

Sermon "The Wrong Side of the Tracks."
Sunday, January 15, 2011
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector
Christ Church, Shaker Heights
Epiphany II, Year B: John 1:43-51

"There is, I believe, in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil— a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome."

Can anyone identify that quote?

It comes from the novel "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen and is uttered by the character Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Darcy's statement about each of us having a tendency to some particular evil hits upon an essential truth about human nature: Prejudice emanating by our pride or conversely pride rooted in our prejudice is one of the less attractive manifestations of the human condition. Regardless of whether pride precedes prejudice or prejudice pride, they are both manifestations of that particular evil, that natural defect, which Mr. Darcy speaks about. That evil in the human disposition was one Jesus frequently encountered and addressed in his ministry.

Today's Gospel reading from John occurs shortly after Jesus' baptism. It is of interest to note that in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness immediately after his baptism where he encounters evil in the form of the devil. John's Gospel is different in that it does not mention that wilderness encounter after the baptism. Instead Jesus immediately sets off to call his apostles. It is that endeavor we hear of this morning in John. And it is in calling his apostles that Jesus encounters evil, only this time it manifests itself not as the devil but as that natural defect of Mr. Darcy's statement. It manifests itself in the pride and prejudice of Nathanael.

In the story we hear of Philip telling Nathanael the good news of having discovered the long awaited Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth. "We have found the One about whom Moses wrote in the Law and about whom the Prophets spoke," Philip gushes in excitement when he sees Nathanael. It is "Jesus, the son of Joseph, the man from Nazareth." Aghast at what Philip has told him, Nathaniel is contemptuous in his response. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he spits out.

It is in his response to Philip's news that a man from Nazareth is the Messiah that Nathanael's pride and prejudice are blatantly revealed.

You see in Nathanael's eyes Nazareth is quite an undistinguished place. It's bad enough that it is located in the heart of the backwater region of Galilee – the Appalachia of its time. But even among the people of Galilee there was disdain for one place of origin over another. Nathanael is himself from Cana, another small town in Galilee. He believes that Cana is a far superior place to Nazareth, which leads to his prejudicial response of "can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Jealousy and prejudice between town and town, village and village and region against region is prevalent in human social structure; actually it is notorious! Just witness the East/West divide here in Cleveland. I still don't get what that's about!

Defending his own turf and perceived superior status, Nathanael's reaction to Philip's announcement that the Messiah is from Nazareth, Nathanael disparages Jesus by declaring that not much good could ever come out of such a low-status place. Really?

About a year after I moved to Shaker Heights I was invited by some people who were members of a private club in the area - not Christ Church folks, by the way - to join them for a light supper and tour of this club. A special discount on initiation fees was being offered at the time and these folks had heard of my recent arrival in the area. They thought I might be interested in joining this club. It was a nice gesture.

Many of you know that in my previous life I was a professional manager of private clubs. After eighteen years in the profession I know the milieu very well. I will admit I had no interest in joining a private club but I was intrigued to see this facility and hey, it was a free meal! So I accepted the invitation.

After a tour of the club we sat down to dinner and engaged in "getting to know you conversation." One of the men asked me, "You live in Shaker Heights, right?" "Yes," I replied. "Oh. What side of the tracks do you live on?" he asked. Puzzled, I said I didn't know what he meant." He said, "You know the North or the South side of the RTA tracks." "Well which ones" I said, "the tracks on Shaker Boulevard or the ones on Van Aken?" (I was also trying to remember which way was north and south in relationship to my home.) And then with a look of exasperation he said, "The ones on Van Aken." "Oh," I said, "I live south of the Van Aken tracks."

It wasn't until a few days later when I relayed the conversation to a colleague that it was explained to me that the question of, "Which side of the tracks do you live on in Shaker?" is coded language. Living on the south side of the tracks is to some people's way of thinking, to live on the proverbial "wrong side of the tracks." The south side of the tracks is less affluent than the north (although that's a relative perception in well-to-do Shaker Heights) and it is also where the majority of African-American residents reside in Shaker. Since that night at the club, I have come to understand there are people in the Heights who when they learn you live South of the tracks in Shaker, get a look

about them where you just know they are asking themselves, "Can anything good come from the South side of the tracks?"

Certainly the response of my dinner host that night conveyed that message. Equally as certain was that the particular evil of pride and prejudice that is rooted in the "where you are from or are not from" attitude with the subsequent judgment it leads to, reared itself in a very unpleasant way as well.

Jesus proved Nathanael wrong in his belief that nothing good could come out of Nazareth. In fact Jesus taught that the distinctions we make based on the boundaries, borders and barriers we use to divide and rank one another are irrelevant in God's kingdom. As that wonderful African-American spiritual (we sang for our Gradual hymn) proclaims, "In Christ there is no East or West, in him no North or South, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth."

Nathanael came to recognize that Jesus, the man from the "wrong side of the tracks," was the Messiah. In Jesus the Messiah we are all likewise called to recognize that the presence of Jesus resides in every person, regardless of what side of the tracks they come from. We are called to not judge someone based on where they are from or what they look like, but rather on whom they are as beloved children of God.

This weekend we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. a man whose life was built on eradicating the particular evil of those human divisions of east and west, and north and south that we create. King's life was one that always sought the presence of Jesus in every human being.

"I have a dream" he said, "that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a 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.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right

there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

Amen.