.”

“Sin and grace,” notes Paul Tillich, “are strange words. But they are not strange things.” Sin is a very powerful force. It affects everything we do. But there is something even stronger than the power of the sin of separation and it is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is this grace that can open our lives in new ways to experience God’s love and our love for each other. And when we experience this grace, we find that we are, in fact, a new creation, and that suddenly we have hope that the old has passed away and the new has come.

Thanks be to God. Amen!