

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Romans 15:1-7**  
***Issues the Church Should Care About: Race***  
**May 25, 2008**

NRS Romans 15:1 *We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. 3 For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, 6 so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

When I was a boy and just turned six years old, I was enrolled in a six week summer preschool, to prepare us rural kids for first grade. The year was 1972. Kindergarten was at that time not available unless you paid for it privately, and so I did not go to kindergarten. My apology, if this diminishes my credentials among this august gathering of community leaders. I met a boy there, my age of course, who was striking in his appearance: He was tall and wore a sharp fedora-type hat. When I came home on the first day, I reviewed with my family all my impressions including my new friend. That evening I asked, "Can he come over and spend the night?" I did not know it at the time, but my new friend lived just across the pasture from my house in a ramshackle of a house. Someone in my family, I am not sure who, asked, "Did you say his name was *(blank)*" "Yes, I think that is his name." The next question was, "Is he colored? What color is he?" Let me hasten to add that I love my family, and you all know that, but as long as we live on this side of Eden, no family is perfect. Following the question of my friend's color, I remember thinking that I had never heard that term applied to anything but crayons. I was thinking, "What a ridiculous question," but none-the-less, I would answer as best I knew how. "He's kind of chocolate-colored, I guess," was my response. The reply was one of amusement, "Honey, he can't spend the night with you, because he is colored." That made absolutely no sense to me, but I do not remember questioning them. That must be just the way things are. Before that conversation, I never thought of my friend or any other classmate then as being any different than me. I suppose that at least half of the class was made up of African-American children. They were all the same to me. I did not know it then, but I would soon receive an education on race. That was 1972. I still look back to that day as formative.

Yet, I remain steadfastly hopeful that there will come a day when race does not matter. In fact, I almost did not preach on this subject for this series, *Issues the Church Should Care About*, because I thought that out of all the subjects that needed to be addressed in just a few weeks, maybe race was not the most pressing. And then Jeremiah Wright showed up.

It was naive of me to assume that after hundreds of years of slavery and a century of brutal segregation that officially ended forty or so years ago, I should think that we can all just move on and forward. As recent as 1970, our own city was engulfed in a race riot, where fear metastasized. Race, to paraphrase Cornell West, still matters.

Race, of course, is not just a black and white issue. All around this globe human beings draw lines of demarcation due to ethnic differences and shades of skin color.

Whites versus Blacks  
Jews versus Palestinians  
Mexicans versus Puerto Ricans  
Asians versus Native Americans

Pashtuns versus Hazaras  
Darfur versus Arabs  
Romany gypsies versus Hungarians  
Travelers versus Augustans  
Jeremiah Wright versus pretty much  
everybody.

Will race always matter? Can we imagine a community that goes beyond race?

While the names have changed over the millennia, the issue hasn't: race still matters. For Paul the apostle, the differences ethnically and religiously between Jews and Gentiles were just as pronounced, and every bit as divisive as racial issues of our time. It is telling that Paul often writes about the "circumcised" and "uncircumcised." We hear that, as the language used to distinguish the Jews who were circumcised (the males), and the Gentiles, who were uncircumcised. But these were not polite terms. They were labels intended to dehumanize.

Wherever there is a race problem, there is a label or name calling problem. We have nasty words for all kinds of people. Red, and yellow, black and white, may be precious in "His" sight, but since the creation of language, human beings have used words to denigrate and dehumanize, because they are not like us.

Regarding the issue of race, we are compelled to answer one of at least three questions: Does the gospel call us to exclude or tolerate or embrace?

**Do we exclude?** I am convinced that exclusion based on the ethnicity of a person is sinful. It is indefensible from a New Testament perspective. Paul, our most famous missionary of the first century, journeyed throughout the Roman-Greco empire, because he fiercely believed that the exclusive claims of the good news in Jesus Christ was not exclusive. Paul, a circumcised Jew, proclaimed the message to the Gentile world. Paul, who carried within his tradition a thousand years or more of separation from all non-Jews, reached beyond the religious barriers, reached beyond the ethnic barriers, reached beyond the cultural barriers and declared: *Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.* (Romans 15:7)

It was Paul who wrote to the Gentile Galatians: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* (verse 28) Yes, we have little option but to repent of the exclusive practices of our past.

A church member wrote to me and shared this story of which she has given me permission to share with you:

Never will forget the one day that my sister and I were in the old Davison's Department store on Broad Street, and my sister wanted a drink from the fountain, as she always did...Mother took her hand and walked her over to the fountain to lift her up to drink from the fountain. As she bent to pick her up, my sister saw a sign over the fountain and asked mother to read it to her. Mother said, this says "Whites"...and my sister responded...what does the other sign on that other fountain say....Mother retorted, "Colored".

As mother lifted her to the fountain, such screaming and howling you never heard....Mother asked quite calmly, "Anne, I thought you wanted a drink of water....what is your problem?"

"I do want a drink...but I want colored water to drink"!

Thankfully, we no longer have segregated water fountains or bathrooms or restaurants or buses. Yet, we must be evermore vigilant to the more subtle forms of exclusion here today. I wish our church family, for

example, reflected the rich diversity that is America. How can we reflect on our words and actions to discern, if they are exclusive or not?

Theologian, Miroslav Volf argues, that anytime we attempt to dehumanize another by promoting fear, or by assimilation, so that others can “be like us” or to simply dominate, so that any and all differences are sublimated by our own views and agenda we are committing the sin of exclusion (from *Exclusion and Embrace*).

The sin of exclusion, like all sin, has a seductive sinister side. Volf suggests one other form of exclusion still practiced today: abandonment. When we choose to simply ignore the issues of justice for the oppressed we are effectively abandoning. No, we may not overtly dehumanize another, or forcefully work towards assimilation, or seek to win through domination. But the sad truth is, we may not want to get our hands dirty by standing with the crucified Christ, whose very resurrection is for all people.

To the question of the issue of race, do we exclude? The answer should be an unequivocal, no. What about...

### **Do we tolerate?**

After all, we are told from many sources that to be tolerant is something of a virtue. Indeed, we teach our children the importance of being tolerant of others. That is, we want them to accept others who may have different opinions, different views, regarding politics and religion. We want them to be fair, because we should want the same kind of respect.

Mere toleration however, implies, gritting ones teeth and enduring the circumstances without any transformation of heart. There is no love in such toleration. I have to think that when Jesus told the story of a man beaten and abandoned on the way to Jericho, the Samaritan did more than just “tolerate” his neighbor. He loved him through action.

I join with other voices in saying: *If the liberal proclamation of tolerance is short sighted, and the fundamentalist proclamation of exclusion is anti-gospel, where does the mission of the church lie? It lies in the modeling embrace of God* (from Drew Smith ).

### **How then Do We Embrace?**

Jesus is of course the model. In Jesus, we do not have the one-dimensional picture of a secluded mystic, content to pray for the Kingdom of God, but do nothing to make it a reality. We embrace, by walking where Jesus walked, talking like Jesus talked, and living like Jesus lived. In other words, we act as though we really believe all this stuff we celebrate about Jesus every Sunday. How do we embrace the other as embracing Jesus? We practice forgiveness.

This of course, is one of the most difficult and yet most necessary of Christian practices. It was Jesus who said: *If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.* (NLT Matthew 5:14-15) Of course, we have work to do. Hateful bumper stickers give voice to what many are thinking. Without forgiveness, we have no hope, for the cycle of hatred will only continue.

### **We love our neighbor.**

In his book, *Strength to Love*, Dr. King labels this kind of love as “*the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.*”<sup>i</sup> Love has the power to change this world.

### **We live peacefully.**

A grandfather in this church, was sharing with me a story of his grandson, Morgan. A few years ago, Morgan was saying his prayers with his grandfather. He would pray for a little while, then his grandfather, and back and forth. He prayed and thanked God for Martin Luther King, and not at the time his life is celebrated. After our prayer, I asked Morgan why he thanked God for Martin Luther King and he said: "Trey would not have been my friend if it had not been for Mr. King." A child shall lead us.

### **We Witness to the World.**

Witness is not a program of the church or an activity we engage in. To witness is to practice living out the reign of God to this world. It is bearing witness to God's reign - A reign that includes all people, a reign that trusts not in the things of this world, a reign that practices love, forgiveness, and peace.

Jesus did not enter this world to save some and condemn others – *for God so loved the world*. Jesus did not enter this world to tolerate us either. Jesus entered this world to embrace us, and in so doing, we go and live accordingly. We make room for one another.

We are not there yet, but we are on our way. There are still voices of exclusion, voices of hate, voices soak and saturated in the rhetoric of division. We are not there yet, but we are on our way. Gone is the day when a black man or woman would not get seated in public worship, and while we have not yet achieved the diverse tapestry reflected in this world, we nonetheless see richness in our congregation, in our deacon body, guiding us in worship, singing in choir, and leading on committees. We are not there yet, but we are on our way.

Jesus called us to let our light shine, and when we do so, may it radiate a kaleidoscope of colors. We are not there yet, but we are on our way.

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<sup>i</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love*(New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 38.