

No, I Do Not
Rev. Curtis L. Price
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Isaiah 43:18-19

“Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise. “

The text for today says, do not remember the former things or consider the things of old, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the Spring of 2001 my answer to that question coming from Isaiah was, “No, I Do Not.” That Spring is when I joined the Task force that was charged with forming a new region that would eventually become the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Church. This group was formed when it was decided that the churches in ABC of the Northwest that were committed to autonomy of the local church and the churches that took issues with the two churches that were members of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, an organization made up of churches that welcomed into full participation people from the LGBTQ community. Seattle First Baptist was one of those churches. University Baptist was the other and they even dared to call an openly gay albeit prudish pastor, named Tim Philips. I had never met Tim at this point. My first introduction to him was at my ordination council. This is the gathering where I defend my ordination paper to all of my colleagues. Tim wasn’t able to attend but he had read my paper and sent along a letter with his notes and reflections in it. At the bottom of the letter Tim had written a PS that said, “Sorry to play into the stereo type with the flowery stationery, it was all I had.” I didn’t get it until I asked someone who Tim Philips was and they said, “Isn’t that the gay guy they called to University.” Once I realized who Tim was, the note made me laugh.

I was the youth pastor at a church that was having an internal battle over this issue as well. A battle that got very ugly and mean. Lies and half-truths were told and misinformation was spread freely in a campaign to smear AWAB, these two churches and Queer folk in general. Pastor was misquoted a few times. This crusade ultimately led to me and the head pastor resignation, not over the issue of which side to fall on, but over the ugliness with which people had gone about it. I say all of that to make the point that I was coming at this task with some baggage. I wasn’t feeling inspired, or creative or excited about any “new thing” God was doing in our midst. So No, I did not perceive it. Initially I was asked to serve on this group because I was a youth pastor and it was decided that the first year of the two years, we had to form a new region should be spent in building relationships among the churches. And I was supposed to do that with the youth. The group decided to go at it in this way because when we looked closely at the churches that fell within the boundaries of the Seattle Baptist Union, which would serve as the initial boundary for the new region, we realized that it was made up of 15 traditionally dominate

culture churches and 15 traditionally African American churches and a handful of Asian churches. People got excited about this because it meant that there was no ethnic or cultural majority. They thought this presented an incredible opportunity. So we went to the African American Churches and we said, "hey we got this new thing region we are putting together because I am sure you heard about the split in the region and we would like you to throw in with us and help us put this things together". To which they replied, "I'm sorry, you are who?" When we started looking into it and started looking for partners in this effort the African American Pastors basically said, "We don't know you, we don't trust you, and quite frankly, we don't have skin in this fight, we have our own problems and this argument isn't high on our list."

So the committee decided to suspend any discussion about the structure of the new region and instead hosted a series of events to help build those relationships. We went to baseball games, we had youth events that Ashley Wiest- Laird and I work on together and we had the clergy dinner cruise. And all be darned if it didn't work. Fledging friendships were formed, and the foundations of trust were built. I was amazed. The group so far was pretty "white heavy" if you know what I mean. The only voices of color we had at the time was Minister James Winbush who was an associate at MLK jr. Memorial Baptist Church and a man you all know named Yoshitada Nakagawa. Yosh kept talking about his experiences in the Asian Caucus of ABC. And so we resolved that we would form a vision committee made up of four people from each of the three ethnic groups represented. I was one of the white guys.

Once we all got together, Yosh Nakagawa began to explain to us that really the only way the Asian people within the American Baptist Churches ever felt empowered was in the context of the Caucuses. As individual Japanese Churches or Chinese Churches or South Pacific Islander churches they were never heard. It was only when they all joined forces as an Asian National Caucus that they were able to be heard. Dominate culture saw them all the same anyway. Yosh insisted that this was the way we ought to structure ourselves, including the White group. This was a crazy idea that I was sure would never fly. It didn't even make sense, how would us splitting into racial groups bridge the gap between the churches of color and the churches of dominant culture? But Yosh kept at it trying to explain why this was a good structure idea and pretty soon we began to see the wisdom of it. In addition, when Yosh talked about empowerment that came through the caucuses on a national level, the African American churches agreed. There was a reality that came to us in all of this. We-- by we, I mean the dominate group, all of us white folks--We had said that this was an opportunity for all voice to come around the table; we had realized early on that we would never be able to form a new region without participation from the churches of color. And so here we were, hat in hand, asking, "How do we make sure you get heard?" and they said, that doing decision making by caucuses was the way to do that. While I was not really sure this was a good idea, we had asked for leadership from the churches of color and this is what they came to us with, it was time for me to shut up and try something new.

Some amazing things happened when we stepped out in faith like this. All of a sudden, we didn't have the other groups to focus on anymore. We good liberal white folks were always so concerned about the fact that churches of color did not participate. All of a sudden now, this was not our problem, that was the concern of the Black Caucus (which, by the way was the name they chose for their caucus. We opted for the term Euro-caucus). And the Black caucus took notice of how many churches were not participating and began to think about how to get those churches involved. We were forced to look at ourselves in a way we never have had to do before. What we discovered was that we who are dominate culture have our own fractures to deal with. Unlike the ethnic and cultural minorities in our midst, being dominate means that we never have had to speak as one group. We have never had to be White in the way that Asians have to be Asian. They don't see themselves that way. They see themselves as Japanese or Chinese, Korean or Cambodian. It is our society that wants to label them as one thing, Asian. These subgroupings often had very little in common and were even historically hostile to each other. Yosh used to tell us stories of how difficult it was in those early days of forming into a caucus. They could spend

hours trying to figure out what style of rice to serve at lunch because every Asian Culture does it differently.

It is the same for white folks. We have all these sub-cultures that don't think the same way and sometimes don't get along. Men and women, clergy and layperson, gay and straight, introvert and extrovert which I had never realized was such a huge thing until your own Cathy Franson and I began to try to work together. As time went on I realized that Cathy and I were a good barometer of the Euro Caucus. Because here we were both in leadership a man and a woman, both strong people, one extroverted, one introverted. I always said that if Cathy and I can overcome the differences that made it challenging for us to do work together, then the Euro Caucus can accomplish anything. And I have to say that Cathy and I did just that, we overcame the things that conspired to keep us apart and not only did we do a lot of good work together, we walked away from it all as colleagues and friends. This was a gift of the Caucus system and remains a gift that we continue to explore together which programs like the one here called, "I'm not racist, but we are" and other such efforts.

Another thing happened as we were pulling this region together. We had come up with a name, a mission statement we had a vision statement and we were in the process of finalizing the By-laws and when we gave it to the lawyer to put into the legal language, there was a line in it saying that the Association would make decisions using Roberts Rules of Order. Dr. Marica Patton observed this and was remembering how many times we were at meetings and the room was divided and the discernment process under Roberts Rules only served to divide us even more and then we would vote and there were winners and there were losers. Dr. Patton suggested that we adopt a consensus model. Once again, we in dominant culture struggled because consensus takes something we were never forced to have and that is trust in each other. But by this time, we were pretty open to anything, so we put it in there. The search for consensus brought us many gifts as well. I have never, in the 16 years we have been a region, walked away feeling like I have not been heard, nor that any other person has not been heard.

What I really need to say about all of this is that what ultimately came out of this is not a structure or a system for decision making, but redemptive relationships. Through Evergreen I find myself in relationships that never would have happened otherwise. It's not that different races were not active in other iterations of ABC life, but here, there were deliberate efforts made to empower each other and to create fertile soil for deep and abiding relationships to grow and flourish. Where structure fails, relationship is the glue that holds the whole thing together. Looking back, did I perceive the new thing that God was doing in our midst. I have to admit, No, I did not. Do I see it now. Oh yes I do. Do I think God is continuing to shape us, stretch us and help us grow? Oh yes I do.

Seattle First Baptist you have been a part of this story from the beginning. Evergreen's story is your story. This is Kingdom Building stuff. This is what the Bible tells us what heaven looks like when every tribe and every nation and every tongue will stand before the Lamb of God together, as one. That is nothing short of our goal together. I thank you for the role you have played in that and encourage you to continue in your faithfulness because there is still more to do. This story is the beginnings of our journey together. It is an important one, but it is not all that we are. Isaiah tells us to not remember the former things or dwell on the things of old. I do not agree with that. Our story is an important one to tell. However, God is getting ready to, nay is already doing a new thing. It springs forth. Do you not perceive it? This time I do.