

Zion's UCC of Taborton
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Love Isn't the Only Four Letter Word

Last January, I broke down, did the Ancestry.com thing, and got my dna tested. I was pretty sure what it would tell me. I believed that I was one quarter each British, Irish, German, and Scandinavian. After all, that was where my four sets of great grandparents had come from. So I was somewhat surprised when I got the results and found that I am 67% British, 18% Western European (that's the area around the Rhine River where the Germans and French have mingled for so long), only 5% each Irish and Scandinavian, and 3% Eastern European. That adds up to 97% white European. It was the last 3% that was interesting. I am 1% European Jew, 1% Western Asian, And 1% North African.

So I learned that I am even more of a mongrel than I thought I was, but, except for a few falafel jokes from my two sons, it didn't affect my life. That is, until a few months later when I was reading a book entitled *White Trash, the Untold History of Class in America* by Nancy Isenberg, a history professor at Louisiana State University.

There I came across the Virginia racial integrity act of 1924. The Virginia law was typical of the laws enacted across the American South and it said that anyone who had any non-white blood was considered non white. I suddenly realized that under the Virginia law, my 3% Jewish, Asian and North African heritage legally defined me as a person of color. Pasty white, blond haired me would not have been allowed to use a white water fountain in the south.

That perked my interest and I decided to look under up the laws promulgated by the Nazi regime in Germany. They are called the Nuremberg laws of 1934. They state one must be $\frac{1}{8}$ non white (that is 12.5%) before they were considered to be in the non white population. So I could have been an obengruppeführer in the Waffen SS, but I could not sit in the front of a bus in Richmond Virginia of the good old USA. I think that you may be as shocked as I was to learn that when asked where they got the inspiration for their race laws, Nazi legal experts cited the laws of the American South. Only the Nazi laws weren't as strict!

Those Southern laws remained in effect well into the 1960s. They started 10 years before the Nazis And lasted for 20 years beyond them. Even then they weren't changed by politicians, but declared unconstitutional in the court system. The next time someone throws that old saw about America being a shining city on The Hill, tell them that little story. The myth and reality of US history are often far apart.

But, it still begs the question of why? Why do human beings, not just Americans, treat one another with cruelty and disdain? Why does another Four Letter Word, hate, compete so strongly with love?

At the moment our country is very concerned about race. But, as nasty as some situations may be, I think that race is only a symptom of the real disease. Racial differences are just a convenient way to identify the "other". Race isn't a factor in struggles between the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, and certainly not in the centuries old struggle in Northern Ireland. Even if you go to a place like New Mexico, the struggle isn't black and white, but white versus native American and all the various types of Hispanic people. I could cite dozens of other examples of such divisions where race is at best a secondary factor in the things that divide human beings from one another. I am firmly convinced that if we were to awaken tomorrow morning and find ourselves all bright Kelly green, by nightfall we would have found another way to separate ourselves from one another.

I believe that the problem is yet another Four Letter Word: fear. We are afraid. We fear losing our social status, we fear losing our economic position. We fear anything that is new and strange. New people, new ways, new ideas scare us. Any change is difficult for most people. We want things settled and routine. We don't want to worry about what will happen next.

And that fear is exacerbated when there is so much turmoil in the world. Will there be war in Asia? Will the new tax bill help or hurt me? Are the terrorists going to blow us up or run me down with a truck. Is some person going to through walk into this church shooting? What will global warming do to us? If I drink my tap water, will I get cancer or some other dread disease? How will my children and grandchildren succeed in this strange new world? I could go on for quite a while listing all the fears that lurk in our minds. You've got your own list tucked away up there, don't you? But, we know how we react. We become defensive. We look for absolutes that we can depend on. Religion is a big one. These are the rules, follow them and you get into heaven. Violate them And you'll be damned forever. Our ethnicity can be another. My people have always gotten it right. My country, right or wrong. For mongrels like me, that doesn't work so well.

Whatever we try and grasp, it may give temporary solace, but eventually we will have to come to terms with the fact that change is inevitable, for all of us, and for all of them. The people we have been seeing as the other are just as frightened as we are and they are struggling just as hard to cope with change. For us, they are the dangerous other. For them, we are the dangerous other. In reality we are just people trying to live in a changing world.

So, who do we turn to? The church at Ephesus was also a community that was caught up in a chaotic society where fear of change was spilling over into a fear of the other. Paul wisely said to them that Christ is peace. Jesus had broken the barrier of hatred that separated them. If Christ can reconcile that community, then surely he can ease the fear that haunts our own time.

But, to do that we have to overcome our defensiveness and anger. We have to look outward, rather than inward. The Buddhists have a Word “namaste” that they use in greeting. Essentially it translates as “I bow to the spirit in you which is also the spirit in me”. What better way to say that we are all children of God. We are all struggling to make our way in the world. Let’s not fear one another, but work together so that each of us may find that peace of Christ that passes all understanding.

The story of the bridesmaids in our Gospel reading today, reminds us that we do not know when Christ will return. We cannot waste time in fear and hate. Wisdom tells us to be the community of Christ. Namaste.