

—Richard R. Guzman—

I've worried about this talk. There's a lot I want to say, a lot of examples I'd like to give but know I can't. And I've also written it out, something I never do, but did this time so I could better stay within the time limits given to me. Most of all, I wish I could be more certain that what I have to say today would make your fight against racism easier. But then I remembered what my kids have often said about me: "Yeah, Dad's a doctor, but not the kind that really helps anybody." In fact, over the years I've seen my job as actually making things harder. And it may be the same with race. So let me start with a passage from James Baldwin that I've already shared with the CPRES team.

Here's what he says anti-racism people often say to each other. They say: "...though there are whites and blacks among us who hate each other, we will not; there are those who are betrayed by greed, by guilt, by blood lust, but not we; we will set our faces against them and join hands and walk together into that dazzling future when there will be no white or black." Then he continues: "This is the dream of all liberal men, a dream not at all dishonorable, but, nevertheless, a dream. For, let us join hands on this mountain as we may, the battle is elsewhere. It proceeds far from us in the heat and horror and pain of life itself where all...are betrayed by greed and guilt and bloodlust and where no one's hands are clean."

I think being up on a mountain, talking about our ideals and dreams IS important, and I think seeing the big concepts from high up, like systemic racism, is VERY important. But finally as church leaders I think we'll have to lead the individuals in our congregations and communities down into the "heat and horror and pain of life itself." When we can *feel* the heat and horror and pain of systemic racism, then that concept might become more real. We might *really* want to do something about it then.

White Supremacy means many things, but at its core is the idea that cleanness and purity are the highest prizes and can only be maintained by separation. But separation and purity go against the nature of life itself, which is always mixing things together and creating hybrids. We imagine we'll conquer racism by purifying ourselves from it, lifting ourselves *above* it, but it might be different. When we get down into the heat and horror and pain of it, we may have to admit that we may always be betrayed by it, then look around for ways to live with ourselves and each other despite not being pure and clean. For a while at least, white people are just going to have white privilege, OK? But if they understood the pain it caused, they could begin to ask how they can use it, or give some of it up, to cool its heat. I realize it's a privilege to be able to just understand pain rather than go through it, but making that attempt humanizes others and ourselves more powerfully than almost any other thing we could do. Besides, we need to help whites understand that they have caused great pain to themselves by being active or complicit in racism.

Let me tell you about two of my most intense memories. When I was six my father rushed home for lunch one day, called my mother into the dining room where he sat, head down and breathing hard, and said, "You will never speak to the children in our language again." What horror and pain caused this, I don't exactly know, though I have some strong hunches. The solution to his pain was to make his kids as white as they could be, taking away our language so our English would be pure, never dirtied by even the trace of an accent. The psychic costs have been devastating to me, and I was pulled back and forth by people trying to purify me or make me feel dirty, sometimes literally dirty, like when I was chased home from school by a bunch of white kids who had picked up some dog poop on sticks and decided it

would be fun to throw it on me. But here's another memory that's been saving me for decades now. I was 9 or 10 listening to my radio in my bedroom in Hayward, California. I remember how the light, coming through drawn, fading shades, glowed yellow, almost gold. I remember how a wire antenna at the back of the radio rose to where I had tied it to a curtain rod. And I remember suddenly hearing Ray Charles sing "Georgia on My Mind." To this day, I don't remember ever being so still. I don't know why we get attracted to this or that singer. For me, I thought his voice was beautiful, but I also heard other things in it. I heard a longing, a fear, a sadness that resonated with me.

Over the years the feeling of that memory has only grown more and more connected to race, and I recognized even then as a young kid that the longing came from wanting to really belong somewhere, and the sadness was the fear that you never would, that race would block your way. The connection to race was made stronger by the arc of Ray Charles' career. In the early 60's he, probably the pre-eminent blues shouter in America, started recording *country* music. In his album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, a massive hit, Ray remade many classic, *white* country songs. He even remade "You are My Sunshine," as if to say, Hear this: This is what white integrated into black sounds like. These transformations reached a peak in 1972 with his album *A Message from the People*, featuring on the cover a totally reconfigured Mt. Rushmore. One side of the album leans black, the other white, but both come together in his version of one of the whitest songs of all time, "America." He began his version with verse two: "Oh beautiful, for heroes proved, in liberating strife. Who more than self, their country loved, and mercy more than life," and you knew he was referring to the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement.

His music said to me that people of color didn't have to lose so much of their identity to belong, but instead whiteness could integrate into us, into people of color. It would have to give up some things to do that, but that would be healthy for all of us, even whites.

It would have to give up always having to lead things, for example. Writing in 1970, Robert Greenleaf, who started the field of Servant Leadership studies, said: "...the next 30 years will be marked as the period when the dark skinned and...the alienated of the world asserted their claims..." and were not "led by a privileged elite...It may be that the best that some of today's privileged can do is to stand aside and serve by helping *when* asked *and* as instructed." He was off by a couple decades but that time could be now, today, though we're not there yet. We still love white saviorism, and give Best Picture Oscars to white savior films like *Greenbook*. My wife's been telling me about a podcast series she's been listening to, and I've listened to bits of. It's called *Nice White Parents*, about how white parents come in to "help" a struggling minority school, but just wind up taking over, eventually leaving the interests of that school, its students, and its community in a distant second place, all while "meaning well."

In the introduction to my 2006 book *Black Writing from Chicago* I wrote that, If you're American, culturally you're already 1/3 black. I was trying to be provocative with that percentage, not precise. What we mostly see around us today is separation, and it's clear that so many whites still want to keep themselves as separate from black lives as possible. Yet most of the people who define the positive aspects of America to the world are black. Michael Jordan in sports, Michael Jackson, Beyoncé, and Kendrick Lamar in music. There's Oprah, who's everywhere, and in politics Michelle and Barack Obama, and looming over everyone, Martin Luther King, Jr. If you've absorbed anything of the meaning of these people – I'd say, Yes, you could be 1/3 black, culturally speaking. But that 1/3 is the easy part to identify with because it's all about success. What we need to do today is move beyond and see these individual

lives and accomplishments in the context of the white supremacy and racism they occurred in. And not just these famous lives but the lives of all the people of color whose lives we can come close to, and need to know better, as real people. We need to understand their human pain. I think it's healthier if we think of white being integrated into black, not to create a kind of people of color supremacy to replace white supremacy but to acknowledge that the world is inextricably mixed and interdependent. Whiteness doesn't acknowledge that very well. Baldwin believed that nowhere in the world but America have the lives of black and white been so entwined. Our destinies and freedoms, he said, utterly depend on each other. We need to help white people truly claim their kinship with blackness, pain and all. And what they'll find there is hurt, and even rage, certainly, but also a miraculous balancing of that hurt with restraint, and grace, and hope. That's incredible, fertile ground for forgiveness and healing.

All this has implications for our theology. Baldwin's name has been all over our current discussions of race because his take on racism has been about the deepest and most complex we've ever had, but he also recognized that one of the very *simple* roots of racism was this: that we see the color of evil and damnation as black, and the color of salvation as white. Our theology has white supremacist leanings. When I was younger, I was a song leader leading songs like: Lord, Jesus, I want to be perfectly whole. I want you forever to live in my soul. Break down every idol, strike down every foe. Now wash me and I will be whiter than snow. [Now everybody sing with me on the chorus!] Whiter than snow, Yes whiter than snow. Now wash me and I will be whiter than snow. White, white, white. Purity. Separation. But what if salvation is not white snow, white robes, white lambs. And what if holiness meant something more than being "set aside," separated from the unholy and profane. This is one of the things they always got after Jesus for. He simply refused to set himself aside, to separate himself from all those unholy, unclean people, even lepers and tax collectors. Instead he led people into the heat and horror and pain of life itself. Theological discussions can get pretty abstract, but if we could think about salvation and holiness involving whiteness integrating into blackness, not wiping it out, but accepting a creative, equal mutuality with it, this discussion could lead to some very practical steps on our way to becoming a more equal, more anti-racist people.