

At the 10:30 am service on January 17, 2010, the Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Psalm 36:5-10 and Colossians 3:12-17.

“The Black Notes”

The Presbyterian Church (USA), our denomination, has designated today as Race Relations Sunday presumably to coincide with Martin Luther King Jr’s birthday commemorated tomorrow.

On Monday when I wrote this sermon my day began with the San Francisco Chronicle. I read an article headlined “Church attacks in Malaysia deepen racial tension.” Churches were burned in the country because the government overturned a law banning the Christian use of the word “Allah” for God. Apparently, the attacks were perpetrated by extremists who wanted to weaken the country’s commitment to racial harmony, one of the key draws for foreign investors.

While getting ready for work I turned on the radio and a station was featuring far right extremists, so-called Christians in the US, who were on the rise with the drop in the economy and lower employment and were scape-goating immigrants and decrying with veiled threats our President because he was the wrong color.

Driving to work I listened to news of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's description of Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign as a light-skinned African-American "with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one." Reid swiftly telephoned his apologies to the president, who accepted them and issued a statement saying, "As far as I am concerned, the book is closed." Two days later, Reid said he agreed on that last point and sought to shore up his civil rights credentials. Opposition members called for his resignation.

Closer to home, Oakland residents are up in arms about the shooting of Oscar Grant by former BART policeperson, Johannes Mehserle. His court hearing has been moved to Los Angeles to avoid the possibility of unrest.

Unfortunately, racial and ethnic issues are alive and unwell in the State of the Union and in the globe. As Christians who affirm that all people are created in the image of God and thus are precious and equal in the sight of God, we have our work cut out for us in the area of race relations.

We have no problem with Martin Luther King Jr’s dream that “my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Nor would we disagree with Southern author William Faulkner who wrote: “To live anywhere in the world today and be against equality because of race or color is like living in Alaska and being against snow.”

Since I grew up in apartheid South Africa and lived and breathed institutionalized racism I had a hundred ways I could go in this sermon but it came down to focusing on a positive

aspect of the subject: a glimpse at African-American Spirituals, the joy of these songs in spite of their birth in great trial and hardship.

The strength and beauty of these songs are testimony to the strength and healing power of God in the lives of an enslaved people. We owe a great debt to these communicators of the faith and thankfully our hymnal contains a fair number of their compositions. By singing these hymns we are kindred spirits with our ancestors in the fields – their history and struggle.

All our hymns and songs today are African-American Spirituals. Our scripture reading from Colossians encourages us to sing spiritual songs to God with grateful hearts.

A side note, which determined the title of my sermon, is that all African-American spirituals can be played on the black keys of a piano. One can see this demonstrated in a U-tube presentation called “Amazing Grace: Just the Black Notes” sent to me by Dick Judd.

I was under the impression that the tune of “Amazing Grace” came from Native Americans which is why we have Native American versus of the song in our hymnal but this U-tube presentation makes a convincing case for its origin in a West African sorrow song.

The spirituals I chose for today’s worship service are fascinating and important expressions of faith – and faith for us! The first is “Kum ba Yah” which stresses the presence of God.

William B. McClain, in *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (p. 113) writes: “Black people have always trusted in Jesus’ promise in Matthew 18:20 that, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” As the slaves met for worship, often under the cover of darkness, first on their agenda was to invoke the presence of God by softly and reverently chanting “Kum Ba Yah” (this being the earlier slaves’ rendition of the English words, “Come By Here”). The tune is African in origin.

Our next hymn is “He Never Said a Mumbalin’ Word.” The basis for the text of this African-American spiritual is found in Isaiah 53.7: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

The African-American slaves expressed their admiration for Jesus when he suffered persecution without a word of complaint. Theologian James Cone writes, “Slaves were deeply moved by the Passion story because they too had been rejected, beaten, and shot without a chance to say a word in defense of their humanity” (*The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 47; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1972, 1991). Silence is seen as evidence of divine strength rather than an inability to speak.

Some versions of the spiritual have as many as ten stanzas. The phrase “The blood came trickalin’ down” (stanza 4) has variant readings. The words “streaming,” “a-

twinklin'," and "twinkalin' " have all been used to describe the flow of blood from the Savior's wounds.

The third hymn "There Is a Balm in Gilead" is a popular African-American spiritual responding to the questions in Jeremiah 8:22, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" It provides an answer of hope and encouragement. As Cone wrote, "Hope, in the black spirituals, is not a denial of history. Black hope accepts history, but believes that the historical is in motion, moving toward a divine fulfillment" (*The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 86; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1972, 1991).

Finally, the congregational hymn "Amen, Amen" and Dick's postlude "Amen" are fitting conclusions to the worship service. "Amen, Amen" chronicles the life of Jesus Christ from birth to resurrection. The congregational (choral) "Amens" serve as the foundation for the solo narrative (the "solo" in our case will be members of the choir) and should be sung as affirmations of the leader's (choir's) message in the verses.

The traditional African-American tune was arranged by Nelsie Johnson (b. 1912) for *The Presbyterian Hymnal*. The song was written by Methodist, Jester Hairston, an African-American composer, songwriter, arranger, choral conductor, and actor born in 1901.

Hairston also wrote "Mary's Boy Child." He dubbed "Amen" for the Sidney Poitier film *Lilies of the Field* (1963). He arranged traditional "Negro spirituals". He died in 2000.

Martin Luther King Jr., Hairston and all the creators of African American Spirituals would be pleased by our highlighting their messages and music on Race Relations Sunday here at Redwoods Presbyterian Church. They would be more pleased if we worked tirelessly for their dreams. God bless them and us as we build God's inclusive world. Amen.