

Who Me, Racist?

Opening illustration adapted from "Never A Discouraging Word" by Brian Atwood @ SermonCentral.Com

According to an old western ballad, "Home on the Range" was a place, "*where never is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day.*" Certainly it is a wonderful dream of never having to hear a discouraging word. But that really wasn't true in the old west – I've seen the movies – and it's certainly not realistic in our lives either. We can't expect our lives to be totally free of discouraging news.

- The doctor may tell us we have a certain illness - but we need to hear about it in order to seek proper treatment.
- The mechanic may give us a bad report about our car. That too, is unfortunately necessary so repairs can be made.

At times we all need to hear constructive comments to adjust our course of living.

But there are also discouraging words that are both UN-necessary and always UN-Christian. Such as critical comments made against another person without first giving serious consideration to the proper use of God's gift of speech.

Yes, there are some who believe, "*If I think it, I might as well speak it; everybody is entitled to a piece of my mind!*" And such people are easily identifiable by the quiet distance that opens up between them and everyone else whenever they enter a room.

I am sure we have all been guilty in the past of making a thoughtless hurtful remark against another person, which we either later regretted or worse, did not regret. You need to know that Scripture has strong words to say about those who can't control their own tongue. In his letter to the Churches, James the brother of Jesus accuses our tongue of "*being set on fire by Hell... a restless evil full of deadly poison*" (3:6-8)

With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God... My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. James 3:9-10

From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing, My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Yes, we have all been guilty of occasionally saying that which should have remained unspoken; which should have been reproved in our hearts before ever getting out of our mouths. **This is why even what we say should first be filtered through our growing relationship with the Holy Spirit.** James suggests that controlling our tongue is a sign of spiritual maturity (3:2). So at that moment when we are about to give someone a piece of our mind, perhaps we had better step back and give them the peace of Christ instead; What would Jesus say?

Which brings us to today's story from Numbers, chapter 12. Aaron, Miriam and Moses were recognized throughout the Israelite camp as God's very special chosen leaders for all the people. Moses' older brother **Aaron** was both his mouthpiece in the contest with Pharaoh and has now been anointed as Israel's High Priest – the only one allowed to enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to offer a sacrifice for the peoples' sin (in this way he prophetically points forward to the work of the yet-to-come messiah).

Miriam, Moses' older sister was the one who helped save her baby brother's life and as a recognized prophet, led the people in celebration of God's vindication on the far side of the Red Sea. No one would question the special relationship which these three had with God and yet it was baby brother Moses to whom God gave to the highest honor of being His personal attendant and spokesman (another example of God's tendency for choosing the last to be first).

Think about this for a moment. What would you do if your baby sister or brother was elected President of the United States? Would you proudly support them, or move to Canada? Or would you immediately call the tabloids to say "*make me an offer?*" It is difficult to not be a bit jealous when a sibling gains more fame or fortune than ourselves.

It is also true that the greater our responsibility or fame – the more damage we can do by a simple slip of our tongue. Think of all the trouble caused both in England and the States because an undisclosed member of the royal family speculated on the skin color of Harry and Megan's future son. That is why James cautions that those who presume to take the role of teacher, *will be judged with greater strictness* (3:1).

Let's get into today's story. As chapter 12 opens it has been a rough month for the Israelites, their complaints against Moses were first met with a forest fire and then the camp being drowned in meat which then led to a plague and many deaths. Moses then chose 70 Elders to assist him in trying to lead this rebellious multitude. God even gave them a dose of the Moses' spirit and they began to prophecy! Just like that the camp of Israelites has moved from having three prophetic leaders to having seventy three. Aaron and Miriam surely felt some of their own prestige diminished by this explosion of new leadership. And this is when they made the mistake of opening their mouths for all the wrong reasons.

Also notice how they went about attacking their little brother, their problem was JEALOUSY, they wanted to be recognized as Moses' equal, but they appealed to the people's prejudice, to RACISM to give leverage to their complaint. Sadly since time immemorial, JEALOUSY & RACISM has been a regular byproduct of our rebellious human nature. It was jealousy that caused Cain to murder his brother Abel. It was jealousy that moved Joseph's brothers to sale him into slavery.

When you think of it, RACISM is just JEALOUS PRIDE expressed at a cultural level. The Egyptians were racists. They thought of the Israelite shepherds as a filthy sub-class, useful only as slaves. The Jews of Jesus day were even more racist. They considered their half-cousins and near neighbor Samaritans as unworthy of their friendship; they wouldn't even walk through Samaritan territory or sit down to have a meal with them. Which is why Jesus used the parable of the **Good Samaritan** to illustrate what it means to be a true neighbor; realize that the parable of the Good Samaritan is as much about the sin of RACISM as it is about neighborliness.

Worse still, the Jewish prejudice against Gentiles was so strong, they did not even think Gentiles were capable of being saved by God. This racist attitude was so inbred within the Jewish culture, that even Jesus' disciples did not recognize their own prejudice in this

matter. When Jesus told them to go into the world to disciple all peoples, they thought surely He only meant all Jewish peoples. So wherever early Jewish Christians went, they only witnessed to other Jews.

Which is why the Book of Acts tells the story of **Peter**, the blanket of **unclean animals** and **Cornelius** the Roman Centurion. You know this story. Falling asleep while waiting for supper, Peter has a thrice repeated vision of God presenting him with a sheet filled with – by Jewish standards – unclean animals and the command to eat. But Peter, refusing to eat based on his pride of having always kept a kosher diet, is forcefully told, "*What God has made clean you must not call unclean*" (10:15).

While Peter is still trying to figure out the meaning of this vision, God bluntly orders him to go with the three Gentiles who were at that moment standing at the front gate asking for him. These Gentiles then bring him to meet Cornelius who was not only another Gentile, but a commander within the Roman army, Israel's enemy; to whom of course it is against Jewish Law for Peter to even to speak (fraternizing with the enemy).

Only after hearing Cornelius' story does Peter finally understand the vision of the unclean animals and he replies.... *God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean* (10:28).

<p>'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Acts 10:34-35</p>
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It would still take these few enlightened disciples like Peter, Paul and Barnabas, the rest of their ministry and a great amount of struggle to convince their Jewish-Christian believers of the legitimacy and equality of their Gentile-Christian brothers and sisters.

Did you realize that this story of Peter and Cornelius is also a lesson against our own attitudes of racism in relation to God's love; some of which are also so deeply ingrained within our culture that we don't recognize them as such.

For example, we may see a Rebel flag flying from the tailgate of a pickup truck and think only of a romping good weekend with plenty of beer. But for a black person seeing that same flag, dredges up 450 years of memories related to their ancestors' slavery and oppression along with very current fears for their own personal safety.

Here I have to confess my own hidden prejudices. I agree with the removal of Confederate statues from the court house steps to some more appropriate historic park; since they were placed there in years past for racist reasons. But taking down the names and statues of our all founding fathers, just because they were slaveholders is going too far; we can't learn from history if we erase it. On the other hand I always thought that the Confederate flag just represented Southern redneck pride, until I heard a black family talk about their cross country camping trip and the fears aroused when they pulled into a trailer park to find a confederate flag waving at the front gate.

Now if you are getting offended by my remarks, then I challenge you to think deeply – perhaps about that which you may have never even considered before – which is the message that such prominently displayed confederate symbols convey to those who have historically been hurt by them. *God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean* (10:28).

Returning to our story of Aaron and Miriam. In view of their own suffering experienced under Egyptian racism, they should have known better than to attack Moses' marriage because of the color of his new wife's skin (Moses being about 94 at the time, most commentators think that his first wife Zipporah had died).

Now, it is a fact that the Israelites were specifically forbidden to intermarry with any of the Canaanites, whose land they were destined to inherit. However, God was also very clear, that this ban had nothing to do with race but rather with the Canaanite's profoundly immoral pagan religions. There was no other ban against marrying non-Israelites. In fact there were specific laws regarding the treatment of captured slaves should the Israelites want to marry them.

So where did this Cushite woman come from? Cush was the next country on the Nile, south of Egypt. They were a much darker skinned people than either the Egyptians or the Israelites. And as a subject nation, many Cushites also found themselves enslaved in Egypt. When we first learned the Exodus story in Sunday School, we probably never even considered that more people than just the Israelites left Egypt after the plagues, when most likely many slaves of foreign origin who had also suffered under the hands their Egyptian masters took this opportunity for freedom and departed with the Israelites.

While we don't know how many there were of these foreign camp followers, God's commands to treat, "foreigners living in the land as neighbors," was an indicator that they made up a sizable minority within the Israeli camp. So, most likely this Cushite woman was a former slave who joined with the Israelites in following the God of Abraham to the promised land. It was only her skin color which earned Miriam's public criticism. Being jealous of their brother's closer relationship with God, Miriam and Aaron chose to arouse the camp's racist attitudes as a way of diminishing Moses' authority.

Scripture goes on to recount that Moses, "*being the most humble man on the face of the Earth,*" chose not to respond to their attack, but God thought that such poisonous remarks should not be left unchallenged. So He summoned the three of them up to His tent for a personal reprimand of Aaron and Miriam for challenging Moses' authority. Then, when God departed, Miriam now found her skin as white as she had accused Moses' new wife of being black.

What the Israelites called leprosy at that time, was actually a skin condition closer to eczema or psoriasis that caused inflamed, scaly patches of skin, which under Israelite law rendered a person "unclean" and banished from living in camp. Seeing such a harsh judgment now laid upon Miriam, Aaron pleaded with Moses to forgive their foolish, sinful remarks. So Moses appealed to God for a reprieve of what might have become for Miriam

a life sentence. Of course God again listened to Moses and reduced her sentence to one week of living as one who was "unclean."

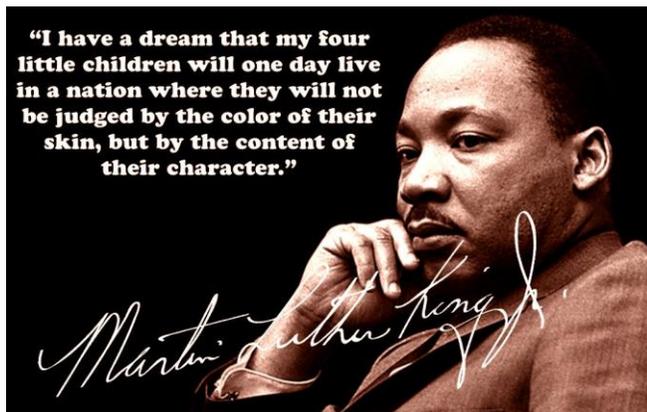
The chapter then closes with all of the Israelites waiting out the week of Miriam's banishment from camp – probably considering the dangers of jealousy and racism – until they once again began moving towards the Promised land.

So that is our story for today, all that remains is to think about what we might take home with us. How do these stories of Miriam's and Peter's prejudices speak to our own racist attitudes?

Reflecting on his own personal struggles against racism, Nelson Mandela noted that *"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love."*

Though to a certain extent, I would disagree with Mandela, believing that hate can easily spring up naturally from our fallen nature, especially if we are not taught and disciplined to resist such things as jealousy and racism; no one taught Cain to hate his brother. So unless we teach our children and personally work at challenging our own racist attitudes when we find them.... such offences against those whom God loves just as much as He loves us, will continue. As our Bible teaches us, *do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good* (Romans 12:21), which is the scriptural principle that probably inspired the Negro spiritual "We shall overcome?" A song they have been singing and trying to live out for a very long time.

In one of his most famous sermons, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. declared,



For all our brothers and sisters in Christ and those we would have as our brothers and sisters, this should be our dream as well.

Let's pray about this.