

## From the Desk of Mack H. Smith, Jr.

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### IT'S NOT TOO LATE

One of my greatest joys in life is the privilege of being an African decent Pastor in the ELCA Lutheran Church. It's a responsibility I haven't taken lightly since my call at the age of 5 years old. For 40 years (March 1, 2021) I have frequently walked with people from all walks of life through their hurts, pains, disappointments, and today its racism and white privilege. I am also most thankful that over these 40 years, I have not only stood on the shoulders of my ancestors but I have also had my Joshua ad Caleb folks who helped to hold me up in the tough times. I want to share with you a few of my personal, social and church struggles.

What are some struggles African Americans live with/deal with throughout their lives? Our struggles include a lack of unity, poor money management, lack of a good education, lack of discipline on the part of many parents, welfare, teen pregnancy, drugs/alcohol, lack of morals/values, the jinx of slavery, the crisis between African American men and women, a lack of spiritual vision, lack of investigative African American media, lack of business resources, health/life insurance, poor health, interracial marriage, loss of identity, integration, a desire for instant wealth, and fear. The list goes on and on.

After this daily dose of struggles, I also experienced a few historical challenges. The 1964 Brown vs. Board of Education, 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott (Rosa Parks), 1964 Civil Rights Bill, 1964 & 1968 the burning down of our neighborhoods over the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Many of these neighborhoods/neighbors never returned.

Thirdly, the biggest struggle for me takes place in September 1961 when I encountered blatant racism and white privilege. Imagine you are 9 years old and receive an invitation to attend a local white Lutheran Church (LCA). You take a seat and the members near you move back a few pens. Come time for Holy Communion-and folks move 6 feet or more away from you. Is this how church members are supposed to act? Their attitude followed me to Sunday School, confirmation, Luther League, bible study, undergraduate, graduate school, (Seminary) internship, certification and endorsement examination for ordination. Lastly when it came time for a call to a congregation for me and others, if you were lucky enough to receive a call, you had to make it work because you didn't get a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance. I didn't give up. Genesis 1:26 reminds me I am somebody. Christ was with me the entire time.

Furthermore, I and other folks of color continue to struggle on a daily basis with white folks who remain blind in their white privilege/racism attitudes and who are not ashamed of it. For the record, white folks typically move through life unaware, or are in denial of all the barriers that they themselves set up that don't dismantle the many systems that opposed the black community and other people of color in this country-I hear things like:

1) "It's not my job to fix racism because I am not a racist"-

My friends, what you are essentially saying is because the systemic racism doesn't hurt you personally, you don't need to be involved in the fight against it. This statement also ignores the fact that racism is a structural problem and not a personal problem-wrong. We folks of color would like to live in a world where our skin color does not impact the way we are treated.

2) I "don't see color"-

My friends, to refuse to acknowledge the color of a person's skin is also a refusal to acknowledge the struggles they have experienced and discrimination/racism they have faced because of their skin color.

3) "I don't have white privilege"-

My friends, you get defensive when you hear the term because you don't really understand it and its contents.

My friends, "white privilege" does not mean all white people live charmed/easy lives". "It simply means that the color of your skin is not one of the reasons you may experience personal or professional barriers. For white people to dismiss these special benefits they have been blessed with because of the whiteness, only goes to show how oblivious and privileged you really are.

"There is good news" "***It's not too late***"

I am the world's biggest Baltimore Ravens fan in Upstate New York and the world. If you have ever (I have) watched a football game, you know that midway through the game (30 minutes) both teams go to their locker rooms to rest and reassess what took place in the 1<sup>st</sup> half. It's a time to regroup-to evaluate how things have been going and to decide what adjustments need to be made for the rest of the game. How many times have you seen the team on the losing side of the scoreboard come back and win the game?

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The same is true in life. You might be in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of the game heading into half time. The game is not over and your clock is still ticking. There is plenty of life and reassessment (personal change) yet to come. Maybe you made some mistakes, made poor decisions, judged someone different from you badly and experienced many disappointments. Maybe you are someone who says/does things that highlight your white privilege not realizing the harm it is doing to someone else. The final whistle has not been blown and it is not too late for Christ Jesus to take you straight to the plan he has for you. It's not too late for God to lead you into your glorious tomorrow.

The second half of the game has arrived. "Adjustment Time is Now". My advice to you as serve together with the ministry of word/sacrament and service is to continue to love. Forgive each other. Surrender your white privilege/racist attitudes. It's never too late. Don't let your yesterday keep you from your tomorrow. Learn from yesterday and don't just live in it.

In closing, God looks at your future while the enemy tries to keep you focused on your past. God says: "You can in spite of what has been done", but the enemy says, "You can't because of what you have done!" God will never define you by your past, whether it's the good, bad or the ugly that dominates you. The 1<sup>st</sup> half Satan's goal is to keep you chained there, but my advice to you, as we serve, love and forgive each other in this ministry. It is never, let your yesterday keep you from your tomorrow. Learn from yesterday, just don't live in it.

Pastor Mack H Smith, Jr.