

Protagonist Corner

Homelessness and Race

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I grew up in the segregated South of the 1950's and the 1960's in a small town in the Mississippi delta. The schools were segregated, the facilities were segregated. Lawful signs, the police, and white violence enforced this system. I was uneasy with the violence, but as a white boy growing up in the South, it was obvious to me why this segregated system was set in place and why it needed to stay in place. There was something wrong with black people, and they needed to be controlled. They were not like us white people - they were inferior. I accepted this system and the reasons for it as historical fact. I felt troubled by this system, but after all, it was necessary because of the nature of black people.

Fortunately for me and many others, a new human rights movement was being born during my childhood. Though much work preceded both actions, the Supreme Court decision striking down "separate but equal" schools in May, 1954, and the Montgomery bus boycott in December, 1955, are generally acknowledged as the beginning of the modern human rights movements in this country. I was nine years old when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat after much preparatory work, including training sessions at Highlander Folk School. Two years later a Republican president would send in federal troops to my home state to protect black children going to a public school with whites.

Though many of its gains are now under attack (as happened 100 years ago when the gains of Reconstruction were repudiated) the modern civil rights movement changed the lives of many white people. It changed our view of history, of historical facts. It revealed to us that black people were human beings. It revealed to us that those who were inferior in the 1950's and 1960's were not blacks but whites. Looking back now, it seems ridiculous for us whites to have claimed that segregation and oppression were necessary because something was wrong with black people. Seeing more clearly now the "historical facts," the truth is painful but nonetheless the truth: it is we who are white who have something wrong with us. Blacks do not stand in the way of equality; whites are the ones who stand in the way.

The gains of the modern civil rights movement are under attack now because we who are white have not accepted this truth. Like our predecessors 100 years ago, we who are white continue to fail to ask the right questions. We continue to ask "What is wrong with black people?" as if the presumptions of segregation are still true. We should be asking "What is wrong with white people?" What makes us flee neighborhoods when black people move in? What makes us fill our prisons and jails with black men? What makes us deny access for black people to our economic systems? This failure to reorient the questions of race relations has doomed the modern civil rights movement to revisit those painful steps of its predecessor in the years 1880-1915, the time when whites repudiated the gains of human rights and reestablished segregation and slavery. The modern human rights movement erred when it sought only to change black people, to lift them up to full citizenship. The ones who needed to be changed (and who still need to be changed) are white people, not black people.

What has all of this got to do with homeless people? Plenty! First and foremost,

the majority of homeless people are black men. The streets are one of the primary places that our society has chosen to place black men. (The other primary place is prison, commonly called "the chain gang" on the street, a name which correctly connects the chains of slavery with the chains of prison.) The failure of white people to accept the gains of the modern civil rights movement has led us to adopt the streets and prisons as our public housing policy for black people.

Secondly, our approach to the problem of homeless people is the same as our approach to the problem of racism. Just as we who are white ask "What is wrong with black people?" we also ask "What is wrong with homeless people?" In both cases, we seek only to change the behavior of those obviously caught in the systems, those oppressed by racism and those who are homeless. We do not ask - indeed, we actively avoid - the primary question: "What is it in our system that creates homeless people?" The number of homeless people is growing, and the frustration level of homeless and helpers is growing. Rather than a frank confrontation with the system that creates such a huge number of homeless people, we choose to cut down on services for the homeless and seek to change (to rehabilitate) only a chosen few who seem redeemable to the masters. In this way, we can feel better and can avoid a confrontation with the primary question of systemic causes.

I want to cite two examples of this process which has led us to such a deadly place. My spouse and I were co-pastors in a Presbyterian church in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1975-1980. The church was located in a privately owned, low income apartment complex, housing some 5,000 people. In 1978, the city of Norfolk declared its intention to buy the property and turn it into an industrial park, effectively displacing the 5,000 people who lived there. When the city was asked about replacement housing for the 5,000 people who lived there, they replied that none would be built. It was the opinion of the city that it could absorb the 5,000 people in its existing housing stock. Our church helped to develop a community organization to fight this action, but after much turmoil, our move to block the sale of the property was defeated in the city council on a 4-3 vote, with two Presbyterian elders voting against us. Oh, we received some consolation - a lengthening of the process and several hundred replacement units - but the meaning was clear: thousands of poor people would have their housing torn down in order to improve the industrial base of the city.

As we went through this process in Norfolk, I saw this as a single, isolated incident. The leaders of Norfolk were incredibly cold and evil. Why couldn't they be enlightened like leaders of other cities? It was only as I got some distance from the Norfolk situation that I began to see it as more than a single incident of stupidity. It was *much* more - it was part of a national movement to remove the poor from the cities by taking their housing stock away. It has happened under many names - urban renewal, redevelopment, revitalization of the inner city - and it continues to happen all over the nation. If we take housing from the poor, can we be surprised that many of them become homeless? Can we continue to ask "What's wrong with the poor?" without ever asking "What's wrong with the comfortable who strip housing from the poor in order to build industrial and recreational parks?" As long as we ask only what is wrong with homeless people, we will continue on our destructive ways.

The second example is more recent but is just as widespread. Churches all over the country are beginning to find ways to sweep the homeless from their property. Some use "no trespassing" signs; some have security guards; some allow the police to control their parking lots. Some churches use an ordinance like the City of Atlanta's which forbids anyone from crossing a parking lot who does not have

business there or who does not have a car there. Many of the churches who are sweeping their property have a history of serving the poor. Whatever their history, the decision to rid the homeless people is defended on the grounds that it was done because there was something wrong with the homeless people. They were dirty, noisy, smelly, violent, and unsanitary. It is a defense that echoes the beginning of this article: segregation is always defended by those in power as being needed to control the behavior of the outcast. None of the dialogue raised the question "What is wrong with us, that we must choose to close off the church of Jesus Christ?"

The most depressing part of this second example is that it is churches that have decided to segregate their property. A church, called by God to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people, chooses to close off a class of people, regardless of their character, from the proclamation of the gospel. It is a sad state of affairs, but I suppose I should not be surprised - many churches have blocked black people from entering worship.

We live in dangerous times. Racism is reasserting its grip on us, the number of homeless people grows daily, and the poor are unable to find justice. The people of God seem unwilling or unable to address the need for justice, making a mockery of the gospel. We face fundamental problems as a people and as a church. While there are prophets among us who cry out for justice, we seem unwilling to listen. It is time for prayer, earnest prayer to God that God will not give up on us and leave us to our destructive ways. Let us pray to God, asking God to raise up more prophetic voices for justice and to move our hearts so that we may listen to these voices and respond to their call. *And*, let us practice what we pray.