

BACKGROUND FOR PREACHING AGAINST RACISM

*Adapted from Preaching for Conversion: Racism in the Small Church,
the unpublished doctoral dissertation of Fr. Steven Janowski*.
(Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2003. Used with permission.)*

This packet contains background information and points of reflection that we hope will be helpful in preparing homilies focused on the sin of racism. We have developed the material in a question/answer format, and have included two sample homilies, also written by Fr. Janowski, at the end.

What constitutes the most effective preaching for conversion from racism?

Racism is a particularly insidious form of sin—often difficult even to recognize, thus particularly challenging to uproot. However, the problem seems a bit less daunting when we recognize that racism, far from being linked to any form of instinctual inner drive, is a totally learned behavior.

It is important to invite congregations to reflect upon racial attitudes in a positive fashion. Preachers should not intend to name their faithful “racist,” for that label could cause defensiveness and a lack of openness to the message. Daryl LaRoche, quoted in *Everyday Acts Against Racism*, urges, “Remind yourself that people don’t change their minds about something because they are yelled at, and recognize that racists are rehabilitated the same way they were deformed: one at a time and slowly”. David Hollenbach writes in *Church* magazine about the relationship between preaching and politics,

The gospel is a challenge to conversion, sometimes even a word of judgment. However, it is the vision of a loving God who loves justice that should be at the heart of every homily. It is this love that calls, challenges, and invites whatever social response should be forthcoming. Avoid guilt trips.¹

What Scriptures are most appropriate to address the issue of racism?

Because the scriptures unfailingly invite the hearer into a deeper communion with God, injustice can always be confronted when the liberating Word of God is proclaimed. One need not stretch the scriptures to fit the particular injustice. They simply do. The preacher opens his/her heart to the

¹ Hollenbach, David, “Preaching and Politics” (*Church*, Summer 1987), 11-19.

Word of God and prays for inspiration and creativity in order to address a particular injustice evident in the life of the community, whether that community be local, regional, national, or international. The Word of God, even when assigned through the structure of a lectionary, is always a current and real message to the community of believers. The Word of God will always speak to particular issues of injustice at specific times in history. Inspiration and creativity are indispensable tools.

Preaching against racism can focus on the human person created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27), as well as the *persona Christi* of the New Testament (Matthew 25:31-36; Acts 9:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:27). Using the example of Jesus as he attempted to heal the divisions and separations between peoples in his own day (Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 5:27-32; Luke 10:25-37), and his own unconditional love for everyone (Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 7: 36-50; Luke 6:27-36; John 4:1-42), preaching against racism will call congregations to no less.

What is prophetic preaching, and am I called to it?

Prophetic preaching often centers on issues of social justice. Preaching is always rooted in the Word of God, the scriptures. Prophetic preaching hones in on injustice in the world and in the community of believers, exhorting people to repentance and conversion. As such, prophetic preaching does not make the hearer or the preacher “feel good.” In his article “The Church: A Non-Prophet Organization?,” Keith Drury makes the same point:

A prophetic ministry won't make people feel good. It makes them feel bad. Guilty. Rebuked. Corrected. Prophetic preaching is an awful assignment. Perhaps that is why most of the Old Testament prophets were such unwilling messengers. (Maybe a person who enjoys this kind of preaching shouldn't do it.) I know that when God compels me to do it, I hate it. When God lays one of those heavy sermons on my heart I approach the pulpit thinking, “This is going to hurt me a lot more than it will hurt you.” It does. I die all night before, all during the sermon, and myself all the way home. When I preach a normal sermon they say, “Great!” To a prophetic one they say, “Ouch.” Or, more likely, they say nothing at all, slipping out a side exit, nodding quietly my way if I happen to see

them. People don't like to be scolded. Even when you are speaking for God.²

A distinction must be made, in preaching, between a hard message and a harsh message. Drury is correct in pointing out that people don't like to be scolded. But they must be challenged or they may fall into complacency. If the preacher never preaches prophetically, beware the pitfall of apathy or negligence on issues of social injustice. Again Drury reminds the preacher of the responsibility to speak on behalf of God:

So be ready. Listen. God may give you some hard words for your people. Not harsh words mind you, but hard words. You may have to pass this message on to your people. They might not listen. They may not "feel good" after hearing it. You may not feel good either. But, like all true prophets before, you will have one major consolation—you will know you have spoken for God.³

Prophetic preaching calls us to view life from a different perspective. Prophetic preaching raises up voices that are often silent. Prophetic preaching speaks the truth in love to the powers or systems of our time from the perspective of people who have been excluded. And, many times, that word might be hard or challenging.

There is a hesitancy among preachers to preach a hard word to their congregation for fear of offending them. From firsthand experience, when visiting with other clergy I am often asked about preaching on racism. Often they ask if I actually preach about racism. When I tell them that I have, I do, and will continue to do so, they shake their heads and tell me that they would never be able to preach about racism in their parishes. Reasons given vary from, "They'd run me out of town," to "They'd quit coming," to "They'd stop giving to the collection." While these very clergy acknowledge the presence of racism in their congregations and in the local community, they prefer to refrain, out of fear, from addressing it. And so racism goes unaddressed, and the sin continues. But these clergy are correct in one area. They could well be "run out of town," because when preaching prophetically, they know they can expect rejection or at least a lack of affirmation. Richard C. Devor summarizes what can be expected if one responds to the call of God to be a prophetic preacher: "Nobody gets hanged

² Drury, Keith, *The Church: A Non-Prophet Organization?* (Thinking Drafts, 1995, Wesley Press)

³ Ibid

for talking about pastoral care. But prophetic sermons get preachers into hot water. This kind of preaching got Moses into trouble in Egypt and Amos in a jam in Bethel, made Jeremiah a laughingstock, and got Jesus crucified"⁴. And sadly, Devor also shares the results of his survey of candidates of the doctor of ministry degree that reveal, "At least for mainliners, prophetic preaching is a homiletical Edsel"⁵.

To whom does the preacher preach prophetically?

If the preacher is called to be prophetic in proclaiming the Word of God, why is there such hesitancy to preach prophetically? One reason may be fear as noted above. Another reason may be that the preacher feels that his or her own weaknesses and sins give him no right to preach to others. Therein lies the key to prophetic preaching. It is not preaching *to* or even *for* the assembly alone. It is preaching to and for the assembly *and* the preacher himself or herself. Devor quotes Gardner Taylor's *Beecher Lectures* on "the presumptuousness of preaching" which offers insight into prophetic preaching:

The person who preaches is as guilty of the wrongs against God against which he inveighs as are those to whom he addresses his words. He cannot help feeling a deep embarrassment at the recognition that those who hear are likely to ask, justifiably, "Who is he to talk? Listen to her! Can you imagine the nerve?" God help the preacher who is so self-hypnotized that the full brunt of this shame does not fall like an awful weight upon him, loading what he says with a becoming humility and hush of the soul, that he, of all people, should be sent to say such things about what is wrong with people before God. For what is wrong with the hearers is the same thing that is wrong with the preacher.⁶

If we really love our people, do we want to upset them with prophetic preaching?

Devor answers:

A misperception about the nature of love also makes us hesitate to be prophetic. Good teachers of homiletics remind us that we don't

⁴ Devor, Richard C., "Whatever Happened to Prophetic Preaching." (*The Christian Ministry*, July-August, 1990), 9-11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

speak to the folk; we speak with the folk. But sometimes we interpret that as never confronting them. After all, we say, how can we love our people and still be prophets? Look at Amos. He was never invited back to become Bethel's beloved pastor. But love requires us to struggle with the beloved.⁷

Burghardt adds to this idea by commenting,

Our people should sense from our words and our faces, from our gestures and our whole posture, that we love this sinning, struggling community with a crucifying passion; that we agonize over our own sinfulness, our failure to be holier than we are; that we weep with the refugees whose tears water the ways of Rwanda; that we too are awfully vulnerable, prey to the loneliness of the human heart....⁸

How can we preach this prophetic message?

We preach the hard word precisely because we love the people we serve. We must indeed practice what we preach. We must preach with courage and conviction. As painful or as difficult as the message may be that God places on our hearts and lips, the preacher cannot fall into the trap of courting martyrdom. Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, writes,

One of the temptations of prophets is to court martyrdom. They speak a distasteful message (which often must be done)...and they do it in a distasteful way (which is never the objective). A prophet must be a communicator, and a communicator always asks, "How can I get this message across to these people?" Sometimes when we get into the "prophetic mode" we suddenly put aside everything we know about good communication. We seem to say, "It's a hard message, and they're not going to like me..." and we make sure they don't. And if they don't like our message, we always have that excuse. We seldom ask if it is our own fault for communicating it badly."⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Burghardt, Walter J. S.J., "Preacher as Prophet." (*Church*, Spring 2000), 15-17

⁹ Untener, Kenneth, "What a Prophet Does and Does Not Do." (*Origins* 21 1991), 36-40

We must speak the prophetic word in love. The people of God expect no less. If there is to be conversion in our world, preaching is indispensable. At some level, the faithful may be crying out for direction in overcoming sin and injustice. Speaking boldly in love is prophetic preaching.

Prophetic preaching not only speaks the truth about the current situation, but it also begins to envision a new reality, an alternative to the way we live now.¹⁰ It is a good idea to use stories or images of progress that has been made in order to help our communities to imagine what a Church and a world without racism might look like.

The journey to racial healing is long, difficult, challenging, frustrating, unpredictable, and yet filled with hope. Racial healing is a real possibility. Mutual respect between people of different races is not a fantasy. It will take a long time to undo the racism, intolerance, and prejudice that has been taught and ingrained and perpetuated in society as individuals and as a community. As the Bishops of Illinois have stated,

It would be naïve to think that racism will disappear overnight, it is too deeply imbedded in the American experience. But change will come if we remain constant and never lose sight of the goal. The goal is visible when we see with the eyes of Christ, for our hope of ultimate victory is the Lord who desires that we be one with him.

1 Walter Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), 62.

* Fr. Steven Janoski D.Min. is a priest of the diocese of Springfield, Illinois, and currently serves as pastor of St. Jerome Church in Troy, Illinois. He completed his Doctor of Ministry at Aquinas Institute of Theology in Saint Louis in May of 2003. Fr. Janoski has extensive experience speaking and preaching about racism.

Sample Homily #1

Third Sunday of Lent, Cycle A
Exodus 17:3-7; Romans 5:1-2,5-8; John 4:5-42

The Book of Deuteronomy tells us why Jews were forbidden to eat the meat of swine, or pigs: "And the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you." (Dt. 14:8) Pork, swine, is forbidden food for the Jew.

At the time of Jesus there was a common phrase among Jewish Rabbis that went something like this, "The water of Samaria is more unclean than the blood of swine." This phrase indicates the kind of intense hatred Jews had for Samaritans. Why? Where did this animosity originate?

In the year 930 before Christ, Israel was divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the North and Judah in the South.

In the year 722 before Christ, the Assyrians conquered the Northern kingdom of Israel and then sent citizens to intermarry with the survivors.

Samaritans were descendants of these mixed marriages. Jews considered them unclean and literally hated them.

People would travel out of their way to avoid going through Samaria. But not Jesus. Not only does he pass through, but he stays in Samaria for a couple of days. While there he has the encounter with the unnamed woman at the well.

Normally women came to the well to get water in the early morning or at dusk, when the weather was cooler. Normally they traveled together, in a small group. Because the woman in today's Gospel was alone, and at the well in the middle of the day, she was probably ostracized by the other women and her community for some reason. But she is alone. She is a female member of an enemy people.

Jesus talks with her. He does not pass judgment. He does not allow the prevailing prejudice of the day to cloud his vision of her. He listens to her story. She listens to Jesus. Jesus was able to see beyond the limits that his ancestors and his contemporaries placed on Samaritans and was able to touch her life and she his.

Now let's move to 2003. It is nearly impossible to pick up a newspaper or periodical without reading articles about prejudice or racism. Acts of hatred toward people who are different, a different color, a different ethnicity, are growing.

Conventional wisdom tells us that every child born into this world is born completely free of prejudice. Prejudice and intolerance and hatred are learned. In 1978 the Bishops of the United States issued a document on racism titled "Brothers and Sisters To Us," and in it they remind us that racism is a sin which

can be personal and social in nature and that each one of us is responsible to some degree. We are surrounded by a culture that pits people against one another because of color. It is that simple. We react out of fear and ignorance.

This week I would ask you to observe yourselves and others, watch the news and read the papers, and notice how rampant this sin of racism really is, especially in our own country. The Bishops define racism as “the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of race.”

Sample Homily #2

**Fifth Sunday of Lent, Cycle A
Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45**

“Untie him, and let him go free!” Lazarus couldn’t do it alone. He was bound hand and foot. He needed the help of others in order to be freed from the bondage of death. Jesus raised him, called him forth, but others loosed the burial cloths that wrapped him.

For the past four Sundays I have been addressing the injustice of racism from the pulpit. Some among us may claim to be free from this sin, but I would question that claim. As the Bishops of the United States, as psychologists, as sociologists all over the world would claim, we are all accomplices to some degree. Now maybe we don’t believe that we have a racist bone in our body, and that’s good. But racism is still prevalent in our society and community, and if we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem.

If we don’t help unbind others from the death throes of this sin against humanity, we are guilty as charged of harboring racism in society. If we don’t speak out, if we look away, if we just ignore it...will it go away? I doubt it. In our society silence indicates consent, not condemnation.

So what can you and I do to minimize this sin that says some “human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of race?” How can we untie others, so that they can be free? How can we untie ourselves so that we can be free of this sin? How can others help to untie us?

Hopefully the preaching these past weeks has helped in the process of untying. Hopefully eyes and hearts have been opened to understand the injustice of any human group claiming superiority over another. So preaching is one way to help untie ourselves.

How else? Speak up! When someone uses the n-word, say simply, “That’s inappropriate and uncalled for.” When someone refers to a black person as colored or darkie, or whatever term which may have been acceptable in bygone years, educate them. Let them know that even though they mean no harm, those terms are hurtful.

When neighbors are concerned about blacks moving into the neighborhood, what can you do to calm their fears? Certainly YOU can be open to the possibility of black neighbors and make that known.

All of us can educate ourselves. We can study black history. We can read books by and about black people. We can see movies like *Rosewood* and *Amistad*. We can try to appreciate the pain that black people feel. We can attend lectures

by black speakers. We can celebrate Black History Month. We can read and study one of the thousands of books written about the injustice of racism that dwells within each of us, within our country, within our Church. For I am convinced that the more we study the culture and history of people who are different from ourselves; the more we study the roots of racism, the more enriched and open-minded and open-hearted we become.

You and I can make a difference. You and I must make a difference!