

The Colors of Faith—Black

March 9, 2014

Romans 3:19-24

19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. 21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus,

Today is the First Sunday in Lent and the first Sunday in our sermon series on the Colors of Faith. I want to point out that we are only touching on some of the colors that are used to represent the various aspects of our faith and some of the various meanings that those colors represent. There is no formula per say or order of how we should proceed but in the interest of making some sense out of the color choices we begin today with Black.

Black is...well what is it? What do we think of when we hear the word black? Again this is one of those participatory moments in the sermon. What do we think of when we hear the word black? (Reflection time) We use black a lot as a descriptive term and word. Often it is associated with a somewhat negative connotation because it is the color most often associated with death and mourning. This association of Black with death is an ancient one. The Egyptians considered black the color of the underworld and the color of Anubis god of the underworld who had a black jackal head. Black was also the color of the underworld for the Greeks and Romans and even became the color of mourning for the Romans. We today still hold many of those same associations with the color Black and while it has come a long way in the fashion sense many of us still have set aside what we term funeral wear, that black outfit that hangs in our closets waiting for the next death to occur.

In that sense, as we think about death, it is appropriate to begin our Lenten series with Black. We are aware that in 40 days the next death will occur. We will pull out our already waiting funeral wear, and mourn the loss of our Savior. Yet Lent does not begin with the funeral march. Lent does though begin with a reminder on Ash Wednesday of our finite time on this earth. That from "Dust we have come and to dust we will return". What follows during the 40 days is traditionally a time of reflection, particularly penitent reflection of our lives in light of our faith.

Penitent is a derivative of the word "Penance" which relates and is similar to "Repentance". What these words all have come to mean is a want, or more accurately a fervent desire, to be forgiven for our sins. In some traditions these days of lent mark a time of penance when a person will actually perform acts of restitution for his or her sins. It was at one time how one was accepted as part of the faith. You would confess your sins and make restitutions by your acts of penance which were set by the faith leaders.

How many of us have seen the show "My Name is Earl"? It is where the main character goes around with a list of all the bad things he has done and his challenge and goal is to fix things with any and all whom he has wronged. Similar to that these acts of restitution were as simple as prayers or as complicated as doing something more physical or public. In fact one of the reasons for the reformation, think Martin Luther, was that these acts of penance had gotten so very ridiculous that perjury had been created so that you could still do your good works of penance even after death to earn your way into heaven.

We as Disciples of Christ come out of the reformation and more particularly the restoration movements so one of our guiding principles is that we are restored in our relationship to God by faith not by works so the entire act of penance does not play a significant role in our basic theological framework. However in the larger scheme of faith understanding we should not neglect what this time of lent calls us to do and calls us to understand about ourselves through repentance.

Remember we are trying to understand the colors of faith and particularly today, Black. Black in the color sense is also understood as the opposite of white. It comes into being because it absorbs light instead of reflecting it. This is why it is often referred to as the color that represents the darkness of our world. In the understanding of biblical metaphor Christ is the Light and Sin is the Darkness through which the light penetrates. In our discussion of the colors of faith that is why Black in most definitions represents sin. In particular black represents our own personal sinfulness.

Understanding our sinfulness and accepting that we do sin is significant in being penitent before God. Think of Indiana Jones the Quest for the Last Crusade (in fact I have the DVD because I could not find the exact clip on youtube). Where at the end Indiana is to undergo the three trials to finally get the Holy Grail and the first is "the penitent man shall pass" He then recalls that a penitent man is humble before God, they are aware of their sin and in their humility they pay homage and kneel.

While we do not kneel a lot in humility before God we can acknowledge our sin, our blackness, in other ways during this time of lent. Lent as a time of spiritual reflection leads people to assess their spiritual and faith lives and make changes to make those lives better and more in tune with God. Often people engage in spiritual forms of discipline. These spiritual forms of discipline can and often take a variety of forms. Meditation and daily intentional prayer and devotion time are some of the ways of utilizing the 40 days of Lent. Others engage in spiritual fasting either on the physical sense by literally doing a limited diet or in the spiritual sense by giving up something bad. Today this often falls under things like "I will give up chocolate, or caffeine, or potato chips." And while these methods vary in degree the underlying problem is that we tend to focus on giving up something rather than gaining something.

40 days is a limited amount of time. Many of us have given up something for that length of time and then indulge again on Sundays, as they do not count in the 40 days, and the minute Easter is here we go right back with a "Whew, give me my chocolate bar!"

We kind of by giving up something can miss the point of penitent reflection that allows God's light through Jesus to penetrate the Blackness, the darkness, the sin of our world. We especially miss the point when we go right back into enjoying whatever was bad to begin with...this is why instead of engaging in the often fruitless endeavor of giving something up we instead should take something on.

The concept of black being the absence of light is a profound one theologically. Because when we take on and engage in spiritual disciplines like daily prayer, family prayer, prayers before bed, reading our bibles, daily devotions, family devotions etc. etc. etc. we are constantly shining the light of God through Jesus into our lives. There is little to no room for the darkness to be there. So what is bad becomes irrelevant when the light overwhelms it, our lives are Black no more. Amen.