

The creation stories in Genesis are not abstract stories about the origin of life. We usually place the creation story in Genesis at the first of the writing on the Old Testament. Actually, the creation stories come from the 6th century BCE. If you remember your history, you will know that in the 6th century, the world of the people of the Old Testament was upside down. There was war with the Babylonians. The Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed and many of the Jews were deported to Babylon. There was not much stability. The war between Babylon and Egypt literally consumed the Hebrew people. Understanding life, understanding history is difficult. It is out of this context that we have the creation story of our text for today. The story itself is even older. It reflects the creation stories and cosmologies of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Israel transforms these older materials to serve their purpose of the covenant. The Babylonian gods seemed to be in control of the future. It appeared they had defeated the dreams - of the God of Israel. Genesis addresses these claims and asserts that it is indeed Yahweh who watches over his creation and will bring it to well being. To the despairing exiles, the creation story declared that the God of Israel is the Lord of all life. If we judge the passage this way then the text is not an abstract statement about the origin of the universe. It is a theological and pastoral statement addressed to a real historical problem. The creation story cuts through the Babylonian Captivity and grounds the rule of the God of Israel in the fundamental claim of creation. The assertion is that God can be trusted against the contemporary data. The captivity included sickness, deportation, poverty, unemployment, loneliness – the human experience of abandonment. The creation story is a proclamation of God's intent for the world. God is with us. The Hebrew people were not interested in God's technique – how God created . They were interested in God's intent. The creation binds us in relation to God and to each other. It is in the light of this basic understanding of creation that I want us to begin this sacred conversation about race.

Racism is a doctrine - without any scientific support – that claims to find racial differences in character, intelligence – and asserts the superiority of one race over another. Racism is the practice of racial discrimination based on such beliefs. Again, there is absolutely no scientific evidence to support racism. Asians and Blacks and Native Americans are as smart and ethically equal to Caucasians.

Racism did not begin with our generation. Racism is rooted in a 400 year old system on economic exploitation. That history is a real part of our problem. Racism was constructed, racism is rationalized, racism is legitimized for one reason – economic gain.

The creation story text asserts that God created human beings (earthlings) in God's image. It is clear that God did not create native Americans, Chinese, Africans, Europeans – God created earthlings.

We are all alike. We are the same. Psalm 8 reminds us that we – earthlings – were created little less than God. Our task is to have dominion over God's creation – that is not domination, not exploitation - we are to till the earth and keep it. Global warming is teaching us that we have done as good a job of destroying God's created world as we have of destroying our relationships with each other. We were created gender beings without hierarchies between us. We are created in God's image.

Psalm 8 considers us all equal.

Sacred conversations are often about difficult topics. That is because sacred conversations are about the basic understanding of life – of who we are – of how we are to live together as created beings of God. Sacred conversations are about death. Sacred conversations are about our human condition – disease, poverty, hunger. Sacred conversations are about how we treat each other – about our social constructs. Sacred conversations would always include slavery.

Who could own a slave? To me, it could only be someone who believes that the enslaved are less than human. That is exactly what the slave traders did. They were able to use racism to enslave a race of people that they deemed less than human. I can give you a very contemporary example of that.

The owner of Mulligan's Food and Spirits in Marietta, Georgia made a tee shirt last week. He put a picture of a monkey on the shirt and under the picture he put the words Obama 2008. As long as he can get by with depicting Obama as less than human, he can make fun of him. Anytime anyone is treated as less than human, that is racism.

PILGRIM

CHURCH

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

The creation story is clear that human beings exist in relationship to each other. Racism destroys relationships. You know why I volunteer a lot of time at YouthServe? I believe that YouthServe more than any other organization in our city works at building relationships. We include young people from all over the city together in community service. It is amazing how working together builds relationships and breaks down barriers of race and economic differences. It was in the early 70's.

Our youth group from Trinity in Huntsville was going on a summer service project to rural Tiptonville, Tennessee. We would be working with people in poverty about half of them black and half of them white. We recruited some black kids from Chelsea Lane Presbyterian Church to go with us because we thought it would help us establish relationships in our work there. What we discovered was that our work together planning for the trip built relationships in our work group. On our way to Tiptonville, we stopped in a little town in North Mississippi to eat lunch. We were late for lunch – about 1:30 and were about the only people in the restaurant. The waitress brought us no menu. Heck, we didn't care, we were going to order hamburgers and fries anyway. After a bit, I went over and asked if we could get lunch. She told me she would lose her job if she served the black kids with us. When I told the group, we just got up and left. If the restaurant couldn't serve all of our group, they would not eat lunch. We have not even gotten to our work site, but I knew we had learned our most valuable lesson before we left home. Relationship. Racism keeps us apart. It breaks down relationships – even before they can begin.

We live in a consumption society which seeks to create false, artificial living – as though materialism could fulfill us. Our society seeks to hold up the individual. YOU DESERVE IT, HAVE IT YOUR WAY – all those slogans. We are fulfilled as we live in relationship. Racism is designed to perpetuate our separation from each other. Racism denies we are related to each other. Racism creates social oppression.

There is an African American spiritual "Sit Down Servant." It promises a long white robe. It promises a pair of shoes. It promises a golden wrist band – in time to come. Martin Luther King Jr. noted that there is nothing wrong with a white robe and a pair of shoes – but he pointed out that people need those now – they do not need to wait to get them in the world to come. We have black young people in our city who cannot wait to get a good education. We have black families who need food and medical coverage now. We have black families who cannot afford decent housing. Promises of the future are not helpful. It is just another way of enslavement. Computers and new buildings do not make a good school. Parents who are absent from parental guidance are no help. Parents who work two jobs to try to afford food and education are tired people and have little energy for homework and school activities.

I wish I could point to the church as a relevant force in the struggle against racism. In my own experience, about the most the church has done is give lip service that we are all God's children. The church has been remarkable in its absence in the struggle against racism.

So today, we begin this sacred conversation on race. I believe that we work on that a lot here at Pilgrim. So it affords us the chance to become that community of faith that crosses boundaries in our society by building relationships with the black community. We are all God's people. We are all created earthlings. We can never imagine or even think about God giving up on us- any of us. A conversation about race reminds us that we cannot give up on each other. We are related to God as we are related to each other. We were created to live in relationships. We are God's people when we reach out to each other as sisters and brothers in this family of God.