

Homily – On interracial marriage in America
The Rev. Canon Douglas Edwards, D.Min.
September 1, 2024 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

PREACHER'S NOTE: My prepared text is rarely the same as the preached sermon, and this sermon is no different.

Dateline 1827 Maryland. A young couple, dressed in festive clothing and accompanied by friends and family, arrive at their town hall, at the announced time, to be married. The sympathetic town judge walks in and frowns. He is not able to perform the marriage, explaining to the gathered townsfolk, "State law prohibits me from marrying a white woman to a Negro man." The law is clear, but the judge has an idea, and suggest to the white woman, "If you could prove that you had a single drop of negroid blood, I could proceed." Message received. A lance was produced and the black man cut his arm. His blood was gathered into a cup and the bride drank it. With the white woman now having within her a single drop of Negroid blood, the magistrate declared her legally black, the marriage proceeded, and the town hall registry noted the marriage of Samuel to Sarah, two free Negro adults. Mazel tov!

That, dear brothers and sisters, really happened. It is the one-drop rule. More later.

I grew up very naïve to issues of justice. In elementary school, Harold Brown was my playmate during recess. His family moved into Santa Ana when Harold was in 4th grade and moved away the following summer. Harold was the first black person I knew or had met.

My broader neighborhood was white by virtue of redlining. Next door was a Mexican woman and her ancient mother. I adored the old woman and regularly visited for prunes and a difficult discussion owing to her speaking little English and me only a beginner in Spanish. One Jewish family lived north of 17th Street but moved out after a few years. Barry was a close friend. Four doors down lived a middle aged white gay couple for 20 years, not that I knew what that meant. I liked them enough, though as two adults, we didn't really interact except when I hid in their bushes playing hide-and-go seek.

My bubble of childhood innocence burst on August 12, 1965, the same summer Harold moved. The TV news was filled with images of angry black men destroying their neighborhoods, the Watts Riots. Fear was rampant in my white world. I remember to this day the terror dreams that had me closing my windows and hiding in my bed. Would my home be burned by angry black people? I didn't understand, and how could I? I lived in a world of white Protestantism in which my greatest mystery was that my pretty classmate who went into the Catholic trailer parked on the street while I got religious instruction in the adjacent Protestant trailer. "Christian Release Time." The lesson of August 1965: fear black men, don't trust the voice of Martin Luther King—whoever he was.

Was I a racist child? Well, not if you asked me, but my world sure was.

Consider this. In its first year of achieving statehood, 1850, California passed a law outlawing interracial marriage. Almost a century later, in 1943, the ban was strengthened by the all-male, all-white legislature when it established "all marriages of whites with negroes or

mulattoes are declared to be null and void.” Any prohibited couple applying for a marriage were subject to a \$10,000 fine and 10 years imprisonment.

Like I said, my world sure was racist. And so probably was yours.

And what of American Churches?

Historically, Churches have been the harbinger of racism, embracing the status quo rather than challenging it when it desperately needed challenging.

Martin Luther King, Jr., the same man who scared me as a child, was spot on when, in *Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution*, he penned, “We must face the sad fact that at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing ‘In Christ there is no East or West,’ we stand in the most segregated hour of America.” This was true in the 1960s and remains true in the 2020s. Today, as an adult, I find the highest hope and inspiration from the works and teaching of MLK, Jr., which goes to show that we can remap our brains from fear to love.

This morning’s Epistle was written by James the Just, who was the younger brother of our Lord. He led the Mother Church in Jerusalem for 30 years following his brother’s earthly ministry. James Letter to the Church is hands down my favorite epistle in the Bible. Evangelicals are not such big fans. He challenges comfortable Christians who hide bigotry behind the proclamation “I believe and am saved.” James proclaims “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

This morning he teaches us, “Be ye not hearers of the word, but doers. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Being a doer of the word and keeping unstained includes fighting our country’s original sin, racism, in its many manifestations— active and seemingly benign.

In 1990, as I was leaving my parish in Orange County for a new congregation, the Jr. Warden, a respectable attorney, took me aside concerned that a black priest was on the short list to replace me. He told me that a ____ (I can’t say what he said or the Bishop might pull my license) would never be rector. I was shocked and reported his comments to the Bishop and the Sr. Warden. Thirty-four years later, he’s proven right so far, though the congregation got the Diocese of Los Angeles’ 2nd female rector instead.

As I reflect on 40 years as an ordained minister, I can count on one hand the number of black parishioners or neighbors who have been to my home. I have been in the home of only one black family in four decades. (This excludes my friends in African and black clergy who have stayed with me.) I can’t accept the premise that my Church does not perpetuate racism. In the Episcopal Church, outside of a few areas, our congregations are overwhelmingly white, or black, or brown, or Asian, but not interracial.

In 2000, 4% of marriages were interracial, 2015 saw 17% of interracial newlyweds. And none had to drink the other’s blood to get married.

Tell me, have you noticed a proliferation of interracial couples and families in advertising? Your eyes don’t deceive you. Ads today show a significantly higher percentage of interracial couples than in reality. How do you react? Is this wonderful, annoying, or some form of “wokeness”? But here are three

facts about such advertising. First, in the four-year study, not one interracial couple was shown on the Disney Channel. Next, interracial couples are typically positioned further apart than same race couple. Finally, 70% of black/white couples in advertising feature a white husband with a black wife, while the truth is that over 2/3s of black/white couples have a black husband. Why this misrepresentation? Simply, research shows that a majority of white Americans are uncomfortable seeing a black man being intimate with a white woman. A black dad with a white mom hurts sales, but a white dad with a black mom promotes sales... as long as they don't kiss.

Recall the lesson of my youth: fear black men. Apparently, this racist attitude is deeply ingrained into white culture, even when we don't see it. We look for confirming data and turn askew any images or relationships that unsettle something within us. Black America has its racial bigotry, too, with studies showing that black women are urged to marry black and face great social pressure from family if they marry outside their race.

Here on the Central Coast, Hispanic-White marriage dominates interracial marriage. My daughter's DNA is 99% white European. Her husband is 50% Scottish and 50% Mexican. The Census considers him non-white. Further, their children, 75% white, are considered non-white. Why, the one-drop of non-white blood rule was kept in place by the Administration to artificially decrease the official number of white babies, thus raising fear among whites that they are being "replaced."

We, as the Church, have a special calling and opportunity to break out of racial constructs passed down to us. We worship Jesus, God made man, who, by the one-drop rule, was not white. We must rid ourselves of the one-drop rule, of visual tests like a broad nose or curly hair to determine race.

But to break down racism, we must seek and engage, in love and grace, our brothers and sisters in Christ who have a different ancestry, skin color, and experience of what it means to follow Jesus. We must be willing to listen to their stories and tell our stories. We must give up our impoverished racial preferences that keep us in worshipping ghettos. We must allow the Holy Spirit to place us in the smelter and burn away the dross in our individual hearts and in our collective psyche.

Our country needs a courageous Episcopal Church. Our children and their children beg for honest racial transformation. How will we do it? All I can do is look to our Baptismal Covenant: "Will we strive to protect the dignity of every human being? I will, with God's help."