

Owning our own stuff

Last night I attended the annual Wichita Branch of the NAACP's Awards Banquet. I wanted to support Pastor Roosevelt DeShazer, President of the Greater Wichita Ministerial League as he received Clergy of the Year Award.

The guest speaker was Redditt Hudson, a former police officer with the St. Louis Police Dept. "He left the police force in 1999 so that he could focus on addressing systemic problems in the criminal justice system, abuses of police authority, and improving the police and community relations. He co-founded Project PEACE, an organization that addresses issues of individual and community responsibility and accountability." (program notes)

He began, "I'm sure you've all heard the news and the unrest coming from my town - again. There's been a pretty steady stream of it since the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. Just last week a judge acquitted – again – a white former St. Louis police officer of first degree murder in the death of a black drug suspect." The ABC news report said, "Scholars and activists say the latest demonstrations in Missouri, like the Ferguson protests, aren't just about another police shooting. They reflect unaddressed racial disparities going back generations."

Hudson, our speaker at the banquet went on to recite a long and gory list of atrocities committed against black suspects by white officers, not one of which has resulted in an indictment. In fact, the response has been indignation on the part of the officers, that the African American community, or anyone, would dare try to hold them accountable. He said, "These situations pre-exist us." They have been created by generations of injustice; it's the deep-seated prejudice and fear that's built into a nation's DNA when the nation itself has been built on the backs of those considered "other", less-than, suspect.

These situations pre-exist us. We're not responsible for those who brought African people to these shores in chains and enslaved them. Nor are we responsible for those who came to this land thinking they had discovered India and erroneously named the people who were here Indians. We didn't create the Doctrine of Discovery or participate in the mass destruction of the indigenous peoples who inhabited these lands we now call home. Our speaker went on, "It *is* our responsibility, however, to acknowledge these situations, accept their reality and do something about it."

It was almost as if he was the prophet Ezekiel, speaking the words I had been turning over and over in my mind... "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine; it is only the person who sins that shall die... yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?... Therefore, I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways... Repent and turn from all your transgressions... Cast away from

you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.”

“Sometimes we are very good at blaming somebody else for errors and mistakes committed in the past, from which we would like to detach ourselves. It would be much easier if we could say: I have nothing to do with the death of Jewish people during Nazism, or with slavery in the Americas. This text is a reminder that we must resist this temptation and must take the past into account, so that we can create a better life in the present and for the future.” (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4, pg.98)

The prophet is reminding us that while we’re not responsible for the past, we are certainly responsible for understanding and acknowledging what happened in the past that got us to where we are now – and making decisions and choices in the present that turn us to a new and life-giving future.

Sister Joan Chittister wrote, “We have abandoned the concerns of the civilizations before us. We have forsaken the good, the true and the beautiful for the effective, the powerful and the opulent. We have abandoned enoughness for the sake of consumption. We are modern, we are progressive and we are lost.” (*What Does It Mean To Be Human*, Frederick Franck, Janis Roze and Richard Connolly, eds. (St. Martin's Press, 1998)

Reddit Hudson ended his speech by saying that he does have hope for the future. He said that the protest last week in St. Louis was the most diverse crowd yet. There were as many white people protesting as there were black and brown. He reminded and encouraged us, “You can BE the prayers you say. Pray for justice – live justice. Pray for peace. Live peace. Pray for a sign. BE a sign. Pray for help. Be help. You don’t have to be perfect to do this – you only have to be alive.”

“God is always calling us to choose life. To choose life is to resist the temptation to blame others and to take responsibility for our participation in the history of our lives, of our country, and our world.” (Feasting, pg. 102)

As we come, this morning, to the communion table, aware that Christians around the world are doing the same, let us come with a renewed commitment to “remembering our past, reshaping our present and choosing ways to (more fully) live and love.” (Feasting, pg. 102)