FRIENDS I HAVE NOT MET YET

by

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John 15: 12-16
Matthew 10: 34-38
Luke 9: 57-62

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"I have a dream"...
comes blaring over the many loudspeakers that are perched somewhere among the trees and the great monuments of the city of Washington. The voice connotes a soulful passion even in its amplified form.

"That some day little white boys and black boys in Georgia"... As the powerful words envelop me, there is a ringing in my ears that I cannot discern. The ringing is not of some distant bell, but the sound of a voice crying.

"Let me tell you, brothers and sisters"...
In that otherwise faceless crowd of thousands, one face emerges, etched against the brillant blue sky. A black woman, fiftyish, is standing in front of me, crying. Her weeping face dominates the panorama before me. In the place of heads, all the other human bodies appear to have placards that say March for Freedom, March on Washington, August 27, 1963. Despite the roaring of the slogan-headed masses, I hear only the sounds of my solitude and the woman's weeping. The cheering, clapping, and shouting of the thousands grow to a deafening roar in response to the building crescendo of the amplified voice. Then there is silence.

I remember where I am in time and space: It is August 27, 1963, and I am in Washington, D.C., a participant in the March on Washington. The amplified and triumphant voice is that of Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking to a crowd of over 200,000 people. I am intellectually aware of the historical and political significance of the particular moment. Now, twenty years later, when I recall the vision of that weeping woman at the March, I am struck by the effects of time on my perspective.

The March was, of course, a great political event in the history of race relations in this country. Recall, if you will, that twenty years ago in some parts of this country a black person could not eat in restaurants, could not sleep in hotels, or in some instances could not even vote without fear of intimidation or death. The March was aimed at marshalling political support to pass specific laws to remedy this situation.

The unknown weeping woman at the March on Washington is important to me in understanding the effects of race on my own life. I had a political kinship with that woman. By some quirk of fate, however, I was made aware of my lack of social and spiritual kinship with her, and thus my need for true human connections.

My sermon today is not, however, about the political aspects of how we must confront racial issues in this country. This morning, in my commemoration of the March on Washington is a message that attempts to talk about the ways race affects us socially, spiritually, and personally.

I.

Nearly twenty years after the March, I realized that I began the long journey towards my own sense of being at peace in the world as a black man when I accepted the gulf between myself and that sorrowful and unknown woman. On that historic day a seed that had been planted in my soul began to germinate: I was an alien to the 200,000 people who represented the Movement (the Civil Rights Movement); I was an alien to myself; I was at war with my soul.

As a nearly forty year-old man looking back on my adolescent self at the time of the March, I recaptured some of the essential truths about myself. Much of my then recent experience, particularly my freshman year at Harvard, had reinforced my pre-existing tendency to believe in the ultimate power of human rationality, particularly the power of my own mind. In the spring and summer of 1963, everything seemed knowable to me. There was nothing to fear since the power of the human mind could eliminate all the unknowns and unlock all the ancient myths and mysteries. The Civil Rights Movement was for me simply a way of destroying racial myths and restoring a rational human order.

From my birthplace in St. Louis I had gone to Harvard in the fall of 1962, untouched in a personal sense by the tremendous social energy that had been unleashed by the Civil Rights Movement, which had started shortly after my birth and which reached a climax in the late fifties and early sixties. My life had been one of protection from and triumph over any racial barriers that might have existed in my immediate environment. As the ninth child in a family of ten children, I had heard many stories from older siblings about the segregated movie theaters, restaurants, and swimming clubs in the 1950's. Yet it never occurred to my siblings to allow me to witness any of these affronts to human dignity; I was one of two "babies" in the family whom they felt obligated to protect. My parents and siblings acted with implicit confidence that these racial barriers would never inhibit me because I was better at everything that mattered in the world, or at least I was willing to prove my superior abilities to any person, particularly any white person.

Their optimism seemed totally justified early on in my life outside of my family. My grammar school teachers, many of whom had had at least one of my older siblings in a class, spoke to my parents of my attending a private, non-segregated grammar school in order to prepare me for attending a fine college, such as Harvard. When school desegregation was announced in St. Louis, I was in the fifth grade. My teacher had pointed out that there were no such things as "white" or "black" schools since all schools were made from the same brick. So, when desegregation was implemented the next fall and after a series of tests and interviews, I was whisked across town to a special class for "gifted children". My sixth grade teacher, whose unusual dedication and sense that superior

intelligence would triumph over school bureaucracy, racial bigotry, and a lack of decorum, only reinforced my triumphant notion of myself. He was to be my teacher for the remainder of my grammar school career, providing me also with a feeling of protection and caring. At the tender age of eleven, I started to feel that no worthwhile intellectual experience was to be denied me. One day in the seventh grade, my teacher, in one of his frequent recitations to our entire class of twenty-two students, told us about a secondary school of true distinction, the Phillips Exeter Academy. He also mentioned that the school had a scholarship program and that I and two of my classmates should be recommended to Exeter. I was later to go to Exeter and from there on to Harvard.

While at some level, my education and present professional position might be described as an American success story, I now realize that my "success" has set me apart from most other Blacks, most other people, and even my orginal family. Thus, at times I have experienced spiritual and emotional pain because of my lack of connection to other human beings.

I would like to share with you today two other significant experiences in my lifelong journey toward spiritual awareness, and finally my perspective on how we might overcome the stress that is the inevitable result of the particular social and historical context in which we live.

II

A couple of years ago I made a visit to St. Louis, where most of my original family still resides, to discuss with my brother and sisters a "rift" that had grown between us. The rift involved many small issues ranging from my marriage years before in Ithaca rather than in St. Louis, to my treatment of an older brother when he visited Ithaca some time before. Beneath all the specifics, however, was the realization of my estrangement from my original family. My older sisters and brothers knew and loved the fourteen year-old boy who left St. Louis to go to Exeter. They had no idea of, nor furthermore little interest in, my life as a husband, father,and university adminstrator. While distantly proud of my success, they could not know the stresses these various roles placed on me. I, too, had lost touch with their frustrations and their hopes, despite numerous phone calls and other attempts to keep in contact. By doing what I thought was important with my own life, it occurred to me that in many ways "my foes" had become "those of my household." I felt estranged from my siblings, my mother, and the people with whom I had grown up. I no longer knew them and they no longer knew me. I yearned to know them and yet I felt anger, not sadness, at my situation.

One of my sisters said to me after this conversation in St.Louis, "Remember, Larry, if anything ever happens to you, you are still our brother and we will be there. And we love you because you are part of us." I saw my sister's expressed love for me as a love connected to our biological bonds, our growing up. She, like most members of our tightly-knit family, would give up her life for me because I was her brother, and she would be compelled by her notions of family and tradition. Her love was not, then, that form of Christian love of which Christ spoke that treats each of us an equal, as a mystery, and then as a possible friend. For we are instructed that the greatest love is to lay down our lives for a friend - a human relationship made of choice, not obligation. Thus it was in coming to grips with my anger at feeling displaced from my large and tightly-knit family that I recognized that the highest form of human love is a chosen friendship.

My way of connecting, however, with my siblings, with my blackness, and with human beings in general is to hold out the possibility of friendship--of seeing each person as he or she is and is capable of becoming--but to recognize its improbability in most human encounters. For my siblings, I am still "their little brother." For me, they are human beings I do not yet know.

III

A few years ago I was at a Christmas party here in Ithaca. The meal was buffet-style, and I found myself sitting on the floor at a coffee table with several people and talking to someone about a cheerful topic. A man sitting next to me said suddenly, "You must be uncomfortable being the only black person here." I replied "no," that I had not noticed this fact until he mentioned it. I resumed my conversation with the other person at the table, but the man, who had been drinking, began to badger me with racial jokes. I was shocked and a little uneasy so I left the table and went into another room.

Later, the man came with his wife to apologize to me, explaining that he had had too much to drink, and offered to shake my hand. I refused both his apology and his hand, told him he had no right to make racially insulting remarks, and that I had no desire to know or to be reconciled with him. I further told him that perhaps he would remember this incident and, in his next encounter with someone black, treat that person with respect. There was a moment of tension, but the man and his wife soon left the party, and I later joined my host and hostess and the others to serenade the neighborhood with Christmas carols.

I felt it was my mission at that moment to break a polite northern tradition that allows for joking racial insults, followed by apology and forgiveness. Before the drunken man spoke, he was

like everyone else, "a friend I had not met yet", but after he spoke I recalled that weeping black woman at the March on Washington and wondered how such a man would have treated her powerlessness and blackness if given a chance. I now realize that at its root racial discrimination strives to break the human spirit, to destroy the possibility of human connections. My drunken would-be friend could not see me because of his unease with race or some void in his own life, so I could not connect with him any more than I could connect with my sister. So in a small way, when I refused to let my own spirit be crushed, without anger at my would-be friend and racial tormentor, I felt solidarity with my nameless friend who by her presence at the March on Washington made an affirmative statement of faith. When Christ said he came "to bring a sword," he meant we must sometime face the loneliness that confronts our particular social and historical situation in order to fulfill his mission first. My small sword was an apparent act of social ingratitude, but it left me at peace with the unmet friends who are seeking human connections and the feelings of God's grace. Our Christian teaching tells us we must face the prospect of being alone in the world as the price of discipleship.

IV.

Shortly after I moved to Ithaca, and in the course of a discussion with a very good friend about a forthcoming trip, I disclosed my fear of vacationing alone. My friend told me, "You will not be alone, you will be with friends you have not met yet." What my friend meant was that when we discover who we are--when we let go of the racial views of our past, and realize that unlike birds and foxes we as Homo sapiens have no God-ordained or natural home--we will recognize the possibility of connection or community in every human encounter because of our faith in the power and mystery of love. Although we act with love - with the presumption of human goodness in each person -- we must realize that connection with another is not always possible.

Thus, when I speak of friends I have not met yet, I want to emphasize that we will not make and should not make connections in every human encounter. Our world is imperfect. Specifically in dealing with the issues of race in a Christian way we must be willing to examine the traditions of our original families and our own races, and sometimes the concepts of ourselves. But we must remember that the highest form of Christian love is friendship, not love of family, not race or tradition.

There is no need to say "farewell to those at home" because the world is full of friends we have not met yet. That is the good news of Christ's message. That weeping woman in Washington, D.C., my older sister who lovingly changed my diapers, a new freshman at Cornell or Ithaca College, (even the man sitting next to me at dinner), are all friends we have not met yet. The Christian message

is that despite our social and historical problems of racial discrimination the world is full of the possibilities for friendship--for human connection--because of God's grace and love. But because we have faith in friendship, it does not always mean action. Sometimes, as in the case of the rift between my siblings, for instance, I did nothing to confront their image of me, for there was no reason to do so. If that weeping friend of twenty years ago inspired me to do anything it was to keep my own spirit alive and to nurture the spirit in others by viewing each human being as a friend I have not met yet.

AMEN