

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Inclusion ... What’s Next?”
Rev. Hank Borchardt
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Deuteronomy 10:12-22, Galatians 3:23-29

Where were you in the summer of 1967? If you were here you probably remember tanks in the Detroit city streets. Fires, burning in buildings. We knew that Detroit would never be the same. If you were an adult living here in 1967, what did you feel? Fear? Anger, anxiety. What? If you were watching it on TV perhaps the feeling was GLAD IT DID NOT HAPPEN HERE!

The riots captured our attention from across the lake. But Lake Michigan isolated those of us in Wisconsin from the real horror of it all. I was turning 30 in 67, pastor of a small Presbyterian church south of Milwaukee, incidentally chair of the city human rights commission, and we were looking at steps we might take to avoid such an occurrence in our town,

The riots also attracted the attention of the federal government, where president Lyndon Johnson did two things: first he called out the 82nd Airborne to aid the city police department and National Guard in maintaining order, and second he appointed a commission to look into the riots charged with the task of determining what happened (that was the easy part), why it happened and what must be done so as not to have it happen again (that was the hard part). The commission was chaired by Illinois governor Otto Kirner. The Kirner commission reported several months early due to the seriousness of the situation.

The Commission asked three questions:

- What Happened?
- Why did it happen?
- What can be done to prevent it from happening again?

The report was lengthy but here is perhaps the most important portion.

Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal. Reaction to last summer’s disorders has quickened the movement and deepened the division.

Violence cannot build a better society. Disruption and disorder nourish repression, not justice.

White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.

Referring to the reports of earlier riot commissions for the 1919 riots in Chicago and the Harlem riot in 1943, Dr. Kenneth B. Clark said:

I must again in candor say to you members of this Commission—it is a kind of Alice in Wonderland—with the same moving picture re-shown over and over again, the same analysis, the same recommendations, and the same inaction.

That is old history, of course, but recent events in 2015 indicate that the problem is still with us. Events in St. Louis, Cleveland and Baltimore indicate that nothing much has changed. A month or so ago a TV reporter interviewed a young African American man who had participated in the riot and asked what it was all about. The man answered that it wasn’t the death of the person with a broken back from being

placed in a police vehicle although that was the spark that set fire to the barn. It was the result of a number of years of pent-up grievances presented to city government with no response. Racial violence seemed to be their only way of communicating and venting their grievances. Nothing new!

That describes the situation. So, what are we at First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham going to do about it? Scripture and our faith demand that we do something. After all, we say we are Everybody's Church and our little blurb every Sunday says we stand for mission INCLUSION and community. After all St. Paul says there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Greek (aaaaaaaand we might add gay nor straight, black nor white) we are all one in Christ Jesus This is what we say we believe so how then do we make that a reality for the metro area in which we live?

When Dr. Judson concludes a sermon he ends it with a challenge. I offer two. First, what can as individual persons do and second what can we do as a church around a thousand people strong? Here is an example of what one person can do.

In the 1960s there was a Catholic priest in Milwaukee named Father Groppi. He was serving St Boniface church on the east side of Milwaukee in 1967. He challenged the city to 100 nights of marches for an open housing ordinance in the city. (Open housing legislation prohibits discrimination in the sale, purchase or leasing of residential property.) At that point there was no such law on the Milwaukee books and it was one of the racial minority complaints. Passing such a law wouldn't completely solve the problem but it would be something tangible and symbolic. The marches were huge. Black and white together. The Police, on their Harleys, were waiting for someone to step out of line so they could react, including watching the white lines at cross-walks. If anyone stepped outside of them you received a twenty dollar ticket. But it never happened because the people didn't want conflict, they wanted change.

As we crossed next to the corner bar (there are very many of them) the marchers chanted NO MORE SCHLITZ. Drink Budweiser, it is brewed in St. Louis. This was as disruptive as it got under Father Groppi's leadership. The ordinance was passed and peace reigned. No violence in Milwaukee in 67. This was the impact one person could have.

What can a church do? Perhaps it is time for another foray back into the city. How about we start or participate in an interracial city think tank where people gather to discuss Detroit's challenges that affect us all?? Ecumenical Theological seminary could be the place. I have spoken with Dr. Murray the president and he welcomes the idea of an ecumenical think tank connected with the seminary in the old First Presbyterian Church of Detroit, just one idea among many. Or, maybe we could invite mayor Duggan to an after worship discussion in the fireside room asking how we can help him help the city. Lots of ideas. Just pick a few.

Detroit needs you Otto Kirner.

Well, Otto isn't here, but we are! What will we do?