

2 Samuel 11:26 – 12:13a  
Aug 2, 2009

South Plains

We can hope that somewhere in that conversation, the tension of formalities will ease and real communication will break through.

### Moral Vision

When President Obama invited the Harvard professor and the Cambridge police officer for a beer at the White House, he was offering a simple solution to a very complex problem, a short answer to a long history of suspicion and distrust. Three people sitting at a picnic table, three mugs quickly defrosting in the DC summer heat, pretzels or foie gras or whatever in the White House passes for nibbles, and then conversation that must start off pretty formal and stiff.

Come on over to my picnic table, gentlemen. But, of course, this is the nation's house and the nation's picnic table.

Thank you for the invitation and your efforts at reconciliation, Mr. President.

I'm glad to be here too, Mr. President.

I wanted to share this beer and bread with you first of all as an opportunity to confess that my comments made a bad situation worse. Beyond that, this picnic table reminds us that the sacrifices of many Americans and the ideals of our nation inspire us not only to talk about unity, but more importantly to work on common goals.

(and so it goes)

Our country and especially our churches need to break through the rituals of equal opportunity and correct language where race relations are concerned. The big legal battles with segregation may be over, but the nagging insecurities remain. It's not only that most congregations are still segregated, but that we segregate our expectations of each other. I expect Asians to be smart. I expect Middle Easterners to be suspicious of Americans. I expect Latinos to be hard workers.

My expectation of African Americans is often confused because I have to sort through my prejudices and my ideals in order to get to the real person in front of me. At that point, I wish I were as insightful and direct as the prophet Nathan. Nathan has two characteristics that I want, especially when I'm dealing with race relations. He has a clear moral vision. The prophet was absolutely convinced that what David had done was wrong in the sight of God. He spoke the truth to the King. David's affair with Bathsheba and his cover-up by murdering Uriah is evil. And, Nathan said so.

But in addition to his clear moral vision, the prophet was also blessed with the ability to speak the truth in love to his King. The letter to the Ephesians says, "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (4:15)."

Having the moral vision to discern unambiguously what is right and wrong, that is a rare and wonderful gift. We call those people visionaries and prophets. When Rosa Parks decided that it was wrong for her to give up her seat in the “colored” section of the bus so that a white person could sit down, she acted prophetically. Of course, most of us see that in hindsight.

The book about snake-handling that we discussed two weeks ago makes a telling observation not only about holiness Christianity, but also about any religion. “Feeling after God is dangerous business. And Christianity without passion, danger, and mystery may not really be Christianity at all.” (*Salvation on Sand Mountain*, p. 177) Nathan knew the danger in accusing King David of murder. It wasn’t just bad form. This king was known to kill messengers who brought bad news.

Discussing race relations in our society is often considered bad form. It’s like those ubiquitous TV commercials for leaky pipes and flatulence. We know the problem. We just don’t want to talk about it in public. And, we are afraid that if we try to discuss specific racial tensions, we will lose credibility with our acquaintances and be accused of not understanding. What little moral vision we have will be ignored or laughed at.

But Christianity does have passion and danger and mystery. It’s dangerous to tell the truth. That is why Ephesians insists that we speak the truth in love, begging us to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace

(4:3), reminding us that “each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift (4:7),” “until all of us come to the unity of faith (4:13).” We’ve got work to do.

During the civil rights movement, my father could never understand the need for protests and sit-ins. He told me that his best friend as a child was an African American boy on the adjoining farm named Henry Mayo. At the time, I dismissed that story as patronizing. But, how many of us can say we have one close friend of another race? I cannot.

We need to have more conversations around our own picnic tables, because we need to learn to speak the truth in love. The truth is that racial tensions twist our freedoms. Racial stereotypes set us up for misunderstandings. Negative images on TV and bad experiences in real life segregate us and limit us and close us down. Race matters. That’s why we need to learn to talk about what matters to people of other races.

If the “unity of faith” means anything, it means an end to the language of us and them. It requires reaching across that barrier of race to understand the other. And the reward will be more than a new friend, although friendship is a gift to be treasured and never taken for granted. Unity in the body of Christ means strength, and freedom and a maturity of faith that deepens the joy of following Jesus.

Several years ago, I was asked to make a speech on the floor of Presbytery. A colleague was retiring and the custom was to recognize his service with a brief tribute before presenting him with his certificate of retirement. Because he was a Navy chaplain, he was able to attend our church occasionally and sing in the choir. I was flattered to be tapped to give the tribute, but I was equally flabbergasted because what I knew about the man was limited to a few pleasantries exchanged on Sunday mornings. I have always wondered if I was the closest thing to a friend in our Presbytery because he is an African American Presbyterian minister. I am embarrassed that we did not know each other better. And, I regret that as brothers in Christ we never activated and actualized our unity of faith beyond the formalities.

We gather around this table once more. We hear the words of welcome, the invitation to come to the table. We hear that this is not the table of South Plains Presbyterian Church. We're temporary stewards of this place. This is the Lord's Table.

We will repeat the customary words of thanks, and we'll say them sincerely because we are thankful both for the invitation and for the sacrifice that makes us welcome. We're thankful for the ideals of Jesus and for the real opportunities to practice those ideals. We have confessed the ways that our lives deviate from Jesus' teaching. To share this cup and bread re-commits us to work together toward common goals of love for our

neighbors and sharing the gospel with the world.

It's a simple answer to the complexities of sin and death, a short answer to thousands of years of wandering away from our Creator and Redeemer. But, it's enough. We just have to do it.