

Gospel of the Nobodies: The Ethnic Other

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Good morning. It is both my pleasure and my honor to be here with you and serve in the ministry of preaching. I thank my friend and colleague Rev. Catherine Williams and also Rev. Jana Purkis-Brash for extending to me the invitation to join you all this morning. I bring greetings to you from Union Baptist Church, Trenton and Rev. Simeon Spencer, the senior pastor there.

I was looking at your church bulletin and came across several meaningful outreach programs that you are all involved in. Your efforts to address homelessness, your Personal Care products drive, and your School Supply drive, among others things, are truly inspiring. It was refreshing also to know that you have a contemporary issues discussion group talking about religion and ethics. I note all of this not to flatter you but to remind myself that I am in good company and am happy to be with you this morning.

I was talking to my sister just this Friday and she shared three stories—all of which happened just this past week—of children from three different racial and ethnic communities in the high school where she works. One was the story of a boy who wanted to talk with some of his teachers but the teachers did not have the time to talk to him. This boy was irritated that his teachers could not find time for him and decided to write them an email that began with a certain word that started with the letter “f.”

The second was the story of another child who was bullied in school because he looked different and could not speak English as well as the rest. This child has been struggling since with suicidal thoughts and has trouble speaking coherently.

The third was the story of a teenager whose teacher made fun of him in front of the whole class for liking the cartoon show “My Little Pony.” This student punched the teacher in his face and was then expelled. He apparently says with pride, “I don’t regret what I did. The teacher will never do something like that again.” When I heard these things, I did not know whether to laugh or cry because here were three high school children who have already been *conditioned* to think that people who are different are a “problem.”

The topic for today—*ethnic other*—is one that is both important and urgent, not because it is a new problem but because it is an old one, an ancient one—one that is etched into our patterns of thinking, our reflexes, our everyday dispositions, our ordinary reactions to things and people, even our very selves. We have always struggled to live meaningfully with *difference*, with *others* who are different from us in more ways than one.

I come from India. And difference is in the very air we breathe. Although many people think that we Indians all get along, we don’t. If you don’t know already, we are some of the best when it comes to discriminating people.

“Patel,” for instance is a popular last name in the U.S. but not many know that “Patel”

hospitality, something that Indians are known for, is usually reserved for those who belong to the same caste, that is, to members of the in-group, *or* to others who are considered “higher-up” in the caste hierarchy. If you are perceived as “lower,” God help you. I’m not sure if you’ve had the opportunity to see the new movie *Meet the Patels*. My wife and I watched it at the Princeton Public Library. The lead actor in the movie is told by his parents that, when it comes to dating, “No Muslims, No Blacks.” Just like that. I don’t intend to single out the “Patels” for being responsible for discrimination because many Indians, irrespective of religion, often operate on the basis of caste.

Members of the out-group, depending on their caste-status, are treated either with hospitality, indifference or utter cruelty. Just a few weeks back, a Dalit boy was beaten to death by an upper-caste mob for daring to have a ringtone on his cellphone that praised someone from a “lower caste.” A ringtone! God help us.

And so when I read Luke 10:25-37, a hundred different images pop up in my mind. When we look at strangers who are different, we are struck by their peculiarity—those eyes, those lips, those cheek bones, that skin, hair, speech and all of those things that distinguish them and remind us that there is *someone else* there with us, someone who is different from us, an “other.”

And then we have a few options. We can say, “Remarkable! How beautiful! “How fearfully and wonderfully you are made!” and then look into their beauty and peculiarity with wonder and love and childlike curiosity....

Or, we can be overcome by fear of difference or some unarticulated prejudice, or some other failure of the imagination or the inability to envision a world that is different from the world that we are used to.

Have you noticed how people are sometimes just afraid to talk to one another? We walk past each other, but don’t look each other in the eye. Some people look away as soon as your eyes meet theirs. People are prejudiced. Fearful. Afraid of people who are “other.”

I went to the DMV the other day and a guy who wanted to change his number plates did not have a screwdriver. So, he went up to a family getting out of their car and asked them if he could borrow a screwdriver for a minute if they had one. The lady went, “No, thank you. No thank you.” The guy goes: “No, I don’t want to sell you anything; I want to know if I could borrow a screwdriver.” The lady was scared of him. Her fear of him prevented her from even listening to what he said.

Fear and prejudice are mixed into a potent concoction today. You and I know both have heard stories of unarmed children, teenagers and adults who have been shot to death by other people who claim that they were scared for their lives. Fear of the other, prejudice against the other is sometimes trivial, but often lethal.

The thing about prejudice is that it does not shout out from the rooftops. Prejudice against others creeps in slowly, appearing as common sense, or just the way things are.

I recall as a teenager I used to be scared of Muslim men with beards. I never quite knew why. I just took it for granted that they were scary. One day I was standing in

me who also had a beard. Although I was a bit conflicted about whether this man was really scary, I was still afraid. I kept looking at him, checking him out, while waiting my turn to get my ticket at the counter when all of a sudden he turned back and there I was looking straight at him. Our eyes met. I was scared. And then, unexpectedly, the most wonderful thing happened to me. He smiled at me. It's been many years but I still remember that smile—big, authentic, warm. Like in the parable, there I was, realizing that this Muslim man was the good guy. I was the one who was prejudiced.

We recognize violence in its most gruesome and visible moments—like when George Zimmerman shot Trayvon Martin for carrying iced tea and skittles near a gated community or when Dylan Roof shot 9 saints at church during bible study, or during the bomb blast in Bangkok.

But at other times, we encounter violence not in its spectacular forms but in forms so familiar that we don't even notice them. They form the background of our everyday interactions and we take them as "the way things are."

And so there is one more step we must take if we truly are come to terms with violence as a social phenomenon that creeps into our ordinary everyday reflexes: We must recognize, name and resist violence not only in its most gruesome and visible moments, but also in its more disguised forms. The things that we do and say in our day-to-day behavior, the way we picture others in our mind when we think about them, our reactions to neighbors and strangers, our perceptions of "others" in the books and magazines we read, the films we see, and the conversations and silences in which we participate.

Disguised, everyday, ordinary actions can be violent as well. As when a group of women were kicked off the Napa Valley Wine train for being too loud. Or when Serena Williams gets called names when she is on court and off court. Thinking that some people are prone to criminal or violent behavior. Or its opposite: attributing childishness or immaturity to people who look or speak different. I have to give you an example here. A professor singled out a graduate student in class, assuming wrongly that the student did not know the philosopher the professor was describing because the student looked "different." The professor then went on to say in front of the whole class, "Here let me spell it for you: K A N T: Kant."

At other times, we attribute inferior cultural development, sexual perversion or hypersexuality to "ethnic" others. I have in the last five years met many men who have a "thing," as they say, for say Asian women. They mention others too. I wish I could go into details here, but this I am aware that I am speaking at church.

I could mention other examples, however, of everyday violence. A friend of mine was standing in line during lunch at the student cafeteria for a sandwich and a visiting scholar from Europe comes up to him and says, "Can you make me a sandwich, quick?" And when my friend says he is standing in line for the same thing, the person just walks away.

Now for some of us here, these experiences are so common that we don't even bother to do anything. Being asked if you work at departmental stores when you are shopping, being followed by shopping attendants lest you "steal" something, professors wanting to touch your hair, the list is really endless... Oh, being stopped

by your own campus security in your own campus and asked, “what is your business here?”

There are many who continue to believe that the best of all possible worlds is one in which we have clear differences between “us” and “them.” And that the “us” must be protected from the “them.” The “us” is good and the “them” is bad. The “us” must therefore be shielded from “them” by all means necessary. The names that they use for “others” whom they include under the “them” category are some of the most derogatory and demeaning names you and I will encounter. Please familiarize yourselves with these people. I won’t name any today but they include some of the smartest and richest people in the world. They are people who are absolutely convinced that they are right.

This category of people in a sense could be compared to the “robbers” in Luke 10 who strip the stranger, beat the stranger and leave the stranger half-dead. They indeed *rob* others of their dignity. I would say that they are cruel. A thousand sermons could be preached about this category of people.

The fascinating aspect that we encounter in the story in Luke 10, however, is that it presents a controversy and conflict that arises when Jesus is talking *not* to someone who is cruel, but talking to someone who is good.

These are the kinds of people I am interested in. That is, those who know the damage that the “us vs. them” kind of thinking causes. These are people who recognize cruelty and its disastrous effects on our minds, hearts and bodies. This category of people understands that when we treat others as “other,” it often becomes a dangerous assessment of human worth and frequently establishes a wrongful hierarchy that pits us against one another. This group seeks to avoid cruelty. This group affirms love. In other words, this group comprises of “generally good people.” I like to think that I belong to this group and it is my guess that many of you also belong to this group.

The character in the scripture reading for today who best represents this group is the lawyer. What is fascinating about Luke’s version of this encounter is that it is the lawyer who summarizes the law, *not* Jesus. The lawyer knows the Torah and it is him who sums up the law saying “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” He knows all of it, just as you and I know it.

“Which is the greatest commandment?” “Love,” we say right away. “How are we to love God?” We immediately respond, “With all our heart, all our mind, all our soul and all our strength.” “How are we to love our neighbor?” “Just as ourselves,” we remark quickly. Like the lawyer, we know these answers. We also know, like the lawyer, that love of God and love of neighbor go together and that “on these two commandments,” as Matthew 22:40 puts it, “hang all the law and the prophets.” This is what is fascinating about the passage from Luke 10: 25-37. It speaks to us who know the right answers. You and me.

What does God have to say to us who know the right answers? What does God have to tell us who are generally good people? The parable shows us that while goodness is found in each of us, goodness is also found outside of us, often in places and persons we don’t expect. The parable is a rejoinder to many of us who have the

In contrast, God reminds us that we have to find the center of our gravity outside of ourselves.

As we look to find the center of our gravity outside of ourselves, it does not mean that we relinquish our good deeds. We keep doing the good. However, we let the “other” occupy our thinking and feeling in such a way that it extends and deepens our sense of responsibility in a fundamental way.

As Christians, we believe that we owe our existence to someone who is “other” than us—God. God gave us breath. We live therefore with borrowed breath. God gave us time. We live therefore in borrowed time. God took time in his time for us. God is different than us but he sought out to be *with* us who are different from God. God thus found his center of gravity outside of himself and calls us to do the same. “Go and do likewise.”