Black History Month Reflection: Making Room in the Mess

Rev. Dr. Velda R. Love
Minister for Racial Justice

“Racism is a philosophy based on contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission. It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can assure the progress of the future. Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual and physical homicide upon the out-group.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

I must say that writing about African descent ancestry, culture, and identity, is one of my passions. I celebrate gender inclusive identity pronouns for myself—She-Her-Hers because my being is created in the divine image of God. God-She/He is intentional and careful with creating humanity—female and male. My identity created in love helps me have more meaningful sacred conversations about the mythical categorizing of humans into races during the month of February, Black History Month. Some people will go to great lengths to squeeze in centuries of Black history in twenty-eight days. But for people of African descent born in America we are Black 365 days a year.

I am a woman of African descent born in America. I cannot dialogue with integrity or authenticity if I do not include the intersections that make this topic relevant. My analysis on the topic does not represent the perspectives of all African Americans born in America. However, my approach includes years of research, writing, preaching, and teaching. This passion is also based on my personal lived experiences as a product of the Black Christian church, a follower of a more radical and subversive Jesus Christ born in Northeast Africa with Black ancestral roots, and a theologian influenced by Black liberation and womanist ideologies. I use the West African Akan word to reclaim my history, Sankofa. Sankofa restores and preserves African descent history because one must go back to get our history, African history in order to understand who and whose we are culturally and ethnically, which establishes our identity in the image and likeness of God.

Race is that social, political, and economically exploitative category that sets up demarcations of systemic hierarchical human relationships. I see color and I
celebrate the complexity of God’s very good creation inclusive of diverse cultures, ethnicities, genders, and ways of being human. My goal is to always move people toward eradicating racism therefore eliminating the need to use the term “race” as a marker of human existence.

Culture can best be understood by immersing oneself in another’s cultural context. Sankofa is about cultural immersion into African and African American historical and contemporary experiences. Cultural immersion has evolved into one of the best practices and models for addressing the evolution of race and racism. The study of history and culture is not complete until the study of Africans and African Americans are thoroughly included as equally valuable alongside European historical and contemporary narratives. Also, African American narratives and lived experiences shape the history of Christianity in America. An African-centered pedagogy creates a human community perspective, encourages inclusive cultural leadership, and integrates Christian history that values an African American worldview. Sankofa educates and empowers people to dismantle and eradicate racism while advancing the ministry of restorative justice.

Identity for the African American is shaped by pre-colonial history inclusive of some of the great dynasties and empires ruled by Black women and men in antiquity. Black ruled empires like Kush, Mali, and Songhai in Africa. And rulers like Candace Empress of Ethiopia (332 B.C.), Queen of Kemet Hatshepsut (1503-1482 B.C.), and Nzingha Queen of Matamba West Africa (1582-1663 A.D.). Prehistory study and research establishes the freedom of movement, enterprise, creativity, spirituality, presence, and contributions of Africans to world civilization before the European and American exploitation and trade of African bodies as chattel and their removal from their native land across the Atlantic Ocean for economic gain and the establishment of white male supremacy. Prehistory establishes the presence of Africans before, during, and after the birth of Jesus and the early Christian Church, which began in Africa. This is countercultural because it refutes the creation of race as an identifier of human beings. Race hierarchy goes against the God of creation and humanity itself, and against the teachings of Jesus Christ. God did not create a ‘race’ of humans, nor did God create categories of superior and inferior human beings. God did not designate descendants of Europeans and Anglo Saxons, i.e. white Americans as dominant. The white American narrative is one among many narratives, and European descended peoples are but one of many ethnic cultures with a role in human history. Therefore, the social, political, and economic construction of race and racism continues to mar the image of God.

Therefore not only are we, who claim and follow Jesus to dismantle racism, we must also dismantle white Western Christian supremacy. Let’s start with some basic Black Reality History. I am not a Minority. My ancestral history is as old as human civilization. It did not start with the enslavement of African people in 1441. My ancestors continue to be misidentified as “slaves.” My ancestor’s history was interrupted. Our history did not begin with their enslavement by Europeans.
It is past time for the Christian Church to reimagine itself as serving God – She/He the Creator, and destroy the beasts of racism. The Protestant Christian Church should be on the front lines protesting, impacting policy changes, disrupting state, local, and the federal government from eroding and destroying human and civil rights. Predominately white Christian churches should be leading the call to end the myths and eradicate the idolizing of white skin as superior to other created humans. God did not create racism.

Imagine the Protestant Christian Church aligning itself with all cultures and ethnicities as equal, working toward dismantling and eradicating race categories, celebrating the equality of all cultures, and establishing our identity in the God of creation. This radical approach to life places God’s narrative at the center of life and faith, while humanity exists on the margins as co-equal partners.

1 http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy.
2 Sankofa literally means, “Go back and get it: it’s not wrong to go back and get what you have forgotten.” The word comes from Akan, the language of 18th and 19th century Ashanti Empire in what is now Ghana and Ivory Coast. http://www.blackpast.org/gah/ashanti-empire-asante-kingdom-18th-late-19th-century.
4 Africans were thought to be, in effect, without soul, spirit, emotions, desires, and rights. Chattel could have neither mind nor spirit. Various forms of human bondage still exist in our world today. As horrendous as they seem to us in our modern sensibilities they are nothing compared to the massive holocaust that struck the African continent during the great disaster called the European slave trade. This search for wealth was equivalent to the madness of a gold rush; it was the iconic capitalist venture of its era, just as information technology might be today. If a European person was not in the game, he or she felt that they were missing out on an opportunity for great wealth. Given the strength of the idea that Africans were property, chattel, that could bring great wealth some Europeans dubbed Africans, ‘Black Gold’. http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/resources/origins_chattel_slavery.aspx

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Rev. Dr. Velda R. Love is Minister for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.