

## ***Awful Late in the Day of History***

**John 2:1-11**

**Sunday, January 17, 2009**

This is a sermon about race. I have called it *Awful Late In The Day of History*, which is a quote from a memoir by a southern white civil rights activist and preacher by the name of Will Campbell. In the year 1959, still early in the civil rights struggle, Campbell has come back from a particularly dangerous incident to news that one of his colleagues in the struggle has been killed. He stands there in the doorway stunned. His brother Joe sees him there and comes up to him, shakes him and looks him in the eye and tells him to cry – *now!* And then Joe says to Will, *When the....world is so callous that it can't cry at anything it is awful late in the day of history.* And so Will finally breaks down and cries in his brother's arms.

It is *awful late in the day of history* to need to be having sermons about race in our nation. It is *awful late in the day of history* to remember to cry. So much was achieved and accomplished through the courage of those early civil rights pioneers thirty, forty, fifty years ago. We now have an African American president! So why is there any more to say? Why can't we turn the subject of race over to the school teachers and the historians? Aren't we done yet? Can we talk about something else now?

And then up pops once again the story of a white Springfield patrolman with a history of problems around race and brutality. I've been in Springfield a while and I see this particular patrolman's name and I think to myself, *I have seen this name before and I have seen this incident before.* And then I see the accusation by the head of the patrolman's union that those who are concerned to see this name and this incident back in the news

are a “lynch mob” and I wonder as the prophet did so many centuries ago – *How long, O Lord?* And then I read that it’s time to establish a commission to review the problem – and I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. How many times have we appointed commissions and how many reports sit on shelves somewhere collecting dust and still the same name and the same sort of inflammatory racial incident pops up -- again? With all due respect to the many fine and professional police officers in the Springfield police department and to the tough job they face on the streets of the city, isn’t it *awful late in the day of our own city* to be having this conversation?

Or am I missing something here?

Clearly we are not done with the conversation about race. It seems to me that it’s going to take something more penetrating than laws, something more effective than commissions, something more compelling for evidence than video clips to put the conversation behind us. Something on the order of a miracle – like Jesus turning the water of our tears over our racial history into the wine of new relationship. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be able to say like the steward at the feast, *Thank you, God, for saving the best wine for last!*

Does anyone have an *Amen* to add to that?

I believe *miracles happen* wherever and whenever we are able to unpack our own baggage and ask God for help. And so I would like to unpack some baggage this morning to begin a conversation with you about race. I believe we have come *far* in our own history about race here at South Church in my years here, but we have a *far* distance yet to go, and it is time. It is time to step aside

from our own past history of racial privilege and step into a new vision of ourselves as *a house of prayer for all people*.

Let me begin the unpacking with a humbling thought. I would not be standing before you this morning with a twenty year history of ministry between me and you – I would not have been chosen to be pastor of this church in the year of our Lord 1989 – but for the fact that I am white and I attended elite schools. Had I been black, I doubt my name would have even appeared among the candidates for this ministerial position. Had not the name Harvard appeared on my educational resume, I don't know that my qualifications would have come to the notice of the search committee here. I say this not as a matter of condemnation, but of noticing. It is what it is. And had I known myself way back then "in the day" that it would be my pastoral job to oversee and participate in a sea change here where this church now strives to become a Jesus-centered, Open and Affirming, *multi-racial* community – had I known what the real job description was – I would have said, *Who, me? You've got to be kidding!*

And yet I am grateful for all that I have learned and seen and done here and for the privilege of seeing a community begin to change its complexion and its self-understanding. Thank you, God!

Let me continue my noticing. When I came here twenty years ago and tried to fit my kids into the school system here in Springfield, I remember how glad the school system was to try to help me. When my oldest daughter was looking at middle schools, I called the principal at that time of the Chestnut Middle School, and you know what? She came to our home to visit and encourage my daughter Johanna to attend Chestnut Middle School because so many white families were fleeing the Springfield Schools. And when my daughter Annalies was having social problems at what

was then called the New North School, now Gerena K-8 School, I went to the parent information center and I was able to arrange to have my daughter transferred quietly to another elementary school in a zone that was less dangerous, though against the rules.

And I remember being asked to be on a special committee investigating a series of problems at a distinguished non-profit organization here in Springfield because (I was told over a lunch that I did not pay for) the organization needed to offset the presence of another black clergyman on the board whom the board felt obliged to invite for racial balance but whom they were concerned about.

I remember being asked to be on the mayor's task force on housing here in Springfield some years ago and realizing that when I arrived at the first meeting that the only black face in attendance at that meeting on housing in the city was a secretary taking notes.

I remember joining a business organization here in Springfield for networking purposes, an organization that does a lot of good and one which certainly had minority membership – but you sure could have fooled me. I seldom saw a minority face.

I remember last year looking for an apartment here in Springfield and how glowing and helpful my reception was everywhere I looked.

I realize how the complexion of my skin and the names on my resume color how people see me. I realize that although I was not born into wealth, I was born into privilege, and some of that privilege has to do with race. It is very humbling to acknowledge

that some of the doors that have opened to me, opened not because of my accomplishments, but because I match a profile. And I have not even mentioned the things that have not happened to me because of my race. No one has ever wondered why I show up and why I am not with “my people.” When I have done something well, no one has ever called me “a credit to my race.” No one has ever suspected that I got a job because of affirmative action. I’ve never been among “some of my best friends.” I have never been harassed by a rogue police officer.

I don’t know why I even have to say this. I say it with concern and passion because it’s *awful late in the day of history* to be having a real conversation about race. After all that has happened to improve the racial standards by which we judge a society – its laws, its judicial practices, its appearance of equal representation – our conversations about race are still poisoned with avoidance that covers over anger and fear.

And yet I believe we have an awesome God who cares not even a bit about our complexion but cares deeply about our hearts. And I believe we have a powerful God who is unimpressed with our resumes but deeply interested in our desire to grow and change. Shifting our conversation about race is going to be like changing water into wine. We can’t do it, but we can call our water water and not pretend our water is wine.

Miracles are hard work. But they are not complicated. Miracles require only that we recognize that we are not accomplished, perfect, rounded out, lovely people but that we are people hungry for a miracle who walk in the company of a God who desires to do miracles for his people – if they will ask!!!

Why is the asking so hard? Why is it so late in the day?

I am asking this morning. I am asking for the miracle of a real conversation about race that begins in this church, for I believe we have a unique opportunity here to explore what it truly means to be *a house of prayer for all people*. I am asking that we be stripped of anger and clothed with love. I am asking that we be drained of fear and filled with appreciation. I am asking that our avoidance be changed into celebration. I believe that God works with our faith to do things we cannot now even imagine!

After this service today I am going to show the first part of a documentary called *Traces of the Trade* about the conversation a white family has concerning the discovery that the wealth of the family was based on the slave trade. It's all about noticing how we see what is right in front of our eyes.

And if the conversation begins to prosper, I would like to begin a series of reflections on race and friendship based on a book called *Racing Across the Lines*, about rebuilding relationship against the grain of our own fears.

You are invited. Come prepared to listen. Come prepared to ask. Come prepared to pray. Come prepared to believe that in our Lord Jesus Christ, it is never too late in the day of history to begin doing miracles.

Amen