



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Anti-Racism and the Peace of God

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 18, 2015
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany—Based on 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and Mark 1:43-51*

This Gospel passage from John we've just heard happens also to be the Gospel reading for the Feast of St. Bartholomew, formally observed on August 24. You may be wondering why, since Bartholomew isn't mentioned.

In the other three Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and in the Book of Acts, it's Bartholomew who's linked to Philip; Nathanael isn't mentioned in their lists of the twelve apostles. But in the Gospel of John, Philip is connected with Nathanael. Some scholars believe Nathanael and Bartholomew are the same person. Bar-Tholomew could have been Nathanael's last name.

So Nathanael Bartholomew is "our" guy. When Philip tells him, "We've found the Messiah, the one Moses and the prophets wrote about," Nathanael famously replies, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That sounds rather curmudgeonly. But that's our guy and we're proud of him!

This, of course, is John's story of Jesus' calling Philip and Nathanael Bartholomew. Philip and Nathanael each answer that call in his own way.

The story of Samuel and Eli is a call story, too. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." I.e., Eli's community is not much connected to God; spiritual vitality among the people has grown as dim as Eli's eyesight.

Samuel, a young assistant to Eli, the chief priest of that area, doesn't have relationship enough with God to recognize that it is God calling him. The dying embers of Eli's spirituality finally bursts into a tiny flame as Eli realizes it is God who is calling Samuel.

We often think and talk about "call" as something only for people who think they may be "called" to ordained ministry. But it's not. God calls each of us. Not just once, but again and again throughout our lives. Do we hear God calling? Like Samuel, we may hear it but not recognize it—we may mistake God's voice for someone or something else. Of course, we're very careful how we talk about hearing voices. Or, like Eli, something may keep us from hearing God's voice. Or, like some other characters in the Bible, we may hear God's call but run as hard as we can away from it.

This weekend we remember Martin Luther King, Jr. and how he answered God's call(s) to him. Recently I participated in a two-day anti-racism training sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of New York. It's training required for clergy and open to anyone in the Diocese. [1]

I must confess I went rather reluctantly. I considered myself progressive and fairly knowledgeable; I also had other ideas about what I could do on my days off that week. It turned out to be two of the most educational days I've spent in a long time. The timing of my attending that particular training was

random. But because of it, I observe MLK Day with a greater depth this year. I'd like to share with you some of the things I learned.

First, I learned that "race" is a modern idea. The English language didn't even have the word "race" until 1508, when it turned up in a poem by William Dunbar referring to a line of kings. Ancient societies did divide people according to religion, status, class, even language, but not according to physical characteristics.

Then I learned race has no genetic or biological basis. We watched a film showing a high school class doing experiments sequencing their DNA to see whom in their class they were genetically most similar to. The students appeared to be white, African-American, Hispanic and Asian. At the beginning of the experiment, each student guessed s/he would be most genetically similar to the person who looked most like her/him. That's not what they found.

They found that skin color really is only skin deep. The genes influencing skin color have nothing to do with the genes influencing hair form, eye shape, blood type, musical talent, athletic ability or intelligence. Knowing someone's skin color doesn't necessarily tell you anything else about him or her.

Most variation happens within, not between, "races." That means two random Italians may be as genetically different as an Italian and a Korean.

Human subspecies don't exist. Unlike many animals, modern humans simply haven't been around long enough or isolated enough to evolve into separate subspecies or races. We've been here only 100,000 years—that's not long enough. Despite surface appearances, humans are one of the most similar of all species. Any two penguins have twice the genetic difference of any of us humans. Any two fruit flies have ten times the difference.

I and most, if not all, of the other people at the training did not remember ever being taught any of this in school, no matter how much school we'd had. One mother went home and asked her middle-school-aged son if he knew any of this. He looked at her and said, "Duh." We took that as a sign of hope. At least in some places this is being taught now.

Race may not be biological, but race is real. Race is an invention—a social and historical construct/idea—a powerful one. Historically, race has determined where we live, what schools we attend, what jobs we have, what rates we pay for health insurance, even what mortgage rates we pay.

The U.S. was founded on the radical new principle that "All men are created equal." But this country's early economy was based in large part on slavery. How could equality and slavery exist at the same time? The new idea of race helped explain why some people could be denied the rights and freedoms that others took for granted.

I learned how arbitrarily race has been determined. We heard about two Supreme Court cases (from the 1920's-30's, as I remember). One involved a Japanese man who had lived in America for a long time with his family, had a prosperous business, an upstanding person who loved America. He applied for citizenship. His application (after going all the way to the Supreme Court) was denied—it was decided that he was not white. The second case was similar, involving a man of East Indian ancestry. His application for citizenship was denied—it was decided that he was not white.

We had a lawyer in our group who happened to be an expert on Constitutional law. After hearing about these two cases, he spent a long time out in the hall with his iPhone. When he came back in, his face was flushed and he told us, "I am livid! We were taught nothing about these cases in law school. It's not that they were skipped over or ignored—they weren't even in our books. I just looked in the literature—they are buried."

As the race idea evolved, white superiority became standard in America. It was used to justify slavery. Ours was the first slave system where all the slaves shared similar physical characteristics. For much of human history, societies have enslaved others, often as a result of conquest or war, even debt—but not because of physical characteristics or a belief in natural inferiority.

The notion of white superiority also justified the extermination of Native Americans, the exclusion of Asian immigrants, and the taking of Mexican lands by a nation that professed to believe in democracy. Racial practices, as we know, became institutionalized within American government, in our laws, in society.

Many of you may have seen the movie “Selma.” For me, one of the most poignant scenes in that movie shows a black woman trying several times to register to vote. Legally, she has the right to vote, as of 1920. But the white registration officer keeps placing hurdles in front of her, making her registration dependent on providing documentation and answering questions that no white applicant would have to do.

Race is a powerful social idea that has given people different access to opportunities and resources. Our government and social institutions have created advantages that disproportionately channel wealth, power, and resources to those who are declared white. This affects everyone, whether we are aware of it or not.

These were disturbing and uncomfortable things to learn. It says much about my own rarely considered white privilege that I was not fully aware of them. What I learned made me think of an alternate form of the Confession, which we have available in supplemental liturgical materials:

*God of all mercy,
we confess that we have sinned against you,
opposing your will in our lives.
We have denied your goodness in each other,
in ourselves, and in the world you have created.
We repent of the evil that enslaves us,
the evil we have done,
and the evil done on our behalf.
Forgive, restore, and strengthen us
through our Savior Jesus Christ,
that we may abide in your love
and serve only your will. [2]*

The spiritual writer Fred Buechner defines “call” this way: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” [3] I’ve begun to think it also may be true that the place God calls us to is the place where our own deep discomfort and the world’s deep hunger meet.

In 300+ years of our country’s history, race relations have never been better ... And as Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin and others have recently made so disturbingly clear, we still have a long way to go.

The hymn we just sang tells of the apostles trying to spread the peace of God. They met early and painful ends, as does our own Bartholomew. But listen again to that last stanza:

The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. Yet let us pray for but one thing—the marvelous peace of God. [4]

The marvelous peace of God ... the uncomfortable, disturbing peace of God?

The Shalom of God: the well-being and equality that God wills for every person. Every person, period.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding ... the peace of God for which we work.

Amen.

[1] Much of the training material was drawn from *RACE - The Power of an Illusion*, a 3-part documentary about race in society, science and history; produced by California Newsreel in association with the Independent Television Service (ITVS), 2003.

[2] *Enriching Our Worship 1: Morning and Evening Prayer, The Great Litany, and The Holy Eucharist*. Church Publishing Incorporated, 2000.

[3] *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. Frederick Buechner, 1993.

[4] "They cast their nets in Galilee," hymn 661 in *The 1982 Hymnal*.

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