

Racial Profiling: "We Do Not Know Each Other"

The Gates/Crowley clash is the most recent, but hardly the worst, example of the racial tensions that still haunt us.

Recently I asked several black friends, "Have you ever been racially profiled?"

Each of them laughed and said, "Of course!" I interpreted that to mean, "Did you really have to ask?"

What is racial profiling? A friend of mine, a black professor, appeared before the Orlando City Commission on an issue that affected the black community. One black speaker would tell the Commission their view, and then another black speaker would tell the Commission a different view. After several black speakers had expressed their views, the mayor said, "Why don't you all get together and agree on what your position is on this issue, and then come back to see us."

Do you see the problem? The mayor assumed that all black people should think alike. Of course, black people don't all think alike any more than all white people think alike. And that's the essence of racial profiling -- it's stereotyping. But it's even more than that -- it's *negative* stereotyping. It's assuming that because many people in a particular group act in a particular way that everyone in that group is probably guilty of the same behavior.

A Pair of Socks

Another black friend of mine, a lawyer, told me that he went to a department store to buy some socks. When he checked out, the white woman at the register said, "Honey, is that going to do it for you?" As he was telling me the story he became enraged and said, "Can you believe that? She called me honey!" After he had vented for another couple of minutes, I explained to him how that same woman called me "honey" too.

By being a good listener, I think I helped my friend that day. Because he had been racially profiled in the past, his antennae were tuned to "hear" through a filter that confirmed his past experience. Processing that way, of course, can become self-fulfilling. Anyone who's ever been stereotyped -- whether black, female, tattooed teenager, Hispanic, or blonde -- knows the anger, resentment, and super-sensitivity that follow. It can affect your whole world view.

Forty years ago the racial temperature in America was 104 degrees. Now it's only 100. It's still not normal, but it's better than it was. We have made a huge amount of progress since the days of school segregation and separate water fountains. Electing an African-American president is a singular pinnacle achievement. Yet the underlying attitudes of many -- both white and black -- perpetuate the stereotypes of whites towards blacks, and also blacks towards whites. Racism is a very thick wall.

What is the underlying problem, and is there a solution? Or is the problem so big we just have to learn to live with it?

Family History

My parents were amazingly respectful of Jews, blacks, Catholics, and anyone else not like the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants that they were. If I had ever uttered a racial slur, I would still be black and blue!

And that's the first consideration in racial profiling -- parents have a huge impact on how we think about different ethnicities and religions. But this cuts both ways. Some white parents poison their children, but so do some black parents.

Frankly, racism is so ingrained in some people, both white and black, that I suspect they'll never change. They will just have to die off and be replaced by a younger, wiser generation.

We Do Not Know Each Other

I attended segregated schools. As a result, I never actually knew a black person until I was in the Army -- except the woman that helped my mother once a week and became one of her closest friends.

And that's the second consideration in racial profiling -- when we don't actually "know" someone who is different, all our information is based on hearsay and stereotypes. It's just natural to be suspicious of someone we don't know when they are "different."

In the early 1970s, I became best friends with an African-American named Tom Skinner. We both played tennis, and we both were interested in theology. It just happened. I could have lived my whole life without knowing a black person with little consequence. So my unthinking response to racism was apathy. As Tom pointed out, a black man can't go one week without understanding how white people think. And because a lot of blacks feel the apathy of whites, they harbor anger.

As Tom often repeated, "The problem is that we do not know each other."

As Tom and I listened to each other and became friends, an interesting thing happened. Tom took away my apathy, and I took away his anger. All of the programs in the world pale in comparison to the strategy of two people from different backgrounds sitting down together and getting to know each other. So kudos to President Obama for getting Gates and Crowley together.

The question takes on biblical proportion: Am I my brother's keeper? And who is my brother?

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

The Bible has a lot to say about our obligations to each other. My personal favorite is 1 John 4:20-21 which says,

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.

That's strong! And there are many others (e.g., Romans 13:7; 14:10, 13, 19; 15:1-2; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 8:13; and Ephesians 2:14-16).

So, "Who is my brother?" First and foremost, anyone who is "in Christ" is your brother or sister:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:28-29)

At an even more basic level, everyone is my brother and sister. We are all sons and daughters of Noah through Shem, Ham, or Japheth. From Shem came the Semitic people, the Jews. From Ham came the dark skinned Africans and Canaanites. From Japheth came the fair skinned Europeans. We are literally all related biologically. We come from the same bloodline.

Finally, and most importantly, every human being is created in the *imago dei* -- the image of God. A human being is the full expression of God's creative genius. To not honor others is to dishonor the One who made them.

Two Examples

In 1980, we had a small racial incident here in Orlando, but it was big enough to make the evening news. With the help of my black professor friend, we called a meeting that was attended by 10 black men and 10 white men. We all agreed that we wanted to take a next step, but there was disagreement about what the next step should be. Half wanted to do a task. The other half wanted to build relationships. We decided that first we needed to know each other.

We met one Saturday morning each month for the next five years. We called ourselves "The Black/White Fellowship." As it turned out, instead of doing one task we did many. Over those five years we met financial needs, helped the poor, repaired houses, assisted with medical needs, sent men to seminary, and started ministries. And it all happened because we got to know each other. It took away anger and apathy.

In the early 1990s, Tom Skinner and I helped leaders in Jackson, Mississippi, start Mission Mississippi, a ministry of reconciliation. Half of Jackson is black and half of Jackson is white, but they were strangers living in two separate worlds. As one white

woman said with tears streaming down her face, "I don't even know a black person." It was clear that the sting of the lack of the gospel in Jackson was most keenly felt at the point of race. Leaders in that community courageously faced their sins against each other, and today Mission Mississippi has chapters throughout the state.

Their strategy was simple: To invite a person of another race to breakfast or lunch and get to know each other. As Tom Skinner liked to say, "A relationship is the most powerful force in the world."

What You Could Do

Last week, after I asked my African-American friends if they had ever been racially profiled, I then asked, "Can you tell me how that happened?" I also made it clear that I wasn't looking for the short or politically correct answer.

As I listened in each conversation, a catharsis took place. As they told me about their humiliation and pain, it made apathy impossible. And I'm pretty sure that I took away some of their anger too.

So how should a Christian respond to racial profiling? In Christ, the relationship is the task. Why not take someone of a different race to breakfast or lunch?