

VIEW FROM THE PORCH

GENESIS 2:1-3; EXODUS 20: 8-11

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I think I have preached one “View from the Porch” sermon in four years at Westminster. For about fifteen years, on the last Sunday of August, David McFarlane and I preached to our congregations in Pennsylvania and New York respectively using our overlapping vacations at Alton Bay, New Hampshire as the taking off point.

Many of you know David McFarlane. He is my mentor, soul-brother and pastor of The Presbyterian Church in Sewickley, PA. His family owns three small cottages on the southern tip of Lake Winnepesaukee, in the village of Alton Bay...about as pretty a vacation spot as you could imagine.

For most of the last 20 years our families have intersected vacations so that the two of us and Ann and Carol and our children all had time together ...swimming, hiking, skiing, eating, sitting on the big screened-in, wrap-around porch overlooking the lake. And, of course, picking wild blueberries and blackberries for breakfast pancakes and dinner pies.

The notion for this annual sermon came from our time sitting, reflecting, talking on that lovely porch overlooking the lake. It is nestled, with the house itself among a grove of tall pines. The scent of the pines and sound of the summer breeze whistling through their branches envelops the cottages, seeps into your soul, bestows deep peace.

Old rockers line the porch and face east toward the tip of the bay just below the house and across the road. From the rockers, we can see down the five-mile finger of water called Alton Bay as it opens up into the big lake beyond. Pine forested hills lining both sides of the widening bay.

Every kind of water craft imaginable passes before us at the end of the bay...from the huge Mt. Washington – a 300 foot 1920s steamer that tours the lake to canoes, sailboats, speedboats of every age and description and even an occasional seaplane. A tiny Gay 90s gazebo for brass bands still sits out in the middle of the water at our end of the bay thanks to a “save the bandstand” campaign a few years ago. It is a reminder of bygone eras of ice cream socials, hoop skirts, handlebar moustaches and straw hats.

In fact, there is a timeless quality about the lake itself formed by the receding ice age. You get the sense that God sculpted that lake out of the granite mountains, filled it with cold, clear water and, like an artist, stood back and said: There. Good. I’ll stop right here.

Somehow, our little colony of 1870, Victorian ginger-bread summer cottages doesn’t seem to violate or disrupt what God put into place eons ago. But more recently, with the bull market of the 90s there have been some palatial year round homes constructed on the mountains that run the west side of the bay. My unvarnished opinion: they are unsightly, arrogant monuments to over-inflated, insecure egos.

This world, even in a place of beauty and repose as special as Alton Bay, NH is not perfect. Perhaps a sermon there somewhere.

You see that is what the porch is about – a place to rest and reflect. Occasionally, thinking how those big new homes deface the side of the mountain or some other injustice our blood pressure will rise. But more often rest and reflection lead to deep gratitude and a palpable recharging of the batteries.

God said our work isn't completed until we have rested from it. Did you catch that in the reading? "The heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the *seventh* day God *finished the work* that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done." It is the final resting, after our work that *completes* our work. Pretty smart of God don't you think? Saying resting is part of working. How else could he get us to stop?

And at Mt. Sinai when God gives the Ten Commandments to Moses, commandment five is "remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." In other words, says the writer, 'if it's good enough for God it's good enough for you and me.' The truth is if we don't honor God's boundaries in our lives we will burn up and burn out and fail to experience the gift of life.

So after a busy year and eventful summer and having missed our time in New Hampshire last year, we found ourselves in Alton Bay for a blessed a week in early August.

God's own example of resting, God's commandment that we rest and that paradisiacal porch drew us in. And we observed a much needed sabbath.

Our porch is one of the best places to read that I know of. We take extra bags of books on vacation. Reading is a great escape. Among the books I've been reading this summer on the bicycle at the gym, stuck in gridlock traffic on the Peace Bridge, before going to sleep are several African American authors: Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison. Not surprisingly, my mind got to wondering and wandering about race in America and race in Buffalo musing on the porch overlooking the bay.

I have been reading these African American authors partly because they are great authors but also because of Buffalo's own race relations issues. I figured listening to the stories of these brilliant black Americans might give me some insight into how race works in our nation and city.

Two years ago, I said I believed School Superintendent James Harris' ouster was driven by race as much as anything.¹ It is no surprise black leaders are telling us again that race is at the heart of the controversy over downsizing the Common Council. Yet, most white people I talk to don't see it that way. They say downsizing is about efficiency. It is what we need. And it is what our democratic process produced. So be it.

Buffalo News columnist Donn Esmonde thought the same thing until he did a 180° turn around. Before he attended a rally at City Hall and interviewed a working class poor black man Esmonde wrote columns dismissing the cry of racism as a political ploy.

But then Esmonde had a chance to talk to a black man who came to voice his concern about the current plan that ousts four Council members three of whom are black including James Pitts Council president. However the white citizens of Buffalo view Pitts, many black citizens of our community see him as a brave advocate for their concerns.

Esmonde's black informant was not into coy political gamesmanship. He was straightforward and honest. If James Pitts is gone our voice is gone, he said.

Esmonde reconsidered. Maybe this debate does have racial implications. Maybe some folks – thousands of poor East Side residents and not a few black middle class citizens – do care if people of African descent are removed from the Council whether the plan calls for a still racially balanced Council or not.ⁱⁱ

The problem is when other issues are involved like competence in the James Harris controversy or cost-effectiveness and efficiency in the downsizing plan white folks have a hard time acknowledging that race could have anything to do with the debate. Years ago Ralph Ellison's great work, *Invisible Man*, called this a problem of vision. The book opens with the main character, a black man saying this, he says,

"I am an invisible man...invisible because people *refuse to see me*...like the bodiless heads you sometimes see in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me *they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations* – indeed, everything and anything except me."ⁱⁱⁱ

In my discussions of race with whites and in my own feelings Ellison's observations ring true. There is avoidance of the subject. A tendency not to see race as race – for what it is – but to see it through some distorting lens.

For example, whites often see race through the lens of ethnic bias. We compare racism with the prejudice directed against white ethnic groups who came to this country earlier in the century. Or sexual discrimination. Some compare it with the plight of women. Or any bias for that matter that some whites experience directed against themselves.

Add to that the belief some hold that race relations have progressed so far that racism is a phenomenon of the past and only occasionally rears its ugly head.

A linguistic expert could explain how these communication strategies function in dialogue. But when racism is compared to anti-ethnic bias or chauvinism my experience is attention on the subject of race is deflected. It isn't easy for whites to talk about race.

What occurred to me sitting there on the porch reflecting on my summer reading and Buffalo's troubled debate over the City Council is that racism is a "moral astigmatism" in the body politic. On the one hand, it has given to blacks a malignant view of themselves on the other hand it distorts and blurs the way whites see black Americans. Since the 1960s as a result of this impaired vision some white conservatives and liberals, for different reasons, have tried to downplay and pull back from dealing head on with racism.

Martin Luther King's famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" confronted the notion among liberal white clergy that King's tactics were the issue and not race. "I have almost concluded," said King writing from his jail cell, "that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice. Who constantly says, 'I agree with you in the goal you seek but I can't agree with your methods of direct action.'"^{iv}

Or James Baldwin on a panel with mostly white liberal intellectuals. In a now famous response Baldwin rejected the notion that the best way to improve the plight of black Americans was to improve the plight of all people of poverty.

To the optimistic view that the nation was making racial progress, Baldwin said, “I am delighted to know there’ve been many fewer lynchings in the year 1963 than there were in the year 1933, but I also have to bear in mind – I have to bear it in mind because my life depends upon it – that there are a great many ways to lynch a man. American society has ignored me when it could, and when it couldn’t, to intimidate me; and when that failed to make concessions.”^v

Delaying or neutralizing the racial agenda are not the only symptoms of our moral astigmatism. Another symptom of our distorted vision is “blame the victim” thinking.

This approach goes back to Daniel Patrick Moynihan when he was a young star in the Johnson administration. But the “blame the victim” idea has been kept alive today by William Julius Wilson a once unknown but now famous sociologist. In the mid-90s Wilson wrote an essay entitled, “the declining significance of race.” It’s not the system that needs to be fixed, said Wilson, see the black middle class we’ve produced. Rather it is members of the black lower class who have to be fixed. The future depends less, said Wilson, on tearing down racist barriers than on raising the level of education and skills among poor blacks.

What made Wilson’s views so noteworthy is that Wilson is himself black. His race neutral, self-help, boot-strap policies are used to shield politicians of every persuasion who need to deflect criticism for the lack of progress with poor blacks and the still very real barriers to the black middle class.^{vi}

One week after returning from New Hampshire I was out on a Saturday morning bicycle ride with some friends. We got to talking about the Common Council.

One of my friends, an entrepreneur and successful business owner said this he said, “what a great opportunity this is for all members of our community to better understand each other. I cannot remember an issue,” he said, “that has galvanized as much attention among so many within our community. It is an awesome opportunity for change. If we could only focus on the end result,” he went on. “You know, *what we want* instead of the initial process to get there.”

My friend is absolutely right. And what we want is an efficient, vibrant, growing city with opportunity for all. But if some believe the process – whatever it is – is racist why should they take the word of white folks that it isn’t? Perception is reality. The first order of business is to find ways to change our perceptions of each other. Until that happens race will divide us and it will have political and economic and social consequences.

My hunch is the Lord wants us to observe sabbath so we can try to see clearly all the ways intentionally and unintentionally we get in each other’s way and thwart God’s dream for the human family. This is an opportunity to get to know one another. To deal with our perceptions. To change them if need be.

Doug King, Kathy Taylor and our race relations task force will tell you soon what they are planning with black churches this fall. Our work is cut out for us. Amen.

Endnotes:

ⁱ My initial response to the Harris' controversy was not unlike Donn Esmonde's response to the Council downsizing. I felt that competence was the issue and any appeal to race such as Arthur Eve and Jan Peters were making was little more than cronyism and political gamesmanship. But also, like Esmonde, I had a 180 degree turn around. On the porch at Lake Winnepesaukee through reading and reflection I changed my mind. On October 11, 1999 I gave a paper to the Pundit Club entitled "White Over Black" using Winthrop D. Jordan's National Book Award work on the history of racism and racial attitudes entitled, White Over Black. In addition to an overview of the origin and flowering of racist attitudes since the 16th century the paper is an analysis of the role of the Buffalo News in the demise of James Harris. The paper is available upon request to Margaret Craig, 884-9437 x106.

ⁱⁱ Donn Esmonde is a compelling writer and astute observer of human events. His commitment to the city gives weight to his observations and opinions. I was impressed with Esmonde's willingness to publicly admit his change of mind after having written several articles calling for efficiency of government and disclaiming any race dimension to the Council debate. Esmonde's turnaround even followed some rather pointed if not disparaging comments to his colleague at the News, black columnist Rod Watson. I applaud Esmonde's flexibility and humility. I also lack the specific citations of the columns to which I refer in this sermon though my guesstimate is that they appeared in the Buffalo News mostly during June and July 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, New York: Vintage International Edition, 1947/1990, p.4-5.

^{iv} Stephen Steinberg, "The Liberal Retreat from Race During the Post-Civil Rights Era," from The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S.Terrain, edited by Wahneema Lubiano, New York: Pantheon Books, 1997, p. 14. Lubiano's book is a wonderful collection of papers given on race from the vantage of a wide range of disciplines and issues. The conference was held at Princeton University in 1997.

^v Steinberg, 18.

^{vi} Steinberg, 31.