

Wednesday, March 22, 2006

The Sin of Racism: A Call to Covenant

A Pastoral Letter from the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church March 2006

We, the bishops of the Episcopal Church, acknowledged the painful reality of the consequences of racism in the 1994 pastoral letter “the Sin of Racism.” In that letter, we stated “the essence of racism is prejudice coupled with power. It is rooted in the sin of pride and exclusivity which assumes ‘that I and my kind are superior to others and therefore deserve special privileges.’” We issue this new pastoral on the pervasive sin that continues to plague our common life in the church and in our culture. We acknowledge our participation in this sin and we lament its corrosive effects on our lives. We repent of this sin, and ask God’s grace and forgiveness.

When Jesus entered the synagogue in his first public act of ministry (Luke 4), he read from the prophet Isaiah. The vision proclaimed is known as the desire of God, the peaceable kingdom, a society of justice and shalom, or the city set on a hill. It is an icon of what God intends for all creation – that human beings live in justice and peace with one another, that the poor are fed and housed and clothed, the ill are healed, prisoners set free, and that the whole created order is restored to right relationship. That vision is our goal and vocation as Christians.

The fundamental truth undergirding this vision is that all are made in the image of God. It is in our diversity that we discover the fullness of that image. If we judge one class or race or gender better than another, we violate that desire and intent of God. And when our social and cultural systems exacerbate or codify such judgments, we do violence to that which God has made. Racism is a radical affront to the good gift of God, both in the creation described in Genesis, and in the reality of the Incarnation. Jesus came among us to bring an end to that which divides us, as Paul so clearly identifies in Galatians 3:28, “in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.”

Whenever individual or community behaviors work against God’s vision, we have promised to respond in ways that will serve to heal: “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? I will with God’s help.” (BCP p 305) God has created us with skins of many colors, God has created us in thousands of tribes and languages, and none is adjudged more godly than another. It is our behavior that gives evidence of godliness, not the color of our skin.

The world has witnessed the evil of institutionalized racism and classism in the United States in the aftermath of the hurricanes of 2005. The poor and persons of color were often served last – or not at all – while wealthy and privileged residents had greater resources to escape the immediate danger of the hurricanes and begin the process of rebuilding. We are all shamed by the sin of racism in the reality of inequity in housing, employment, educational and healthcare opportunities, and the disaster response.

This House of Bishops, meeting in Hendersonville, North Carolina on 21 March 2006, which is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, commit ourselves as bishops to discern and confess our own prejudice and complicity in the pervasive sin of racism, to confront it, and make amends for it in intentional ways every time we gather as a House. We ask the Holy Spirit to empower the House to fully live into this covenant, and we invite the members of this Church to covenant with us, in the following actions personally, corporately, and globally. With God's help, we will:

- renew our commitment to the 1994 pastoral letter, "The Sin of Racism";
- take responsibility to expose, dismantle and heal those situations of injustice based on racism;
- seek forgiveness for our lack of charity and consciousness in recognizing those situations which degrade the image of God in our neighbors;
- make amends for our undeserved position and benefit as a result of unjust situations both now and in the past;
- empower all members of God's human family, that they may live into the fullness of what God intends;
- encourage the larger church to continue and expand its work of education, spiritual formation, and anti-racism training, that all might discover the riches of God's diverse creation, especially in those who differ from us;
- advocate for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals by the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, our respective dioceses, the parishes which comprise them, and our governments, as well as our own households, that God's desire may become increasingly evident for all of humanity;
- recruit and empower people of all races and ethnic origins as leaders in our church, and as members of all boards, agencies, commissions, and committees;
- dedicate equitable resources for all races and national origins in the funding of theological education for all ministries, lay and ordained;
- advocate for continued response to the sinful legacy of slavery;
- expose situations of environmental racism and classism which poison and threaten the poorest among us, and seek justice for those communities; and
- advocate for compassionate care of the stranger in our midst, and demand just immigration policies.

Having entered into covenant with each other to root out the sin of racism in very specific personal and corporate ways, we, the bishops of the Episcopal Church, invite all members of our Church to join us in this mission of justice, reconciliation, and unity. This is an expression of our commitment to the fundamental covenant each of us entered into at the moment of our baptism.

May God give us the will to do this reconciling work, and the power and grace to accomplish it.

We ask that this pastoral letter be read in all churches as soon as possible.