RACISM  AGAIN

A sermon preached at  
         Plymouth Congregational Church  
       1900 Nicollet Avenue  
         Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403  
  on  
     May 3, 1992  
     by  
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     I returned from Wales on Thursday, in my bag a complete, nicely rounded sermon ready for today.  After arriving in Minneapolis I learned about the verdict in the Rodney King case and the consequences of that verdict.  I could have worked remarks about the situation into the sermon I already had.  But I would feel ill at ease not addressing the events of these last days directly this morning, so I have put aside the sermon I had meant to deliver. The Minneapolis Council of Churches too has asked its members to make justice a primary concern in their worship today.

      I'm sure that many preachers throughout the land are doing the very same thing this morning.  Even if none of us says anything our congregations don't already know or believe, simply to talk about some matters from the pulpit is to attribute to them their appropriate significance, and to honor some of the passions they arouse in us.

     There are people in Los Angeles for whom to mourn today: forty or so killed by rioters or by police. There are people with whom to sympathize: families of the dead, hundreds injured, those whose businesses have been ruined. Among those arrested for this or that reason there are probably young black people, who but for frustration brought about by the King verdict would never have been found in handcuffs. The loss of their innocence is a loss for all of us, and the pain of their parents should touch us. There is also the profound disbelief and frustration and anger that has engulfed black people and others the length and breadth of the land.

     The video of the beating of King on March 3, 1991 by four Los Angeles police, filmed by a spectator from the balcony of an apartment close by, had framed and illuminated a dark corner of human relationships. Fifty-one blows in eighty-one seconds. In the eyes of most people, a brutal and vicious encounter which, even taken alone, demanded an adequate response.  It also raised issues of police leadership, accountability, and attitudes toward black people in Los Angeles.

     But for black folks throughout the States it was more than an isolated and localized event.  It was a vindication, an affirmation of their credibility, their opportunity, as it were, to say to the rest of us, now will you believe what we've been telling you for years - you don't have to decide whether or not to believe us this time - look at that video. And non-blacks who cared could expect that such incontrovertible evidence as that video would at least put the brakes on gross abuse of blacks by rogue police officers for a while.

     That Rodney King isn't a saint and wasn't on his way to church when he was stopped is beside the point. Police officers are not hired in our legal system either to be juries or judges, either to decide guilt or to apply appropriate punishment.  Their role is to apprehend people suspected of wrong-doing and to offer evidence in support of their charges.  In apprehending suspects they have a right to use such force as may be necessary to bring suspects to book and to ensure their own safety.  (They also need to use the most appropriate methods - was there a good reason why King wasn't handcuffed earlier?)  Bearing in mind the precarious situations in which they sometimes work, and the split-second judgements they may be called upon to make, they should have a measure of latitude in their use of force. But most juries surely - maybe even the Rodney King jury - would have returned a verdict of guilty without leaving the courtroom against anyone shown to have beaten a horse as that video showed what most of us thought was an already subdued King to have been beaten. That the jury found no-one guilty of anything in the matter so defies the logic of most of us that we feel compelled to try and explain their decision.

     Analyses in the press and anonymous calls to TV talk shows by this and that juror suggest explanations.  The continued showing of the video may have desensitized the jury.  Use by the defence of stills from the video may over time have reduced the impact of the whole happening on the jury.  The decision of the prosecution not to call King to the stand may have depersonalized the issue.  The suggestion has also been made that the charge made by the prosecution entailed a degree of intentionality very difficult to prove.

     But at least one juror has claimed that throughout the beating, King was "in charge". I suggest that to buy that argument by the defence you have to want to buy it very much, at least subconsciously.

     Anonymous comments by other jurors and in press articles suggest why that might be so.  The trial was moved by the court from Los Angeles to Simi Valley.  The New York Times for last Friday quoted Tom Barham, a lawyer in Los Alamos who has represented many victims of police brutality - "the facts were so overwhelmingly in favor of conviction that the court did backflips to give this trial every appearance of fairness".  Afraid that the defendant might not have been able to receive a fair trial at the hands of a jury chosen from Los Angeles, the case was taken to nearby Ventura County. (It's interesting that while a defendant has the right to be tried by a jury of his or her peers, the injured party has no right to have peers on the jury). Simi Valley, where the trial took place, and from which the jury was selected, is a white, conservative enclave.  It is the home of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.  It is a place to which many former members  of the Los Angeles Police Department have gone to live.  The New York Times quoted Professor Laurie Levenson of Loyola Law School in Los Angeles - "Frankly, the people of Simi Valley worship the police".

     Not to take them lightly, but in order to get to other matters, can we take somethings as read? - that we need police officers, that we would be in bad shape without them, that there are times when we are more glad to see a police officer than we are to see anyone else, that there are many very fine police officers - the majority as far as I know - that police work is difficult and demanding and dangerous, that police officers deserve more appreciation and support than they usually get, and so on and so on.

     But when all that has been said, police officers are drawn from the human race, and all kinds of personalities belong to the human race.  In addition, pressures on the police are great and of many kinds: a social isolation that can nurture a simplistic view of life and a stereotyping of people, a constant exposure to violence that tends to desensitize, a sense of power that can corrupt - police officers have most of us always at a disadvantage, we don't know our rights or the law, and for some of us, even in small matters, the stakes ae comparatively high.  So parameters need to be put in place to protect those most vulnerable from possible police abuse of power, periodical assessments of officers as necessary to see whether desensitization has taken place, and agree-upon systems of accountability must be developed to root out misfits and miscreants.  No-one, not even the police officer, is served well by uncritical support of the police.

     But there is a broader question.  To what extent did that jury's decision, and to what extent does any pattern of abuse of power by police, reflect and so is empowered by the attitudes of the white majority that has the greatest influence on the structural life of our society?

     Let's look at two issues, "law and order" and racism.

     First, "law and order". I've had the opportunity for ten days or so since Easter to do some grandfathering.  Now and then my daughter would undress the still fairly new arrival, and lay her on her back on a sheet on the carpet wearing only an undershirt  For a while the little one would delight in the freedom to wave her arms and kick her feet.  But occasionally I would nurse her in my arms, and remember how securely little ones like to be held when they are nursed.

     In time she will probably grow to favor either freedom or security more than the other.  I favor freedom more, I think, and my wife security,  But when either of those options, for any reason, becomes too dominant in the life of a person or a group, it spells trouble.  In particular, when a desire for security becomes obsessive for a group, that group's outlook on life becomes its picture of reality, and all which doesn't conform to that definition becomes an unacceptable and even frightening aberration.  When such a group has power it then excludes others from power and demands that they conform to its imposed pattern of reality in the name of "law and order".  The Afrikaaners in South Africa became such a group.

     One of life's great arts is to learn not only to tolerate diversity among people but actually to like it and to go in search of it, to relish seeing the humanity which we all share dressed in an unusual face or speaking with a strange voice or practicing different customs or owning an unfamiliar story.  Yet another of life's arts is to contribute to building communities which not only tolerate  but welcome diversity, and are resolute in facing the hard challenges that such diversity may entail.

     The jury which sat in the King case came, I suggest, from a community with a "law and order" mentality of the kind I have tried to describe.

     Racism is exacerbated by poverty.  That's a matter of the economy to begin with.  In south central Los Angeles unemployment is 40% - higher among the young men at the center of the violence. There's also the matter of the distribution of wealth.  The national poverty rate among blacks soared in California during the last decade, from 17.5 percent in 1980 to 24.7 percent in 1990.  It's a question of the inner cities too. Inner city blacks, better off than black people in rural areas, are falling behind the rest of the black population.  Margaret Weir, a professor of social sciences at Harvard, speaks of the neglect of the inner cities for the last twenty-five years.  As Jesse Jackson put it, the Rodney King verdict "touched off a spontaneous combustion of discarded people, now three generations deep".  It's not my job or yours perhaps to offer solutions to these problems, but we may need to do all we can to ensure that they are on the national agenda since, as Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey has pointed out,  "politicians feel accountable mainly to those who vote and urban America has voted in declining numbers".  Politicians sometimes have a genuine dilemma in these matters.  The President, unable anyway to convince people he understands, even when he say he does, but pressed also from the right by Pat Buchanan, so far has said more about the violence that followed the King verdict than about either the verdict or solutions to the underlying causes of the violence.  And if Bill Clinton, leading Democratic candidate for the Presidency, focuses on the decay of urban America, he may alienate white voters he needs to win back from the Republicans, to whom they turned in the presidential races in the 1980s because they disliked affirmative action and race-related policies associated with the Democrats.

     Hopefully the current crisis will force discussion in coming elections of these matters which have to do with the common good.  We too need to realize how influential our letters to our senators and members can be.  We never seem to grasp the fact that politicians pay a very, very great deal of attention to their mail, and that they may cut off from their own constituencies when we fail to communicate with them.

     We also need to resist the tendency within ourselves to see life in black and white, to stereotype, and to back off hard issues.

     We must be watchful lest perspectives of homogeneous groups to which we belong entrap and dehumanize us. We should yearn for the larger view of life that different people to us offer to us.

     Many of us may have little or no contact with black people, and even if we do, we may not be comfortable in asking the kinds of questions we would like answers to, or sure that we could handle the answers if we got them  But one thing we can all do is use whatever experience of discrimination we have, small though it may be, as an entry into a better understanding of what it means to be a victim of racism.  Have you never been discriminated against at all - because you are female, or male, or old, or young, or divorced, or gay, or handicapped, or overweight, or didn't go to the right school, or had the wrong parents, or even because you are able or pretty?  Have you no incidents in your past which even now you can't recall without experiencing the rising bile of old anger?  Ponder on your personal experience, extrapolate from it, think what it means to have to face the possibility of such incidents every single day of your life.

     We need to be alert also to racial slurs and innuendos and assumptions in groups to which we belong, in conversations ongoing around us, and we need to be able to address them appropriately, sometimes clearly and boldly, sometimes with style and restraint.  I remember a man who was attending Plymouth speaking disparagingly of the aspirations of women.  I commented on his remarks and knew after saying them that I would never see him at Plymouth again. I had spoken from my need to speak, not from the need of something to be said.  Given another chance I would have commented differently.  Some of us may need to learn that it is not our task to put right everything that's wrong everywhere.

     Despite all that has happened this week, things are better, I think, than they were in the sixties, partly at least because there are now more black people in strategic places - Mayor Bradley in Los Angeles, Mayor Dinkins in New York.

      I am optimistic too that the setback of that verdict in Simi Valley, sad though I am at its consequences, will lead to a deeper appraisal of where we are and a better understanding of where we need to get to if we are not to live in fear and dread in this land. We really have to decide what things we want to excel in as a nation.

      We may resist racism in ourselves and in society for a variety of reasons, from an enlightened self-interest to a humanistic concern. But for us who meet form time to time in buildings such as this, one reason is paramount.

     The World Council of Churches doesn't have much moral clout right now, but it has risen to the occasion more than once.  One such time was when an Assembly of the Council was to be held for the first time in a non-white country - India in 1961.  In 1960 a meeting was held at which representatives of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa, which supported the policy of apartheid, were told that eager as the World Council was to accommodate a vast diversity of differing Christian beliefs, on some the Council could not compromise, for they had to do with the very essence of the gospel, and one such was the belief that all human beings are equally God's children.

      They were right of course.  Paul said it when he wrote more than once that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek.  Jesus lived it when he conversed with the woman from Samaris, praised a Roman soldier, healed the child of the Syro-Phoenician.

     Resisting racism in all its forms wherever it rears its head is not just another item on a liberal social agenda - it is the heart of the matter.  May God empower us as people in the constant struggle to build a just and peaceful society.