

Bad Information – Proper 18B

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert... “I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.”

Happy are those whose hope is in the Lord their God, who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry and sets the prisoners free... “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down They shall see the majesty of our God strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees, and say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear.” ... “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy... “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

The prophecy of Isaiah, was delivered to his people in their exile in foreign land, some 2500 years ago, where all the goodness and mercy in the universe was but a vision of far off future days to come. The dream described by Martin Luther

King in his prophetic speech 50 years ago also describes a vision of a time not yet realized, when goodness and mercy will come to his people who lack them sorely. These latter people are also in exile, and although theirs is no longer the same kind of enslavement as the Israelites, it is no less a bitter, vicious, near devastating affliction. The songs and stories of the American history of resisting white privilege: Abolitionism, The Civil War, and the Civil Rights movement tell a powerful story of wondrous resistance, defiance and change, but the enslavement continues nevertheless.

Neither Isaiah nor Rev. King were talking only about physical bondage, economic deprivation or political emasculation. Both were calling out to a people under another terrible, crippling, immeasurable burden: of bad information. Like addicts, whose most pernicious symptom is the denial of their addiction, these people suffer from the cunning, baffling and powerful effects of ignorance. Isaiah's people thought they could praise the Lord with their lips, but not follow the Lord's precepts in their hearts or with their hands. We American people thought we could praise freedom and equality with our lips, but not lift every stone and practice and ordinance and sneaky little habit that kept oppression, inequality and cycles of poverty, violence and crime in place. Too many of us still think this way; that is what keeps us an enslaved people. We are in bondage to wrongheaded information, to bad facts.

Listen again to the words of James: "You do well if you fulfill the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you show any partiality, you are convicted by the law as transgressors. Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy."

Our last President once described patriotism as more than pageantry and the scarfing of hot dogs, more even than

wartime sacrifice. “When our laws, our leaders, or our government are out of alignment with our ideals, it is the dissent of ordinary Americans that is one of the truest expressions of patriotism. Love of country, like all other forms of love, requires that you tell those you care about not simply what they want to hear but what they need to hear.”

This is not about making criminals of anybody or even about laying blame. It is about saving lives from lies; the physical and spiritual lives of those who suffer from the effects of bad information, and also the moral and spiritual lives of those who allow – and therefore perpetuate -- bad information and its devastation of our society.

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters,” asks James, “if you say you have faith but do not have works? Do you with your acts of favoritism really follow Christ? Are you not making distinctions among yourselves, and judging one another?” We can legislate all we want, but if a brother or sister is naked and lacks food, and we say to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ but do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be heirs of the kingdom? But you have dishonored the poor. Therefore, it is the rich who oppress you.”

Even Jesus struggled with this same bad information, that’s how deep the infection runs. A woman whose little daughter was sick came and bowed down at his feet. But she was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin (horrors!). When she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter, he said, “Let the children be fed first, it is not right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” It’s right here in the book. Thank God she was able to talk him out of such a ungodly mistake, but his initial cultural reaction was to withhold his blessing. There is

no greater proof of Jesus humanity than this example of wrongheadedness -- of bad information.

It is a black and white issue, but the black and white of it is just this: There is no black and white. Biological races do not exist—and never have. This view is shared by every scientist who studies human populations. (Here, from the film *Race: The Power of an Illusion*) “There is no question that individual human beings are different, one from the other. We have a notion of race as comprising the differences among people that are somehow genetic and in unchanging, clear-cut categories. You can identify the “other” on sight by skin color or eye shape or hair. The idea of race also assumes that those simple, superficial differences, are indicative of more complex internal differences, like athletic ability, musical aptitude, natural rhythm, intelligence, and character. But all our genetic research now tells us that's not the case. Nobody can find any genetic markers that are in everybody of a particular race and in nobody of some other race, yet racial prejudice and intolerances based on the myth of race remain deeply ingrained in our society.

[Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) writes “Racism is not merely a simplistic hatred. It is more often, broad sympathy toward some and broader skepticism toward others, based on a myth. Black America lives under that skeptical eye; hence the old admonition that blacks must be twice as good as whites to get ahead. Hence the tragic need for a “special talk” administered to young black boys about how to be extra careful when relating to the police. There is no benefit of any doubt if you are colored.

The irony of Barack Obama was rooted in the greater ironies of the country he leads. For most of American history, our political system was premised on two deeply conflicting

themes: an oft-stated love of democracy on the one hand, and a very undemocratic white supremacy inscribed at every level of government on the other.

The poet Lucille Clifton once put it succinctly:

“They act like they don’t love their country
No
what it is
is they found out
their country don’t love them.”

Continues Coates, “And now, there are many strident voices shouting from this deep foul well of ignorance and bad information trying to demonize the protest movement that has sprung up in response to the all-too-common police killings of unarmed African-Americans across the country. These detractors would cast the phrase ‘Black Lives Matter’ as an inflammatory or even hateful anti-white expression that has no legitimate place in a civil rights campaign, when in truth the movement focuses on the indisputable fact that black citizens have long been far more likely than whites to be incarcerated, and far more likely to die at the hands of the police. No one is asserting that black lives are more precious than white lives. They are underlining an indisputable fact — that the lives of black citizens in this country historically have not mattered, have been discounted and devalued.”

Our nation is today being summoned by God to shed our ignorance and denial, to be our true selves, to grow up and live in the bright warm sunshine of our own professed ideals and drink from the cool, fresh, clear wellspring of good information, of truth.