

*Convicted: A “Moderate White” Pastor’s Reflections on Dr. King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”*

Keynote remarks delivered via Zoom for the Athens Area Human Relations Council and Interfaith Clergy Partnership of Greater Athens 2021 MLK Interfaith Worship Service

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I

Thank you to the Athens Area Human Relations Council and to the Interfaith Clergy Partnership of Greater Athens for this opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. I am truly honored and humbled by the invitation, and I give thanks for the technology that enables us to come safely together during this public health emergency. I bring you greetings from the members and friends of the First Presbyterian Church of Athens, where, since early 2019, it has been my honor and privilege to serve as the eleventh senior pastor in our congregation’s 200 years of mission and ministry.

I’ve titled my remarks this afternoon “Convicted: A White Pastor’s Reflections on Dr. King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail.” I’m mindful that much of what I have to say will be confessional and self-reflective, but I offer it to you today in hopes that my story might connect with your story, and that together, we might build a new story together.

II

Late in the afternoon of February 7, 2006, I went to get a haircut. In those days, I was a student training for the ministry, and the barbershop I frequented was a small shop with just three chairs, tucked into a shopping center just a mile or two from the seminary campus.

When I walked through the door that afternoon, the shop was empty, except for the one barber sitting in one of the chairs reading a magazine. He was a white man, probably in his late 50s or early 60s. I did not know him, and he did not know me, but when he saw me, he got up from his seat, motioned to the chair, and I sat down as he began to cut my hair.

There was an old television mounted near the ceiling of the barbershop, and February 7, 2006, was the date of the funeral services for Coretta Scott King. The television was tuned in to the funeral services, which were already entering their third hour. President George W. Bush had already spoken, and in attendance were also his father, President George H.W. Bush, Presidents Carter and Clinton, and an as-yet-relatively unknown Senator from Illinois named Barack Obama, alongside hundreds of other dignitaries and civil rights leaders.

To this point in the haircut, the barber and I had not spoken to each other except about the haircut. I sat silently, watching the funeral service on the television, while he went about his work.

But then he paused, and looking up at the television, he let out a deep sigh. And he said, "This is still going on?"

Then he said to me, "You know them blacks and their funerals."

And if you're a white person listening to this story, you know the look that he gave me. It's the look of someone offering a secret handshake, testing to see if you'll give the appropriate countersign. It's the look that's testing to see if you're on the right team, if you're "one of us."

I'd like to tell you that I said, "Sir, I reject completely the premise of that remark, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

I'd like to tell you that I stood up from his chair, threw off the cape, and marched myself right out of that barbershop, even if my haircut was only half done.

But instead, I tried to evade the secret handshake and let him off the hook at the same time.

I said, "Well, I'm a student at the seminary, and I know that different cultures throughout history have had different ways of marking death and expressing grief."

He paused for a moment, frowning as he continued to run his scissors near my ears.

And then he said, “Well, one thing you can say about Ole’ Coretta. She knew what it meant for wives to submit to their husbands.”

And I wish I could tell you that I said, “Sir, what you are suggesting is a misogynistic and myopic reading of biblical household codes, and I completely and categorically reject the premise of your statement. Not only that, but who are you to judge someone else’s marriage covenant?”

I wish I could tell you that I stormed out of his chair. I wish I could tell you that I told all my friends and colleagues to no longer patronize his barbershop.

But you and I both know that I didn’t.

I just said, “Mmmm” in the most non-committal way possible. And then I sat there in silence as he finished the haircut. And when he was finished, I paid him (including a tip), and I left.

I wish I could tell you that on the way back to the seminary, I did a deeper analysis of that encounter. I wish I could tell you I considered the social constructs of race that were evident in that room, that led up to that terrible exchange. I wish I could tell you that I did a theological analysis about the work of the powers and principalities and the and the cosmic forces of evil and hate that showed themselves in that barbershop. I wish I could tell you that I resolved to do more work in my life to address the root of the disease of systemic racism, and not just condemn its most obvious symptoms.

But you and I know that I did not.

At the time, the problem seemed to me like a simple one. The barber was quite clearly a racist. And because I believed racism was an individual problem, rather than a systemic one, the simple solution was to find a new barber.

But not so that the barber might consider the effect of his captivity to his own racism. Not so that he might be invited to a new way of being part of the beloved community. No, I chose to find a new barbershop so I wouldn’t have to sit through anymore attempts at the secret handshake, such was my privilege.

### III

Over the years, as I have thought about that encounter in the barbershop and countless others like it, I have wondered how and where and when I came to believe that racism is an individual problem, rather than a systemic one. And if you'll indulge me, please permit be a bit more autobiographical analysis.

I was born a decade after Dr. King was assassinated. For the entire length of my schooling years, the third Monday in January was always a school holiday for MLK Day. We learned about Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement in our social studies books. We watched film clips of the "I Have a Dream" speech, but only the final three minutes of it, and that speech was given 15 years before I was born, so to my young self-centered mind, it seemed like that era of American History was as far in the past. In my mind, it seemed like something that my grandparents and parents had lived through, but by the time I came along, it was over and done with and resolved, the same way that World War II ended with the signing of a piece of paper aboard a battleship in Tokyo Bay.

In short, I was brought up to believe that while there were still individual racists around, they were easy to spot, but overall, racism was a thing of the distant past. I came of age watching sports that were always integrated, cheering as Magic Johnson and Larry Bird and a young Michael Jordan led our American Olympic Basketball Dream Team. I came of age watching the Huxtable family on the sitcom *The Cosby Show*, a family that looked and sounded so much like mine and so many others I knew. I came of age as a black man mounted a serious campaign for the Democratic nomination for the presidency of the United States and as a black man in a biracial marriage was confirmed to the United States Supreme Court. My community and my culture led me to believe that everyone is the same, and that racism had been solved in the same way that polio and smallpox had been solved. They used to be terrible problems, but they were in the past, and so if people were still struggling to achieve in America, as they clearly were and are, then the logical conclusion was that it must be because of some individual circumstance or, more bluntly, because of their own lack of effort.

It was only later, much later, that I learned about the Federal Housing Administration and the practice of redlining neighborhoods.

It was only much, much later that I learned about white flight and the effective continuation of racial segregation in American public education.

It was only much, much later that I learned about mandatory sentencing laws and the devastating effects of mass incarceration.

It was only much, much later that I learned about the daily micro-aggressions that my sisters and brothers of color endure in the workplace, in the marketplace, and in nearly every other social environment.

None of those things were included in my social studies curriculum. None of those were things I encountered in the mostly affluent white suburban community of my upbringing. None of those things were ever discussed in a sermon or a Sunday School class in my almost entirely white church.

And so that is how I came to believe for so much of my life that racism was an individual problem, rather than a systemic one.

#### IV

As I'm sure you know, in April of 1963, while organizing for social justice and civil rights in the city of Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. King was arrested under the charge of parading without a permit. Earlier that year, a number of white clergymen and faith leaders in Birmingham had sent Dr. King a letter in which they lamented the unrest and demonstrations taking place in their city and implored Dr. King and other "to leave Birmingham in the name of keeping the peace.

On April 16, 1963, while he was incarcerated, Dr. King answered those white faith leaders in a pastoral epistle of his own which we have come to know as "A Letter from Birmingham Jail."

The entire letter is an exquisite piece of literary rhetoric, but the part that captures my mind and convicts my heart this day reads as follows:

Dr. King writes:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or 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 cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, I have done more reflecting about that incident that day in the barbershop. I have thought about all of the times over the course of my life in which I've been offered that secret handshake, that wink-wink, nudge-nudge, that test that's designed to instantly ascertain whether I'm a "good ol' boy" or a "snowflake."

I have thought about all the times over the course of my career in ministry when that very same secret handshake, when that very same wink-wink, nudge-nudge, has been extended to me in the church of Jesus Christ. I've thought about all the times I've been warned explicitly and implicitly not to name it or expose it from the pulpit, lest I be labeled a "troublemaker" or worse. I have thought about the ways in which my Presbyterian tradition, which I love and adore its well-grounded theology and thoroughly democratic polity, far too often privileges doing the work of the church "decently and in order" at the expense of the weightier matters of the law like justice and mercy and faith.

I stand before you convicted this afternoon, my friends. Although I have not met the cause of social justice and civil rights with outright rejection, far too often I have hidden behind my privilege and power to offer it lukewarm acceptance.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Letter from Birmingham Jail," 14 Apr 1963, [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html), accessed January 12, 2021.

My faith tradition teaches me that the mission of God, that is, the thing that God is actively up to in the world – is the work of reconciliation – the work of bringing all things into right relationship again.<sup>2</sup>

Some of you are old enough to remember life before the Internet and online banking, when every month, the bank would print out a statement and send it in the mail, and if you wanted to reconcile your checkbook, that is, if you wanted to be sure that your balance was correct, you would go through your checkbook register and compare it to the bank's statement in an effort to arrive at a balance.

In a very broad sense, that's what the gospel work of reconciliation is about – about bringing all things into right relationship with God.

But just like you can't balance a checkbook without first receiving a statement, the work of reconciliation cannot begin until there is a telling of the truth, and in a very small way, that is part of what I am attempting to do this afternoon – to tell the truth with an eye toward reconciliation.

And so I confess to you and before God that I have sinned, not just that day in the barber's chair, but in the countless times in which I have been offered that secret handshake and, while I may not have embraced it, I have not rebuked it, either, instead hiding behind my own privilege in an effort to preserve and protect my own power.

I am sorry.

I was wrong.

I ask your forgiveness.

And where I still have blind spots, I humbly ask for you to point them out to me that I might make an amends.

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<sup>2</sup> The Confession of 1967 outlines the centrality of reconciliation for the Christian faith, particularly this passage: "In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus Christ is God with man. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, man, and the world. Therefore the church calls men to be reconciled to God and to one another." *The Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016), 9.07.

## V

You cannot begin the work of reconciliation until there is truth telling. And so on this day, there is another truth I feel called to state clearly and unequivocally this afternoon.

Racism is not and never has been just an individual problem. That man in the barbershop was a racist, but the racial problems in America are not the result of a few misguided barbers, a few bad apples spoiling the whole barrel.

Race is a social construct, not a biological or theological one. There is more genetic difference between two fruit flies than there is between any two human beings. Race is a social construct, and so racism, the act of privileging whiteness at the expense of all else, is and always has been socially systemic, which is to say it is has been baked into the very fabric of our society from its founding days until now, and it impacts every single one of us in both profound and subtle ways.

Some of you have known that truth for your entire lives. For me, I am sorry to say, it took far longer to see.

But we cannot begin to be reconciled to God and to one another until we can acknowledge that basic truth racism is a systemic problem. As Dr. King so eloquently stated in his letter, “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”<sup>3</sup>

As a friend of mine likes to say, “We get to live in the kind of community we’re willing to make.” And so the good news is this – since racism is a social construct, that is, it’s something that we made, it means that it’s something that we can unmake. It’s something that we have the power to undo.

I have only lived in this community for a short period of time – less than two years, but our family has come to love Athens. Shortly after we moved here, my parents retired here. This is the community that will help us raise our three young boys. We get to live in the kind of community we’re willing to make.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



My sisters and brothers, I think this community has the opportunity to become a model for Georgia and the nation of what it looks like for a diverse community to live together in an interwoven network of mutuality.

But we're not there yet. There's much work still to do.

## VI

And to my white brothers and sisters, here's another truth we must acknowledge. Most of that work of unmasking and undoing the racist systems that are still at work in our community and nation is on us.

And that may seem unfair. You might say, "Well, I didn't build it. Most of this stuff happened well before I was born."

And you're right, up to a point. But whether you are aware of it or not, whether you acknowledge it or not, the truth is that white people in this nation benefit from systemic racism in both obvious and subtle ways. The truth is that while our state and nation are rapidly becoming more racially diverse, white people still hold a disproportionate amount of the wealth and power in our nation.

But you may still say, "I'm not a racist. I didn't build any systems of oppression. The people who built those are dead and gone. Why should I have to bear responsibility for something I had no part in creating?"

And I understand that sentiment. I truly do. But I'm a student of the bible, and I want to tell you about a man named Ezra.

## VII

Ezra was a priest in Israel who lived through a time of tremendous political upheaval and social unrest. By the time he came of age, his country had been completely wrecked by events that had transpired well before he was born. Ezra had nothing to do with making the mess he inherited from his forbearers.

Nevertheless, Ezra fell on his knees and prayed before God and confessed not only his own sin and brokenness and need for redeeming, but that of his ancestors, too.<sup>4</sup>

Ezra had nothing to do with creating the conditions of Jerusalem's fall. But he knew the truth – there can be no reconciliation, there can be no rebuilding, without truth telling.

But Ezra also knew another truth. God has not forsaken us. God has given us new life. God has called us, all of us to this time and to this place to repair the ruins.

But the task seems so overwhelming. Where to even begin?

## VII

On the morning of June 6, 1944, as the Allied forces were landing in Normandy, one of the highest-ranking officers in the first waves was a 56-year-old Brigadier General named Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., the son of the late President. As soon as he landed, he realized that the battle plans that had been two years in the making needed to be scrapped on the spot. The winds and tides had sent the landing craft far from where they were supposed to be. Enemy resistance was far stronger than had been anticipated.

But the legend is that General Roosevelt turned to an aide and said, “We’ll start the war right here.” And General Roosevelt started giving orders and moving men and material forward.<sup>5</sup>

Start right here. Start today. Do one thing today to move the dream forward. Do one thing to name and expose and begin to dismantle the systemic racism that still grips our society so fiercely.

Again, hear these convicting words from Dr. King’s letter:

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless

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<sup>4</sup> Ezra 9:5-9.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day: June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 268.

efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. King would have been 92 last Friday. So much of his legacy, so much of his vision still seems like something from another time in another era. But his call to truth-telling, his call to reconciliation, his call to social justice is more needful today than ever.

The time is ripe to do right.

Now is the time for repentance, both for our own failings, and for the failings of those who came before us.

Now is the time to remember that God has brought us, all of us, to this place and time.

Now is the time for truth-telling, for speaking boldly and clearly.

Now is the time to become the repairers of the breach.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> King, Jr.