

February 2009

Fellow Pilgrims:

January is a month of beginnings. One of these beginnings is the inauguration of a new president, Barack Obama. Whether or not you voted for him, John McCain, or someone else for president, he is our new president. He is our 44th president. It has been a little over 45 years since Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous speech that included the "I Have a dream" ideal of a colorblind society where we see people as they are and not on the basis of their skin color. When Rev. King gave his speech, Jim Crow laws and practices victimized nonwhites and kept them from having their rights as American citizens. Poll taxes and poll tests, along with whippings and lynching, kept them from voting until the Voting Rights Act of the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement.

We recently celebrated the 140th anniversary of our landmark chapel. In 1868, St. Markers were only 5 years away from President Lincoln's *Emancipation Proclamation*. However while the slaves were freed and legal slavery no longer existed, Jim Crow laws and social practice kept African Americans and others (Asian, Hispanic, Jews, and others) in an inferior position legally, socially, economically, and politically. Our churches were segregated. "Separate but equal" was a rallying cry, but it did not hide the horrific practices and outcomes of these vicious practices. Sometimes it was the local law enforcement institutions that kept people down and cowed. Sometimes it was local groups of the KKK and similar groups, which victimized the non-whites while local law, looked the other way. Legal immigrants were often similarly treated if they did not come from Western Europe. Roman Catholics were sometimes also discriminated against in similar ways.

I was tearful at times with the election and inauguration of Barack Obama. It represents a milestone of racial reconciliation and color blindness. Scenes of my childhood and adulthood were vivid counterpoints for me to what was happening in Washington, DC. As a young boy, my family was a regular visitor to the South. I did not understand then what "Men, Women, Colored" bathrooms or public benches with "White or Colored" signs meant. Why were African Americans moving off the sidewalks when Whites were walking towards them? Why was there "White Only" hospitals, neighborhoods, beaches, hotels, and other businesses?

During the summers (1963-1965) when I was at Illinois State University working toward my B.A., I often had older housemates (8 of us in a house) working on graduate degrees. For two summers, one of the graduate students was African American. He was a great guy, a veteran, and a compassionate teacher. Occasionally, we would all go out to eat dinner at a local restaurant. Often, we were invisible and no one would serve us. If we forced the issue, the food was basically inedible. At times, we were treated like any other human being and got good service and food. When I started my career as a professor at College of DuPage, I shared an office (late 60s and early 70s) with a psychologist who was African American. We would play doubles in tennis with our wives. At some Glen Ellyn establishments, we were again invisible. You could never predict. I would hate to live that way. When I was at Northwestern University, I went through rush for fraternity pledging. I visited a number of fraternities and wondered if I would get an invitation. At one of them, I was invited to a private meeting. I was told that no K--- could join their fraternity or any of the other ones I had visited. I was told that I should only have visited the Jewish fraternity and pledged there. They did not want people like me.

To see an African American get so many votes from all ages, races ethnicities, socio-economic groups, and both men and women in the general election and primaries and to be sworn in as president, puts past institutionalized injustices into the dustbin of history. Will there still be racist

hate? As long as there is evil in the world, there will be prejudice and racial/ethnic hatreds (among others), especially if good people do nothing. However God calls us to a different path of discipleship involving love, justice, and righteousness, not racism, hatred, and fear. My tears were tears of healing for the injustices I experienced and witnessed and the injustices I had permitted by not speaking out enough and not being sensitive to them. They were tears of joy for the changes I have witnessed, from Jim Crow legal racism being the accepted practice to racism being illegal, not acceptable, and on the way out.

Scripture demands no less than the rule of love. The prophet Micah tells us (6: 8), “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” The prophet Amos tells us (5: 24), “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” Paul reminds us that we are kin to all Christians and the distinctions of the world do not matter. Paul says (Galatians 3:29), “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Jesus Christ died for all people. Can we do any less than to love all and treat all with justice, kindness, and righteousness? This not one of the major themes of Scripture: God calls all to salvation and offers Grace. It is the individual who says, “Yes” or “No,” to God. Sometimes Christians have said, “Love the sinner, and hate the sin.” Racial, ethnic, gender, age, and other forms of intolerance have no place in God’s Kingdom.

In Christ’s love,
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Spiritual Director