

May 8, 2016

Dear Family and Friends,

America continues to change in some significant yet challenging ways, particularly with regard to moving towards a more racially and ethnically diverse country where whites make up less and less of the majority each year. Today about 30% of the US population is nonwhite and it is expected by 2050 that white Americans will no longer be the significant majority. At that point America will be an even more diverse nation of minority races that include significant populations of minority races collectively totaling 50% or greater of the whole population. Building a bridge to this new America is something that continues to really challenge our country without us realizing that this inevitable declining white majority may be at least part of the cause of what we are experiencing. This greater diversity can truly be a huge strength to our country in the future if we better understand and embrace it. This inevitable shift, I believe, at least partially explains the craziness of our current political season.

I truly want to be a participant in helping to build that bridge to a greater new America that is still ahead of us. My world view was greatly shaped from growing up in the 50's and 60's in a white middle class home with a stay at home Mom and a Dad who was our sole provider. Many of my formative years and a great deal of my playtime memory is from our living in Fircrest, a small community west of Tacoma, which at the time I was growing up, had no persons of color living in its boundaries. I say this to provide some context for the rest of this letter.

I am writing to you out of obedience to a new assignment that God has been slowly laying the groundwork for over some time now, but which only recently came into view after reading an extraordinarily discerning new book. Have you ever read a book that caused you to finally put the highlighter down after you realized that almost the entire text deserved highlighting? I just finished such a book, America's Original Sin by Jim Wallis and I encourage you to make this book a high priority to read soon. While the entirety of my new assignment remains unclear, I am certain about step one and that is to draft this letter and share my story and this book with you.

Allow me to backup a bit to provide further context on how the Lord seems to be bringing awareness to me on institutional racial injustice in America. During this past few years I have become aware of and concerned with racial injustices that previously had not broken through the bubble that I didn't even realize I lived in. The first incident that broke through was the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in Florida in February 2012. If you remember it was six weeks after Trayvon's death that the shooter, George Zimmerman, was charged and only then after a huge national public outcry. Several things about this particular incident were unsettling to me. A couple years later I remember the outcry over the death of Eric Garner in New York from an illegal police chokehold. Then you couldn't miss all the news about the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri by a police officer who was later found to have shot in self defense. Even so that left many questions for me including why Michael's body was left laying in the street for several hours before being properly removed.

This list of seeming injustices, many with eyewitness videos for us to see, just kept growing. In case you may say, as many have, that these were isolated individual events, that in no way indicate a pattern, please go to You Tube and search 'Eric Garner' and watch one of the videos of what actually happened and see how it strikes you? After several of these incidents a local university student arranged for concerned Tacoma citizens to gather at the Grand Cinema to begin a community conversation. I went to that meeting and heard some things for the first time that were important for me to understand. One of my takeaways, I am embarrassed to say, was that I had possessed "white privilege" my entire life without realizing it. The other memorable takeaway from that meeting was hearing from an African American mother about "the talk" that apparently most black American families have particularly with their sons regarding police interactions. I had never heard about that before and that too broke through my bubble.

Being a concerned citizen who wanted to try to make better sense out of this seemingly endless string of mostly videotaped fatal interactions between police and persons of color, I arranged to meet with a person who is a career police officer that I know with over twenty years of service. After being at the community meeting I really wanted to get a 'police perspective' on these incidents; such as was this just business as usual for the police or should we citizens be significantly concerned about what we were seeing? We had some friendly dialog about policing and he was quite honest with me and I heard that policing is complicated and often driven by Command Staff decisions that may not be in agreement with the street officers. Also, that in split second decision making, such as officers often have to make, it is too easy after the fact to give armchair critique in situations that we do not have all the facts. I came away realizing that our Police have a job to do and for the most part they do it well. This friend explained to me that, as citizens, we may not fully grasp the dire circumstances and fast moving nature of what our Police deal with and that makes it difficult for us to make clear judgements of what happened in these various incidents. While I appreciated his perspective and the time he shared with me I realized I needed to keep digging for deeper answers to what is really going on here.

The content of America's Original Sin was difficult to read in many ways as it calls into question several long held beliefs that we need to challenge and this includes many things that we don't generally talk openly about. We still have a ways to go in America to form that "more perfect union". Will you join me on this assignment and read this awesome book and then, if you too are so motivated, join me in conversation about how WE can cross that bridge together to a new America? I believe God will reveal additional steps to this assignment as we read and pray. I look forward to beginning this conversation with many of you.

Sincerely,
Joe