

Sunday, January 15, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown & Michele Forinash

*EVOLVE*2017
re:PENT

A Personal Story of Learning to See Race Differently

Matthew 3:1-10

INTRODUCTION:

Before Jesus turned water into wine, before he healed lepers, ate with tax gatherers, opened the eyes of the blind, forgave adulterers and preached that the kingdom of God was at hand, there was a man named John the Baptist. John caught the fascination of the Jewish people because his theatrical presentation reminded them of the prophets that came before. Prophets are like spiritual columnists who reflect the social condition of a culture and point to changes needed to reorient a way forward. When prophets appear it always signals that God is on the move and change is beginning. A prophet's voice is both thrilling and terrifying at the same time. Listen to John the Baptist's wake up call as he announces the coming Messiah and notice what action the people take to prepare for this hopeful time. From the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 3...

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Honestly now, what was your reaction when you first saw my sermon title - *REPENT*? I'm going to guess a lot of you thought of a dozen legit plans to escape from the sanctuary. (*During the 1st hymn I'll slip out the side*) Some of you maybe took the defensive stance, "*go ahead preacher man tell me how I'm not good enough*". And there might be a few who were thinking, "*It's about time these people were told the truth about who they really are*".

My first reaction whenever I hear the word "Repent" is to remember this street preacher who used to walk up and down main street in Manchester N.H. wearing a sandwich board sign with HUGE BLOCK LETTERS that read, REPENT OR PERISH. On the back it read HELL IS REAL. It's one of those FLASH words that evokes strong reactions. You can't help but infer that you are being categorically judged in a moralistic, religious context that paints an image of God as this vengeful, angry, punishing God that demands you stop doing all the things that are the most fun in life or you'll be summarily CRUSHED. But that's because we've really only seen repentance used in that kind of extremist context, and the association sticks. But, if you look at the root of the Greek word that's in the original text of the Gospel, you will find a meaning that's not nearly as harsh as what we've come to attach to it. "*Metanoia*" simply means, "to change your mind" to "see differently". In Hebrew Scriptures, the word *teshuvah* is translated as repentance but the definition of *teshuvah* is to "turn another way" or "change directions." In both cases the idea is to change in such a way that you act differently because you see differently, you clearly understand that the direction you're going isn't correct. There's no shame or guilt. It's not a strongman-arm-twist to force compliance. Threats don't change people anyway, but when you have a change of mind, you quite naturally have a change of action.

The problem is that we get stuck in these neurological loops that get formed early in life from our experiences and they stick like Velcro. That's why I always see the street preacher when I hear the word repent. Now that I know what the word means, I think differently and I now see repentance as a gift. It's a chance for me to realize I'm going in the wrong direction, recalibrate the internal GPS and head the right way again. When Google Maps tells me to repent I don't feel chastised or yell, "Don't judge me!" But overwriting the deep grooves in our well-worn neurology takes some intention, and a whole lot of courageous openness to the possibility that maybe your default presumption might be wrong, or at least not entirely correct.

Today we are going to hear such a story. Michele Forinash is a well-published rock star in the world of *Expressive Therapy*. She is the Division Director and Director of the Doctoral Program in Expressive Therapies at Leslie University. And, closer to

home, I am quite proud to say, she has made history here in our church by becoming the first lesbian to serve openly on our Board of Deacons. Months ago, Michele told me about a course she was taking on White Privilege and found, to her great surprise, that she had come to see RACE differently and was changing behavior as a result of her new way of seeing. I asked her if she would tell share this very personal story in church on Martin Luther King Sunday and to my delight she agreed. Michele, tell us your story?

Good morning. Please join me in prayer.

Dear Lord, Join our hearts today as we open ourselves to hear things that are difficult to hear, to notice things we would rather not have to notice, and to talk about things that are challenging. Please give us the courage to speak up and speak out when we confront injustice of any kind. Amen

You might be curious as to why a white woman is offering the sermon today on Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday. Hopefully by the end you will understand.

Let me tell you my story of more deeply understanding racism. I was born overseas in 1956 as my father was in the army but I was raised in the deep south at Columbus/Ft. Benning, GA. I entered kindergarten in the fall of 1960. My school was segregated from kindergarten until I was in 5th grade. My father was racist; my mother was complicit in his racism. My father was quite outspoken in his racism. My great uncle in West Virginia, where my parents were originally from, was a Grand Dragon in the West Virginia Ku Klux Klan. My parents and my school explicitly taught me that they believed white people were better, that black people were different and lesser. My father scolded me when I stepped aside to let a black person pass me on the sidewalk. He told me I should never do that again, but rather force them off the sidewalk. I remember that none of this felt fair or right or made sense to me. I couldn't understand how the color of someone's skin could matter. But I didn't dare disagree with my father. He regularly used his loafers on my backside as a way of keeping me in line. This was no exception.

In 5th grade I met my first black girl as integration had finally come to the south. It was 1966. Of course the first thing we wanted to do was to touch each other's hair. Which we did. Evelyn was a lovely person and as I got to know her my experience of black people didn't line up with what my parents were telling me. By high school my school had become about 50% black and I made more black friends. This was because they stopped bussing black kids out of the neighborhood to go to school and instead let them attend the school closest to their home.

I went to college in my hometown as that is all my parents were willing to pay for. They didn't see much use for a woman to go to college. While in college I dated a black man behind my parents' backs. My father must have become suspicious about it because he said to me one day that he would rather see me dead than with a black man. My father had his military issued gun in his bedroom and I totally believed at that time, that he would kill me if he found out.

Over these intervening years I have done what I thought I could to fight racism. I've never told racist jokes, I've never called people names, I never forced black people off the sidewalk. I thought I was being a good person. Over the past several years I have gotten more involved with understanding racism. When the Black Lives Matter movement started I felt like I need to do more, so I put a Black Lives Matter sticker on my office door and one on my car. I chair a department at my university which has several people of color in it. They have been coming to me, probably because of my stickers identify me as an ally, to talk about what it is like to be a person of color in a largely white institution. They have talked to me about the exhaustion that comes from being immersed in white culture, a culture that is not theirs.

While I had clearly grown up with an understanding of personal racism, I began to study racism and began to understand larger issues of systemic racism. Systemic Racism is the racism that the Federal Housing Authority used to keep black people out of certain neighborhoods. Systemic Racism is the kind of racism that allowed the GI Bill to apply mainly to white veterans and not to black veterans. Systemic Racism is the kind of racism that built bridges on the Long Island Expressway in New York very low, so low that no public busses could drive on them, meaning only people with cars could get to the beaches. Systemic Racism is the kind of racism that allows white men to be pulled over and not searched for drugs while black men are pulled over and searched for drugs and white men are just as likely to have drugs on them. Systemic Racism is the kind of racism that replaced slavery with Jim Crow laws, then replaced Jim Crow laws with mass incarceration. This mass incarceration of mostly black and brown men labels them as felons. This strips them of their right to access food stamps, to access public housing and in some states denies them right to vote forever, even once they are out of prison and they have served their "debt" to society. Yes, they have made a mistake and they have paid for it, but once you are a felon, you must admit that on any job application making it nearly impossible to get a job. You do not have access to food stamps, which means you can't eat or feed your family. You don't have access to public housing and if as a felon, you visit your family who is in public housing, your family can be evicted. So we basically strip away from these mostly black and brown men, any chance of having a voice. They lose the opportunity to vote, so they are essentially silenced for the rest of their lives.¹ System racism is intentionally used to erect building blocks of oppression. If you want more information about this progression of slavery, to Jim Crow laws, to current trends in incarceration read Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

In the past couple of years as the Black Lives Matter movement has come to the forefront I have committed myself to actively fight racism and to become a "white ally." A white ally is someone who chooses to use the privilege they have as a white person to call out racism and to work toward dismantling systemic racism. I'm going to share some of the things I have learned in the hopes that you will join me.

¹ Convicted felons can vote in some states and others allow voting at 2 years, some only with the Governor's pardon, which is infrequent.

1. Open your mind to believing that racism exists. You may wish it didn't but it does. Racism is everywhere on a daily basis. Allow yourself to see it so that you can do something about it. You may think racism is over because we have a bi-racial president, but I can assure you it isn't over. If you grew up in this country, you are instilled with internalized racism. It lives deep and unrecognized unless we actively try to unearth it and expel it.
2. Don't pretend to be "colorblind." Don't pretend that you don't notice race. That only further isolates people of color. Notice and talk about race. Talking about race doesn't make you racist. Let me say that again... Talking about race doesn't make you racist. Talking about race is the key that opens the door to understanding other peoples experiences. I put a Black Lives Matter sticker on my car and office door which enabled my faculty and staff of color come to talk to me about their experiences.
3. Understand white privilege. This is the privilege that we have just by being white and in the dominant culture. White privilege is unearned it is simply a fact white people are born with. White privilege can be seen in many ways. Here are some simple examples. White people have done atrocious things, white people have murdered, lynched people, been terrorists, yet as a white person, I don't walk around thinking that people are going to accuse me of being a criminal because I am white. People of color don't have that experience. Many people of color frequently feel they are suspected of criminal behavior just because they are not white. That **IS** their experience! I've had several faculty and students of color tell me how they are followed in stores as they try to shop. I have never been followed in a store. You can see white privilege by look at your kids high school or college curriculum. US history is generally taught from a white perspective and is a required course. Courses on civil rights and hip hop culture, are usually electives. Read Debby Irving's book *Waking up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*. By tracing her own upbringing, she painfully unpacks what it means to finally understand that you are white and understand the unearned privileges come with that. Please also watch upcoming movies, which I have not yet seen, that are based on true stories of people of color in the US "Hidden Figures" and "I'm not your Negro." Notice that we did not hear these stories in school but we are learning about the lives of black people from the entertainment industry.
4. Notice how is race influencing what is happening in every situation you are in. With whiteness comes a certain power. Notice this in any meetings you attend or run, In the grocery store, in church, at your work. How are the voices of people of color supported or oppressed in these situations? I chair a twice monthly faculty meeting of 18 people, 5 of them are people of color. I pay constant attention to who is speaking more, who tends to interrupt others. Which voices are privileged and which are silenced. What do my faculty meetings look like when I view it through the lens of race? People of color, for the most part, are very aware of race. White people don't have to be, but we should be. I can't help support my faculty of color if I'm not paying attention to race.

5. Learn about microaggressions. Microaggressions are actions we take that are based on probably unconscious assumptions we make about other people based on race and gender. I've made them. I will probably make them in the future. However, I will strive not to make them. Let me give you an example of a microaggression. I have a faculty of color who was talking to me a while back. He was talking to me about his sister who was giving him advice because he had been sick for a while and he wanted her input. My response was – “Oh is your sister a nurse?” His glare told me immediately I had offended him. My unconscious assumption was that because his sister was female and a person of color she would be a nurse and not a doctor. I was wrong, his sister was a doctor. I wanted to collapse in anguish. I was so embarrassed. I wanted to get down on my knees and apologize. But I have learned that this is what is called “white fragility.” My over the top emotional apology would have had more to do with me than with the person I had offended. So I have learned to resist the impulse and simply acknowledge my microaggression – I made a mistake. I apologized and said I would work to be more careful and more aware of my assumptions in the future.
6. Educate yourself. Read about racism, take a class. I took a great class this past fall with Patti Digh called “Hard Conversations: Introduction to Racism” and I learned so much. It is our responsibility as white people to figure this out. We don't need to burden the communities of color to explain racism to us or to educate us. Racism is a white person's problem to fix. Get involved and help fix this. This is why there is a white woman here in the pulpit on MLK Sunday.
7. As one of the instructors in my last online course said. Give yourself a learner's permit. Give yourself a learners permit. You can't become an expert on racism overnight. It takes time, you will make mistakes. But start trying. If you make a mistake listen to how what you did felt to the other person, apologize without becoming fragile, and strive not to make the same mistake again. Let me say now that understanding and seeing racism in ourselves is a painful process. We have to feel the pain and forgive ourselves for our roles we play in racism so that we can move forward. Don't let the pain and ensuing grief keep you from moving forward. There is no need to get stuck there. Focus on moving forward.
8. Don't let your awareness of race end this morning. Please take the list of resources that are available and look at them.

We all have to fight racism. Each and every one of us. Please join in this fight for equality. Racism is largely a white person's problem. It is ours to fix. On this Sunday that we commemorate the life of Martin Luther King Jr. commit yourself being active in the fight against the ongoing racism that still exists.

This is Michele's story of *metanoia*. Michele heard the invitation and was open to the possibility that she might not be seeing totally clear.

The presumption of the Pharisees and Sadducees that John the Baptist railed on was that they were fully justified by God. These religious moralists were so certain in their righteousness that they were blinded to their own culpability and need for repentance. John tells them that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire. Again the “TURN OR BURN” loop begins to play. But in light of what we know now, it seems that burning up what is not good or true is actually a good thing. Radiation burned out my cancer 25 years ago. I heard someone say recently that maybe it should be TURN & BURN. Leave behind what doesn’t serve and make room for a new thing.

EVOLVE 2017 offers us the chance to bravely evaluate who we are as a church. We have to question the deeply rooted institutional loops that may be keeping us stuck. That “log in my own eye” is not really that obvious because I’ve become so use to it. But, if you’re in denial, how do you know it? John the Baptist screaming at us probably won’t be very effective. However, humbly opening to each other’s point of view and stories, risking vulnerability, as Michele did today, and learning the discern God’s voice may very well reveal a new way of thinking, a shift in direction, and a willingness to put aside whatever might be keeping us from fully evolving into the TriCon Church that God has put before us.

Next Sunday we’ll look closer at the ways God might reveal to us what is possible. This is the good news of the Gospel, TURN & BURN; God’s invitation to see differently and adjust the direction. Amen

Resources to Fight Racism

- **Hard Conversations: An Introduction to Racism**
<http://www.37days.com/racism/> a 4 week interactive online course with Patti Digh and Victor Lee Lewis
- **Guidelines for Being Strong White Allies** Paul Kivel www.paulkivel.com Lots of resources on many social justice issues.
- **How to be a White Ally** <http://blavity.com/how-to-be-a-white-ally/> Blavity: A website for black millennials with lots of good information.
- **Showing up for Racial Justice.**
<http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/about>
- ***The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.*** Michelle Alexander (2012) The New Press.
- ***Waking up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race.*** Debby Irving (2014) Elephant Room Press.
- **White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.** Peggy MacIntosh (1988)
<http://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/knapsack.pdf>
- **Southern Poverty Law Center** <https://www.splcenter.org/> “Fighting Hate, Teaching Tolerance, and Seeking Justice.”
- **Black Lives Matter** <http://blacklivesmatter.com/> This is the Official #BlackLivesMatter Organization founded by Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza. “#BlackLivesMatter is an online forum intended to build connections between Black people and our allies to fight anti-Black racism, to spark dialogue among Black people, and to facilitate the types of connections necessary to encourage social action and engagement.”
- ***Sacred Conversations on Race***
http://www.ucc.org/sacred-conversation_sacred-conversation-resources
- ***White Privilege: Let's Talk*** <http://privilege.uccpages.org>