

*Second Samoan Congregational Church UCC
Convocation on Racial Justice
Portland Oregon
November 12, 2005*

This sermon was delivered at a Convocation on Racial Justice November 12, 2005 in Portland, Oregon. The event was a co-celebration of the ministry and retirement of The Rev. Dr. Hector Lopez from the Central Pacific Conference of the United Church of Christ.

SEEKING RACIAL JUSTICE in HUMILITY

Vivi'i atu ia outou i le Alii, aua e lelei lava o ia, e fa'avavau lava lona alofa. Fa'atalitali atu ia outou i le Atua, aua e manatu mai o ia ia te outou. Aua e oge mea leona ta'anoa ma latou fia aai, a'o e fa'atalitali atu i le Atua. E leai se mea e matitiva ai i latou.

Si el SEÑOR no hubiera estado a nuestro favor,
si el SEÑOR no hubiera estado a nuestro favor
cuando los hombres se levantaron contra nosotros,
vivos nos hubieran tragado entonces
cuando su ira se encendió contra nosotros;
Bendito sea el SEÑOR,
que no nos ha entregado como presa de los dientes de ellos.
Nuestro socorro está en el nombre del SEÑOR,
que hizo los cielos y la tierra.¹

INTRODUCTION: When I first received the invitation to bring greetings from PAAM at Hector Lopez's retirement party. I was delighted. For it is not often that I get an opportunity to toast a living Saint of the Church. And I have attended retirement parties before, it's usually for a couple of hours, light remarks, little refreshments and the mood is mostly reflective.

Then I ran into Wally Kuroiwa and Lynn Smouse at General Synod and, much to my surprise, they informed me that the retirement party has now become a three day, heavy, Convocation on Racial Justice and like Rosemary said yesterday, "that is so Hector Lopez," I don't know why I was surprised.

And then Hector e-mailed me the program draft in September and said that I only have 15 minutes – 20 minutes tops.

Reflecting on these seemingly ill-related events, it underscores a profound challenge that we as a Church face, when inquiring about Racial Justice. Inquiring into racial justice, in our context, is equivalent to trying to right the world with the wrong tools. In our context, we are asked to put together a puzzle, but we are not given all the pieces. We are being called to transformation of the world, yet we are expected to experience our own transformation. In essence, we are being asked to have a miracle without becoming a miracle maker. How then do we proceed?

¹ Psalm 124:1-3; 8.

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Paulo Freier said it best “We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects.”²

We cannot inquire into racial justice as an afterthought, but it ought to be forethought. It ought to be the main thought. We cannot right the world, without using the right tools. We cannot put together the puzzle without having access to all the pieces. We cannot call for transformation in the world when we ourselves have not had a transformation. We cannot have a miracle when our context does not allow for miracles to occur. How then do we proceed?

1. We cannot talk about justice without EXAMINING JUSTICE. Most of our constructs of justice were constructed in objectivism. Meaning it was constructed without conscious input from the knower. Meaning it was constructed without input from the subject to be known. So we are not consciously present to when it was put together, how it was put together and how it affects our daily lives.

Justice today is characterized as “blind.” Justice dons the “veil of ignorance” so she can be impartial. She is called “blind justice” so she is not impaired by the intimate. So she is not affected by the particularity and therefore she is removed from the consequences of her actions. My friends, we can no longer constitute justice this way.

We must approach justice with both our eyes wide open. We must seek justice with not only the eye of the mind, but the eye of the heart. With the mind’s eye we see the world of facts, reasons and dollars. It is a cold and mechanical place, but it is predictable and safe and this is where we build our lives. Today, we have found flaws in our mind-made world. So we open the other eye, the eye of the heart and see a world that is warm, transformed by the power of love and a vision of community beyond the minds capacity to see.

We can no longer have blind justice. Or even a One Eye justice. We must reconstruct justice informed by the subjects to be known. And we can no longer do justice and be impartial because lives are affected and people are dying.

2. We cannot talk about racial justice using SIMPLISTIC BINARIES. Most of our ideas of justice are manifested in simplistic binaries. Meaning justice issues are mostly seen as black or white issues. Yes or no. Up or Down. We are not consciously present to other possibilities for justice other than “us” or “them.”

When the tragic events of 9/11 occurred, there was such hatred of others as the only JUST response to what has happened. Negating the fact that the overwhelming majority of people whose lives were affected were people of color. Negating the fact that over 60 countries were represented in that tragedy. Negating the fact that every major religion in the world was represented in all shapes, sizes and age group. The collective American response with the help from the media, reduced this tragedy to the simple binary of

² bell hooks (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge) p. 46.

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“us/them”, US citizens as “the chosen people” against a world full of “un-chosen” people.

My friends, we can no longer do justice in this way. Whenever we wish to right a wrong, whenever we wish to do justice, we ought to refuse simplistic binaries. We ought to refuse to allow “either/or” thinking to cloud our judgment. But we must embrace the logic of “both/and” language. The inclusive nature of this language allows us to be inclusive and create space for other possibilities for justice.

3. We cannot talk about racial justice without talking about RACE. As an educator, I am often reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which racist thinking informed all aspects of our culture; including the way we learn, the content of what we learn and the manner in which we are taught. We must resist the denial that leads many people to pretend that racist and supremacist thoughts and actions are no longer pervasive in our culture. - Hector touched upon this briefly in his remarks yesterday when he said that, and I’m paraphrasing, “he grew up thinking Chicano was above all other races.” It is against this thinking that I am speaking against and more.

I have had some of my friends tell me that there is no such thing as racial difference, suggesting instead “we are all members of the human race.” So I do a little exercise with them, I’d say: “If you were to die now, and you could choose to come back as either a white male, a white female, a Samoan male, or a person of color, which identity would you choose?” Each time I do this most individuals, regardless of gender or race, invariably choose whiteness and most often white maleness. When asked why? They would go into some sophisticated explanation of an identity of privilege, based on race.

Can you feel the conundrum? On the one hand folks are consciously saying that race does not matter but unconsciously they understand race as a marker of privilege. As long as we deny the existence of race, we will continue to enter racial justice as object and not as subject.

In the early 1900s, about 7,000 Chinese laborers were brought to Samoa to work the plantations. The Samoan context allowed for hospitality to be extended to strangers. And after hospitality ran its course, it was the dominant culture’s awareness of racial differences that lead to respectful conversations, which resulted in the peaceful transitioning of Chinese immigrants into mainstream Samoan society. It is not surprising that Chinese surnames are common Samoan surnames and a recent survey found that almost half (47%) of all Pacific Islanders in California are multiracial.³

One thing is for sure: We can no longer be silent about race. We must bring it front and center. We must have the boldness to name it, confront it and allow it to empower us.

³ The Diverse Face of Asians and Pacific Islanders in California: Asian and Pacific Islander Demographic Profile (2005). Published by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center. p.4.

4. We cannot speak about racial justice without TAKING RESPONSIBILITY for our own racist tendencies.

To enter the struggle for racial justice as subjects, we need to assume responsibility for examining our own responses to race. We must start from the standpoint of accepting and acknowledging that we have racist assumptions that we have to deal with. When we all are able to address these we will come to these dialogues with both our eyes open:

I first met Hector in Southern California around 1986. Hector and Dan Romero were putting together our very first Youth Roundtable and ostensibly it was an attempt at doing racial justice. I had just graduated from college and was the only Samoan on the Youth Roundtable. But after 20 years, I could not remember any significant advances that we have made regarding race relations from this group. Around the same time in my life, I was a member of a community group that approached the racial issue from their own cultural particularity and needless to say it was the work of the latter group that remained with me to this day.

Reflecting on this experience, the difference between the two groups was that one relied on others to remind them of their racist dispositions and the other took on the responsibility of acknowledging their own racist disposition, embraced it and finally transformed it.

Some of the work that came as a result of my participating in the work of the later group is the *Tafesilafa'i* Festival in Long Beach.⁴ It is a week-long celebration of Pacific Islander culture in dialogue with the Judeo-Christian narrative.

5. We cannot achieve racial justice without TAKING a STAND.

Because of Freedom of Religion, we have become a pluralist society. Meaning that we tolerate different religions and we co-exist with sometimes opposing religious ideas. One of the spokesperson for this majority positions seems to be Matthew Fox. He wrote: “once we return to the depth or core of religion ... we do not encounter many different religions so much as one experience, that is expressed variously, and with great diversity and color, flowing in the name of different traditions and cultures.... There is only one underground river — but there are many wells into that river...”. Isn’t this what is popular in our country? Isn’t this a common approach to doing religion?

I suggest that the reason why this seemed popular is because of the fear people have of becoming dogmatic, dismissive, rigid and judgmental. People fear being exclusivists. We believe that we cannot take a position without being dogmatic. We cannot make a truth claim, without being seen as rigid or judgmental. And because we believe that, we conclude that we should not take a stand or make any truth claims. We should refrain from offending our colleagues. My friends, we cannot do racial justice this way. We must take a stand. They have to know our position.

⁴ *Tafesilafa'i* is a learning context where indigenous wisdom is brought into dialogue with Judeo Christian narratives. It is culture informed by theology. For additional information, see www.tafesilafai.org.

The task for liberals today, as Peter Berger has brilliantly expressed, is to learn “to hold convictions without either dissolving them into utter relativity or encasing them in the false absolutes of fanaticism.”⁵

Meaning that we have to take a stand. I’ve come to believe that we must be able to make some truth claims, that is, to believe that some things are true. I also believe that among these must be some distinctively Christian truth-claims. There must be some way to affirm some distinctively Christian beliefs without becoming judgmental and dogmatic. Which leads me to my final point:

6. We cannot sustain racial justice without HUMILITY?

One of the things that I have noticed is that when one has the truth, it has a tendency to “puff us up.” Knowing the truth gives us a big head and so this begs the question: How can one possess this gift without having her ego blossom at the same time? How can being right not make a person dogmatic and dismissive of others? How can we possibly say that we possess truth without thinking of ourselves as set apart, as different and as chosen? How can we achieve racial justice and not grow arrogant?

In our text this morning, Paul was primarily conveying the “mindset” that he believes is distinctive to the Christian life. And it turns out he was answering this very question we’ve just raised. In verse 4, Paul begins with reasons to boast. He had plenty. But in verse 7 he gives us a hint about the way one can hold them. “Whatever was to my profit” — and certainly the possession of racial justice is to one’s profit! — “I now consider loss for the sake of Christ” (7). The “bookends” of Paul’s famous answer in vv. 10-11 are provided by the repeated word, “resurrection”: and the hope “somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” Between these two bookends, however, lie two fascinating phrases: first, “the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings” and second, “becoming like Him in his death.” In these two phrases, I believe, lies the answer to our dilemma: Can we achieve racial justice and not grow arrogant? Paul here defines the mindset that we are seeking.

First, the mindset of one who does justice is molded by *koinonia* or found in community. We tend to think of *koinonia* as meaning “happy church fellowship,” but for Paul it means the “fellowship of sharing in the suffering of Christ.” The second phrase is like unto the first. It’s based on the Greek word *symmorphizómenos*, which means to be joined to the form of Jesus’ death, to be with that form, to take on the form or to conform to Jesus’ death.

In the second chapter, Paul renders into narrative form what this mindset really means: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a

⁵ Peter Berger (1993). *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*. (New York: Free Press). pp

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slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.”

This summarizes the mindset that Paul seeks to convey in this letter. That mindset can be summarized in a single word: *kenosis*, or self-emptying. *Kenosis* is about having the form of God, while not being “puffed up” by that form, but instead “emptying oneself.” It means to remain untouched by the ego-enhancing dimensions of truth. My Buddhist friends refer to it as: emptying out ego, “becoming a servant.”

Reflecting on the life of our friend Hector Lopez, his work and what he stands for, I could not think of a better incarnation of *kenosis* than the life of Hector Lopez. You have touched our lives more that you will ever know. Furthermore, this convocation is the best manifestation of *kenosis* that I have yet to witness. And I salute you Hector for the opportunity that your retirement has afforded us to examine again what it means to be a Just Church.

In case his hearers might have missed the point, Paul closes the text by emphasizing that he has not yet arrived; he is on the way. Paul hopes, but does not know for certain, that he will be able to endure to the end. And I commend this uncertainty to you: it’s a powerful way to “speak the truth in love,” to have deep convictions while remaining humble.

I must conclude. I trust the teaching is clear: EXAMINE everything critically. Take nothing for granted. REFRAIN from offering and accepting simplistic solutions to life’s issues. ENGAGE life fully conscious and with all our senses functioning. Take responsibility for our own TRANSFORMATION. Speak the TRUTH of our convictions! TAKE A STAND! Don’t let the fear of dogmatism or intolerance force us to abandon our convictions! And in your seeking and in possessing Justice, BE HUMBLE! According to John’s gospel, “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him” (13:3-5).

Yes my friends: It’s all in the attitude; “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Sisters and Brothers, I don’t consider myself to have taken hold of it yet. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal...” (12-14a).

Benediction: O atu ia Outou ma le Manuia o le Atua. La paz de Dios esta con usted siempre. May the great Ruler of all high places, God of many names, touch you with a wind that keeps you strong, for all the days to come. Amen.