

**A SACRED  
CONVERSATION OF RACE**

**Sunday, May 11, 2008**

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Acts 2: 1-21

A Sacred Conversation of Race

*(Leah)*

When I was a little girl growing up, I wanted more than anything to live on Sesame Street. They had Cookie Monster, Oscar the Grouch, Big Bird and Grover, and it seemed to me a neighborhood that could hold those kind of people and monsters all together would be an amazing place to live; that they really knew how to be neighbors with each other..

So I grew up, left Jasper and lived in Orlando, Florida for a little while, then in Chicago; both incredibly diverse communities. At least in Chicago, I was living in a very diverse community and my building was incredibly diverse. You would smell smells that you certainly didn't recognize wafting down the hallway for dinner. I worked in places, sometimes, where I was the only white person around. In both of those places where I lived we had incredible Sesame Street moments. We had moments where that sense of community and neighborliness crossed over all of those lines of difference, amazing moments of neighborliness.

But, the other thing that I started to figure out is this: on Sesame Street, all of the monsters were make believe. In the real world, the monsters were very, very real. They would pop up and rear their ugly heads when we weren't able to cross those lines of difference very easily with each other.

When suddenly someone's difference was cause for alarm, anger or confusion the biases and the prejudices that we all have within us would come up and get in our way. I found that it wasn't always easy to live in a place with such diversity. At the same time, our world is getting smaller and smaller and smaller. This is the reality that we are gifted with.

*(Tom)*

Living in community with people of other races is hard because our own life experiences profoundly color the way we look at the world. And when we come into contact with people whose own life experiences are very different from ours, it can be challenging to see the world from their perspective.

One of our dearest friends in Webster New York is an Armenian woman named Aza Deverian. Aza and her husband Vartan were the first two people that everyone met when they stepped into the sanctuary of the Webster United Church of

Christ. They were the unofficial “greeters for life” and I can’t imagine anyone better suited for the job. Everyone who entered that church received a warm, sincere and heartfelt welcome from two of the most gracious people I have ever known.

Aza was a young woman living in Paris France during the Nazi occupation of WWII. Her husband, Vartan, liked to say he was responsible for liberating Aza. He was a young infantry soldier from Rochester New York who entered Paris as part of the Allied liberation force in 1944. When he heard a pretty young Parisian woman speaking Armenian, he followed her home and asked her father for his daughter’s hand in marriage.

Having come of age during the terror of Nazi occupation, Aza understood the destructive hatred of racism. Consequently, she was one of the most tolerant people I knew. “Live and let live” was the philosophy she embraced. Aza was a peacemaker. She intervened whenever people got upset and helped them calm down and recover perspective. People admired and respected Aza because she was always thoughtful, considerate and compassionate to everyone.

Except Turks. The first time I heard Aza talk

about “the Turks,” I was shocked. It sounded like a completely different person was speaking. “Turk” was almost a swear word for Aza. You could hear the contempt in her voice whenever she said the word. It sounded coarse and vulgar on her lips. One day the women’s fellowship at church asked me to share pictures of the trip I had taken to Turkey to visit Ephesus and Colossae and other the communities where the Apostle Paul had organized some of the earliest Christian churches. After the presentation I could see the hurt in Aza’s eyes as she came up to talk with me. It was as though I had betrayed our friendship by sharing my admiration for the Turkish people we had encountered.

Aza’s family had been caught up in the Armenian genocide of the Turkish Empire in 1915 during World War One. Her father was a coffee merchant who, on several different occasions, had to literally walk away from his business, his relatives and neighbors, his home and everything he had worked so hard to build up and flee with his family as the persecutions intensified. After gradually making their way west, Aza’s family finally settled in Paris and rebuilt their lives, just in time for Hitler’s invasion.

I can’t imagine what it is like to have my life threatened because of my ethnic background. I can’t imagine being forced out of my job, my home, my community, my country by people

who are hostile to me because of my ethnic identity. I can't imagine receiving news of loved ones and friends who were slaughtered in genocide. None of those events have colored my view of the world.

But they have for Aza. As kind and considerate and compassionate a person as Asa is, she is stuck with her hatred. She cannot free herself of the hostility she carries towards anyone who is Turkish.

*(Leah)*

In the end, we are all stuck with the feelings we have, whether ones like Aza or ones that we have had ingrained in us, taught to us, or developed on our own because of the experiences we have had.

When Tom and I talked about this this week, when he told me this story, he said "You know, in the end, we are just stuck with our stuff." But when we realize that we have stuff that we are stuck with, that's when the Pentecost story becomes real for us.

In the Pentecost story we heard this morning, there were 18 different groups of people who came together on that day: wildly different people from different places, with different

customs and habits. They looked differently from one and another and they spoke different languages.

I am sure that when they all showed up at the day of Pentecost they brought their stuff about each other with them. But, then, God does this amazing thing: the Holy Spirit sweeps over them and touches each of them. And, then, in that story, suddenly, because they have been touched by the Holy Spirit, they are able to speak and understand each other like they never have been able to before.

In the story, it is not that they each speak their own language and suddenly everyone else can understand them. No they are suddenly able to speak in other languages. Everybody is able to communicate in new ways, and yet, hear each other from their own perspective.

It is not that the Holy Spirit suddenly descends upon the people at Pentecost and gives them some secret “God language” so that they can all speak to one another. Rather, this is the kind of unity that the Holy Spirit bestows upon us: it’s not a unity of assimilation. And that is important for us to understand this sacred conversation on race. The kind of unity that the Holy Spirit bestows upon us does not require us to be anything different than who we were born

to be. That is so different from how we typically tend to solve this unity problem.

Often we say we could just be unified:

*if **they** would just talk like us,*

*if **they** would just learn our language,*

*if **they** would just use proper English. Or we say, we could be unified,*

*if **they** could just dress like normal people like us, or*

*if **they** could just eat normal food—not weird things like they eat,*

*If **they** could just be like us is not part of God's plan for unity in the midst of diversity, especially as we read it in the Pentecost story.*

The Holy Spirit allows us to have unity without conformity, because the Holy Spirit bestows upon God's church a spirit of understanding like we have never experienced before, a sense of compassion and of openness and understanding — that's what happens in the Pentecost moments.

*(Tom)*

As wonderful and exciting as the experience of

Pentecost was for the early followers of Jesus, it was also very fleeting. The first argument to cause division in the early church had racial undertones. Followers of Jesus who came from Jewish backgrounds found it very difficult to accept followers of Jesus who were gentiles, many of whom came from pagan backgrounds. These were people who had always been considered a source of defilement to the Jewish people and now they were being asked to recognize gentiles as brothers and sisters in Christ. And what made things even worse was that these gentiles were not being required to honor all of the laws of Moses that Jews had always considered a sacred obligation.

The life experiences of first century Jews and gentiles had colored the way they viewed the world, and yet the flames of Pentecost had seared into their memory a vision of an all inclusive community in which no one was left out and everyone was heard and understood and appreciated and valued. So the early church didn't split over racial differences. As hard as it was, they stayed connected and continued to work hard at living together as brothers and sisters in Christ. They didn't allow the experiences of their past to harden their hearts with hostility and hatred.

Here in Battle Creek, most of our neighborhoods, most of our churches, most of our schools, and

most of our social circles are racially segregated. Last week when I was thinking about our national church's Sacred Conversation on Race, I realized that the only significant interaction I've had with black people here in Battle Creek was the weekend of the Martin Luther King Junior celebration when our church shared in a pulpit exchange with 2<sup>nd</sup> Missionary Baptist Church. Now, I don't consider myself a racist, but I have to admit that I haven't gone out of my way to develop any relationships with anyone who isn't white since I moved to Battle Creek.

So I called Pastor Wyne and we got together for lunch last week and began talking about possibilities for initiating our own conversations on race among our churches here in Battle Creek. William is going to talk with Pastor Michael Smith at Mt. Zion AME Church and I'll talk with Pastor Jeff Carlson next door at First Presbyterian and we will get together to start exploring possibilities for building deeper connections between our congregations. If you are interested in being part of that conversation, let me know after service or send me an email.

The Pentecost story begins with the words, "They were all together in one place...." That may be the most important message for us to hear as we take up this Sacred Conversation On Race. That wonderful breakthrough moment when God's Holy Spirit burned through all the barriers that

alienated and isolated people from each other never would have happened if they hadn't been "all together in one place." We can't have separate conversations on race. We can't have our own white middle class conversation here at First Congregational Church. If we do, we'll never be able to appreciate and understand the life experiences that have colored other people's views of the world.

Aza will never be able set herself free from her hatred of Turks by talking with her Armenian friends. I will never be able to get past my fear of a black person approaching me on street by talking with my middle class white friends. It is uncomfortable to seek out people who are different than us, but that is what Pentecost is all about. As people of the Pentecost, we cannot allow our differences to separate us into isolated clans that seldom have any meaningful contact with each other. The challenge of racism is the challenge to stay connected, to build relationships, to be "all together in one place" so that the power of God's Holy Spirit can burn through every barrier between us. Amen.

