



ST. JAMES' CHURCH

865 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021 · 212-288-4100 · www.stjames.org

Sermon for Sunday, September 3, 2006

The Rev. Carlye J. Hughes

Deuteronomy 4:1-9; Ephesians 6:10-20; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

I am quite happy to see the sun peeking this morning because it has been an unseasonably cold, wet, and dark end to the summer. As we experience the rain, wind, and gray skies that are the remnants of hurricane Ernesto, I have been reminded of this time last year, of last Labor Day weekend—and the painful watching we did as a nation and as individuals when Hurricane Katrina cut a swath of destruction through the Gulf Coast followed by the failure of the levees in New Orleans.

I remember turning on the television every morning and thinking, "This morning we're going to hear good news out of the Gulf Coast; things would be a little bit better." But instead I and we—and not just we here but "we" out there—grew more and more stunned and shocked as each day brought new horrors: thousands of people were stranded in the Superdome without food, water, and medical assistance; families separated and scattered all over the Gulf Coast during the evacuation; rescue teams working tirelessly and in the same confusion that Katrina left behind.

I am glad that we have weathered Ernesto with fewer casualties than expected; yet, my heart remains heavy when I think of the one we weathered this time last year. And it is not just the loss of life and livelihood that weigh so deeply on my spirit. Alongside those very deep losses is the growing awareness that we seemed to have missed an opportunity. As a nation, as individuals—and especially as Christians—we let an opportunity to engage in meaningful conversation about race in the 21st century slip right through our fingers.

We have a difficult time with this complicated subject of race today. With all our hearts we want to ignore it and yet it simmers on. We want to believe that past struggles have eliminated all struggles. We avoid feelings of guilt about the advantages and resources that some of us have. We say "Hey, this is America in 2006—anybody who works hard can succeed." Still, despite our best efforts to ignore, deny, or suppress our thoughts and feelings about race, from time to time our nation's problems with race move beyond simmering and boil over as they did in the midst of that disaster last summer. We could not ignore the video footage was beamed into our living rooms nor the photos that arrived at our doors with the morning papers.

At first, our attention was focused on the immediate crisis—and it should have been. Many of us gave generously of our time and financial resources to help with recovery efforts—and still do. Yet, on a national and individual level, we have remained remarkably silent about the obvious and tricky challenge of race in this disaster. We wondered privately what was wrong with "those" people that they did not get out before the hurricane hit. Behind closed doors we asked why "they"

have not adjusted to the new communities and new jobs "they" were offered. With like-minded or like-looking people we have pondered whether this is an issue of class only, not race.

When it comes to issues of race we are as lost and confused as the Pharisees, the disciples, and the crowd who listened to Jesus talk about defilement and purity in today's Gospel lesson. On the one hand, we have the Jesus' followers munching on loaves of bread without observing religious purity laws, laws that, of course, were put in place to protect and guide God's people. On the other hand, we have the Pharisees, mindful of purity laws not only for themselves but for all members of the community.

The disciples quite obviously defied these laws by eating with unclean hands. The Pharisees responded by pointing out that the disciples are now as unclean as their hands and food they touched.

There is nothing in this interaction that leads us to believe that the disciples, the Pharisees, and the crowd that gathered around Jesus fully understood what happened next. In a sentence, Jesus dismissed all the laws that came before: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

If we broaden our Biblical horizon to passages just before and just after this one, we see Jesus acting in defiance of purity laws over and over again. When healing physical and social outcasts—like the hemorrhaging woman—she was unclean, that woman who touched his hem; or the young girl who had died—nothing was more unclean than touching a dead body; or the man possessed by demons—Jesus put himself in direct contact with the impure in order to restore them to health, to a full life, and wholeness in the community. Now, Jesus rebukes and redefines the thinking that determined purity and impurity.

Repeatedly in Mark's Gospel, we see Jesus reach out and touch those considered untouchable. With miracles and tenacity he challenged current thinking and taught God's views on purity at every opportunity: no denial, no suppression, no ignoring a tough problem away—instead the hard work of directly engaging the thoughts, traditions, and beliefs of people trapped by laws and circumstances from which God had released them.

It is Jesus, then, who shows us the way into a conversation that began not with the Civil Rights movement, but new conversation that began with the passage of Civil Rights laws, that continued with integration of schools and neighborhoods, and—if we're honest about it—that went underground with our

ambivalence about affirmative-action laws. Jesus shows us how to find language that does not rest on old arguments but brings healing to old wounds. Jesus gives us hearts that makes it impossible to ignore, deny, or forget the ongoing problem of race in our country.

God has never given up on any part of creation, even the parts that are daunting to us. Every time we continue a conversation about the economic and social impact of race on institutions and individuals in this country, we invite Jesus into the conversation. When we press for open dialogue by our elected officials – and I do not mean political- speak – but real dialogue on the deadly cocktail that is poor education, segregation, and discrimination, we invite God’s intervention. And when we are speechless about gross inequities and do not know what to think or say or do the Holy Spirit interprets our speechlessness for us.

Our painful memories, awkwardness, and impatience with ourselves and others have no power to silence us through Christ.

Part of our calling as a nation may be to serve the world by tenaciously continuing a conversation that has faltered and shifted and will continue to change over time. Across the globe and in recent history, we have seen problems with race boil up and overflow into

apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and riots. It might be that the greatest gift that we share with our international neighbors is not military might, economic prowess, and scientific discovery. Instead, it might be—with God’s help—our continued conversations about race may show the world how to respect the dignity of all human beings.

But we cannot live fully into that call until we, as a nation, as individuals, and as Christians begin in our own backyards. The good news that glimmers through our confusion like the sun breaking through our gray skies this weekend is that there is hope and help for us. Jesus stands beside us and urges us, encourages us, and strengthens us for the hard work of directly engaging the thoughts, traditions, and beliefs about race that are held by us, our families, our friends, our schools, our workplaces, our elected officials and our churches.

As a nation and as individuals, sometimes we long for the next Martin, Nelson, Rosa or Desmond, that Next One to come along and lead us. I am convinced that it is time for us to let go of that longing. It is time for us to look to the one who has, still does, and always will lead us out of denial and confusion—Jesus, who leads us into the fullest of freedom that God intends for all members of creation.

Amen.