

Giving It Up: Superiority Sunday, 3/19/17

1 Michael Pearson and Tom Cohen on cnn.com give this historical account of the Apartheid era in South Africa:

Though white Europeans had long ruled in South Africa, the formal system of apartheid came into existence after World War II. The country's National Party -- led by the descendants of European settlers known as Afrikaners -- ushered it into existence after sweeping into power on a campaign calling for stricter racial controls amid the heavy inflow of blacks into South African cities. Between 1949 and 1953, South African lawmakers passed a series of increasingly oppressive laws, beginning with prohibitions on blacks and whites marrying in 1949 and culminating with laws dividing the population by race, reserving the best public facilities for whites and creating a separate, and inferior, education system for blacks. One of the laws, the Group Areas Act, forced blacks, Indians, Asians and people of mixed heritage to live in separate areas, sometimes dividing families.

Blacks had to live in often barren tribal homelands or townships near cities, often in polluted industrial areas. Whites got the best agricultural areas, the choicest city addresses...A system of passes and identity papers controlled where blacks could travel and work. Apartheid rules governed virtually every aspect of daily life. Blacks had to use different beaches and public restrooms. Signs distinguished facilities reserved for whites -- often referred to as Europeans. Blacks earned meager wages compared with whites, and their children went to poorly funded schools. In one of the telling anecdotes of the apartheid era, black nannies who dressed and fed and sang to the children of their white employers were unable to join them in the Dutch Reformed Church, the main Afrikaner congregation.

Apartheid reminds us of our own shameful heritage of broken race relations in this country, doesn't it? Today we continue our Lenten worship series entitled "Giving It Up," examining the attitudes of our hearts that we need to give up and leave behind in the spiritual wilderness of Lent before we're ready to rise from the grave with Jesus on Easter morning. This morning we focus on giving up our attitudes of superiority. Although those feelings aren't always centered on racial divides, and they don't always collectively rise up to the horrific prominence of Apartheid, the underlying attitudes share an uncomfortable kinship which is dramatically at odds with the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus. Giving up our

attitudes of superiority means learning to look past our histories of pain and prejudice to break through relational boundaries in new ways; to share the Good News of Jesus, whether those boundaries concern education, race, age, or sexuality. The Good News is good news for everyone, and unless we give up our misconceptions of superiority over others, we'll never fully receive the Good News ourselves.

2 Ever since the fall in the Garden of Eden, God's people have had a penchant for dividing themselves and asserting their status and privilege. The Gospel story we started this morning is the longest Gospel account among a handful describing the interaction of Jews and Samaritans, two social groups who, despite sharing a common heritage and beliefs, had a history of violent confrontation. Let's continue the story now, picking up in the Gospel of John, chapter 4, verse 16. **{Read John 4:16-30, 39-42, NLT}**

3 Like most political disputes, the tensions between the Jews and Samaritans had historical and geographical roots. Much of the true origin story is lost to the sands of time, with both sides having written down equally incredible polemic in defense of their respective positions. What we do know is that at the beginning of the first century AD, the area we now know as Israel/Palestine was divided into Roman territories or provinces, with the Samaritans essentially living in an Apartheid state of their own. You'll notice the Jordan River on the right side of the map, intersecting most of these territories. That's the same Jordan River where Jesus was baptized. To the north was Galilee, the place Jesus grew up and the location of the Sea of Galilee. Much of the ministry of Jesus took place in this area.

To the far south was Jerusalem, in the Province of Judea, the Holy City, the site of the Temple that all Jews, including Jesus, were required to visit on the Day of Atonement. The interesting thing about this map is what lies between Galilee and Judea. To the East was the Decapolis, a confederation of Greek Gentile cities that lived and worshipped in ways that were abhorrent to Jews. You might remember the Gospel story about the herd of demon-possessed pigs. Decapolis, on the south-east side of the Sea of Galilee, is where that happened. Jews wouldn't want to be roaming the countryside where pigs were herded because they considered pigs ritually unclean.

On the other hand, in the middle of the map was Samaria, the home of a people who shared common ancestry with the Jews, followed much of the same Law of Moses, but who

had built a Temple of their very own in Samaria. According to the Dictionary of New Testament Background, Jews living in Galilee, like Jesus, who made pilgrimage to Jerusalem “often crossed over to the east bank of the Jordan River in order to detour around Samaria. Those who chose to pass through Samaritan territory did so at great risk.”

What was Jesus doing in Samaria? We don't know. John simply says, “he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar.” We don't know why he was there, but we do know that travelling through Samaria wouldn't have been the first choice of any devout Jew. We do know that travelling through Samaria would have been the most direct route home to Galilee. And we do know that it was in Sychar that Jesus met a woman at a well.

4 This meeting at the well was socially wrong from the very start. Never mind that Jesus was a Jew in Samaria. Jesus was meeting with a woman at a well, alone. The Gospels says that when the disciples returned and found Jesus alone with a woman, they were astonished! It would hardly have escaped any of them, or any of the readers of John's Gospel, that Jacob, who the woman identifies as her ancestor who gave her people this well, met his wife Rachel through an encounter at a well. In fact, Jacob's father Isaac's courtship of his wife Rebecca also featured an encounter at a well. The woman was alone, the disciples were away: at the least, Jesus was risking scandal at the very beginning of this story.

Then there was the hour. Why was this woman drawing water at noon, and why was she alone? The women would normally draw their water in groups in the cooler hours of the day. The fact that this woman was at the well alone at noon suggests that she lived outside of the usual social circles of her village. That is, she was an outcast, living among a people who were themselves shunned by Jewish society. As we discover later in the story, she's probably been cast out by the other women because of her sexual promiscuity. For Jesus to ask her for a drink of water could easily have been constituted as flirting with the village harlot. And yet, inexplicably, Jesus engaged the woman in conversation, seemingly unconcerned for his reputation or the huge status divide existing between them.

Why was Jesus in Samaria? I think he was there to meet this woman, to offer her living water. What are the places you won't travel to because they seem too dangerous to you, or because perhaps in some unspoken way you believe that you're in some way better

than the people you'd find there? Jesus went places he was expected to avoid, setting aside pride and status to bring his healing truth. When we follow Jesus, we find ourselves doing the same thing.

5 We have a guest with us this morning who (will be sharing/shared) his story during our Cross-Training Multigenerational Sunday School time between services in the Extended fellowship Hall. Dr. Lowell Gess, an ordained United Methodist pastor and an ophthalmologist, was a medical missionary in Africa in the 1950's and was instrumental in establishing the Lowell and Ruth Gess UMC Eye Hospital in Sierra Leone. Now 94, Dr. Gess travelled back to Africa last year to help with the Ebola outbreak there. Brothers and sisters, do you think this might be someone who's learned to give up his attitudes of superiority? What could possibly explain this kind of risky, self-giving service other than that he is following closely in the footsteps of Jesus. Why was Dr. Gess in Sierra Leone? He was there for the same reason that Jesus was in Samaria. There were hurting people there who needed the healing that only the living water of Jesus could provide. And sometimes, perhaps most times, carrying that living water means being willing to go places and be with people that you might not ordinarily choose to be around.

I wonder who the hurting people are that God is inviting you to share living water with. Is it someone in your family? Is it someone in your apartment building or neighborhood? Is it someone at work or at school? Don't let your mistaken notions of superiority prevent you from carrying the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Great Commission says, "Go," not "sit and wait."

6 Sometimes when we stick our necks out to bring love and light to someone new we encounter a stone wall or an angry rebuff. There's an oft repeated saying that goes, "No good deed goes unpunished." Sometimes that's true. But sometimes God's spirit finds fertile ground. At first, the woman at the well responded to Jesus like poor confused Nicodemus from last week. Remember when he repeatedly said to Jesus, "What do you mean?" But slowly Jesus unfolded for the woman the truth that cut through all of the social expectations of superiority. There were at least three truths that she had to accept: the truth of who she was (a hurting sinner in need of salvation); the truth of who Jesus was (not just a Jew, not just a prophet, not just the messiah she was expecting, but the Messiah in a surprisingly new

way); and the truth of her future (that after meeting Jesus, nothing would be the same- for her, for her village, or for her people). The living water of Jesus has a way of washing away all the pretenses and bigotry, leaving only the truth exposed to the light of day. And by the end of this story, instead of questioning the presence of Jesus, the Samaritans are begging him to stay with them longer.

7 Do you remember that map with the Jordan River running through the Roman territories? Just like that river, Jesus, the Living Water, has a powerful way of cutting across human social boundaries to build unity and peace. In the Kingdom of God, there is no room for Apartheid, Racial segregation, or bigotry of any kind. Each person bears the indelible image of God, marred by sin but impossible to completely erase. When God looks at us, God sees his handprint, the unique way we've been made, and the unmistakable mark of his son, Jesus.

Who are the people that you think you're better than? Allow yourself to be honest with this one, because this is between you and Jesus alone. God isn't grading our performance, ranking us according to any human measure. For some of us that might be a disappointment, but I hope for most of us that's a relief. Because when we face the stark truth of who we are and what we've done, it can be shameful and terrifying. All of us are equally in need of God's forgiveness and favor.

So hear the Good News. The truth of who Jesus is trumps all our inadequacies and failures. The truth of who Jesus is offers us hope. And the truth of our future is a bright one. We are called to be bearers of the Living Water to a thirsty world, including other people who are just as broken, lost, and thirsty as we are. To do that, we have to give up our attitudes of superiority.

Please pray with me. *Holy God, you have shown us in Jesus what it means to give up superiority. Forgive us for feeling that we're better than anyone else. Allow us to see our neighbors through your eyes, and send us to them bearing your Living Water. Amen.*



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



**609 8th Street NW
Buffalo, MN 55313
763-682-3538**

Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com