

Protagonist Corner

Oh, Lord, Hold Our Hands

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Consider: in this last decade of the twentieth century, color determines the social and economic status of all African Americans, both those who have been highly successful and their poverty bound brethren whose lives are grounded in misery and despair. We rise and fall less as a result of our efforts than in response to a white society that condemns all blacks to quasi citizenship as surely as it segregated our parents and enslaved their forebears. The fact is that, despite what we designate as progress wrought through struggle over many generations, we remain what we were in the beginning: a dark and foreign presence, always the designated 'other.'¹

In this quote from *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Derrick Bell exposes the place where we all live in regard to "race" as we are poised to move into the twenty-first century. The recent Presidential Commission on Race failed because it was not given the political or moral power to confront the glaring and yet unspoken truth about us as a nation: race is one of the central organizing principles of our society. There is no truth so evident but so often denied in our society than the power of race. It determines where we live, where our children go to school, where we worship, where we play, whom we put in our jails and prisons, where our toxic wastes go, where our money goes, and many other dynamics of our life together. We should not be surprised, for it has been a truth about us since the European beginnings of our nation. We have made some gains through the civil rights movement, but many of those gains are under attack, and some have already been nullified.²

Race is one of those powers that Paul identified in Ephesians when he talked about the difficulties of the journey to be a witness to the liberating freedom of the God we know in Jesus Christ: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of the Lord. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this current confusion, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:10-12). Paul emphasizes that this kind of power is not easily eradicated and that it, indeed, at times seems beyond the power of the individual human will.³ For engagement with this kind of power, we must enter a process that involves our imaginations as well as our wills, because a power such as racism maintains its status by becoming intertwined with our very definition of ourselves. In regard to race, there are steps to consider as we seek engagement and freedom.

The first step is an acknowledgment that race is a political and social construct, not a biological or scientific concept. The purpose of racial classification is not to classify the branches of the human family. Its purpose is to determine the distribution of power. The idea of race is a political idea, similar to being a Republican or a Democrat. It has no basis in scientific analysis. The basis of "race" as a category for classifying people

is the desire to determine who will have access to social, economic, and political power, and the desire to assert that there is a fundamental difference between those who are classified as “white” and those in all other racial categories. Racial classification is fluid and continues to mutate. When I was growing up in the 1950s, there were three categories (Mongoloid, Negroid, Caucasoid); now there are many other categories, but only two categories really matter: “white” and “non-white.” The idea of race asserts that those classified as “white” are fundamentally different from, and even superior to, all other classifications. It is the theory of white supremacy that undergirds the idea of race.

The second step in our engagement is to consider that those of us classified as “white” must cease denying the power of race in our lives. In our dialogue as a nation and in individual thoughts and conversations, we spend most of our discussions on race denying that it still has power in our lives. Neighborhoods all over the United States, however, are determined by the presence of black and Hispanic people. If they move in, whites move out. The idea of race is deeply ingrained in those of us who are called “white.” We learned it from people whom we love and trust. Our parents taught it to us; our grandparents taught it to us; our teachers taught it to us; our churches taught it to us — not because they were bad people but because they, too, had learned it from people they loved and trusted. It has become so much a part of our identity that we cannot recognize it, and we cannot imagine life without it. That is what Paul meant in his words in Ephesians. Many white people are conscious of our participation in the power of race. Many are not conscious and are thus shocked and angered and offended when that participation is lifted up. This admission is often the most difficult step of all.

The third step focuses on those classified as “nonwhite.” They are asked to resist the internalized oppression of race, the voice that tells them and seeks to convince them that they really are inferior. They are also asked to “come out,” to engage white people as human beings. Few of us who claim the name “white” recognize that those we call “nonwhite” rarely ever allow us into their humanity or into their lives — it is simply too much trouble to let white folks in. As painful and as difficult as this engagement is, it is necessary if the system of race is to be dismantled so that the humanity of all people can be recognized and affirmed. In past generations, people of darker color have learned that the path to survival is built on making white folks around them feel comfortable. That axiom still holds today, but there must be genuine engagement if we who are called “white” are to change our behavior and our attitudes. All of us must recognize the peril of this step. This is the first generation in United States history where such “coming out” by people of darker color is not immediately and universally life threatening.

A fourth step is to make engagement with race and with people of other racial categories a top priority in our lives. We must seek out those of other racial classifications for their insights and their challenges, and we must educate ourselves as to the power of race in our institutional life. We who claim the name “white” must listen to the stories of people from other racial categories rather than seeking to convince them that they are wrong. For example, go sit in your county court for a morning or a day. The defendants you see there will be overwhelmingly black or Hispanic. Why? Is it because they tend more toward criminal behavior, as our society would have us to believe? Or, are there other factors such as race involved? Pick other

institutions — schools, health care, housing. Unfortunately, the list of possibilities is endless.

These words may sound harsh or unreal. They may cause despair as we seek to come to terms with the depth and tenacity of the power of race in our lives. Yet, they are the starting point as we seek to be redeemed by the power and the story of One who broke down the dividing walls of hostility and who made one humanity out of the many. In this journey we ask God to hold our hands because the terrain is unknown and rocky, and because our imaginations are so limited. God will hold our hands — that is the promise of the story that anchors our lives as children of the God we know in Jesus Christ. We may even find redemption and grace on this journey, as many people and churches have. It is a difficult journey, but God will hold our hands, and many gifts await us as we find a measure of freedom from the demonic power of race. Hear these encouraging words from the mission statement of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, which has challenged me and pointed me toward God in this journey of encountering the power of race and yet discovering the power of grace:

Oakhurst Presbyterian Church is a community of diversities. We come from different places, from different economic levels, from different countries of the world. We are a church in the city. Our life has known the movement of the city: we were once all of one kind. Then our church became multi-racial and felt small and insignificant. And our people were afraid — afraid of ourselves from different races, afraid of ourselves from different cultures. The faithfulness of those who stayed and those who came gave us courage. By God's power we have been given grace through what we thought was our weakness. In the midst of our fears, God has surprised us and blessed us. The diversity which we feared has empowered us to confront God's truth in the world. In Jesus Christ the dividing walls of hostility have been broken down. Though we are born into diverse earthly families, our life together at Oakhurst has led us to affirm that we are called to be one family through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁴

Notes

1. Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: the Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) x.
2. For more details on this process, see Nibs Stroupe and Inez Fleming, *While We Run This Race* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995); Nibs Stroupe, *A Twice Told Tale: Race in America* (Atlanta: The Open Door Community, 1996).
3. For an excellent treatment on this approach, see Walter Wink's masterful trilogy on the Powers: *Naming the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), *Unmasking the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
4. Mission Statement, Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, 1990.