

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 10: 1920-1955)”

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

August 16, 2020

The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1920, granting women across the United States the right to vote. Sojourner Truth, the escaped slave who became a prominent abolitionist, would have been pleased; she had advocated for women’s suffrage way back in the 1860s. Except ... across the South ... black women still couldn’t vote. They faced the same hurdles as black men: poll taxes, intimidation, threats, and violence. Three million black women in the South did not *truly* gain the right to vote when the new Amendment was adopted. The persecution was far too great.

Injustice reigned in the South. Discrimination affected blacks everywhere. But there were a few bright spots. The Harlem neighborhood in New York City and the South Side of Chicago both *thrived* during the 1920s. Music, literature, theater, art, fashion, culture – this was the era of writer Langston Hughes, musician Duke Ellington, and dozens of other black men and women who made a huge impact. Blues, jazz, and black gospel music flourished. The Harlem Globetrotters were founded. Finally, after centuries of oppression, some blacks were able to express themselves with freedom, passion, and joy.

But it didn’t last long. The Great Depression brought the roaring twenties to a crushing halt. Massive unemployment hit industrial cities throughout the north, impacting both blacks and whites, though the percentage of blacks who were unemployed in any given city was several times higher than that of whites, because blacks were typically fired first and hired last. In the South, necessity forced many impoverished blacks to work as sharecroppers in conditions that weren’t much better than slavery, often without pay. President Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” provided much-needed support for millions of people, and he implemented a number of measures to ensure that it was reaching blacks to the same extent that it was reaching whites. Roosevelt also appointed many blacks to relatively high-level positions in government, including the first black federal judge. Those blacks who could vote overwhelmingly voted for FDR’s re-election in 1936. Most of them switched political parties too.

One component of the New Deal was the National Housing Act of 1934. It was intended to make housing more affordable, but it had an unfortunate result. Bankers drew lines on city maps to distinguish between different neighborhoods. People living in newer neighborhoods were considered good investments; people living in older neighborhoods were considered risky investments. The areas perceived to be the riskiest were marked with a red pen. Decisions were made based on *where a person lived* rather than *what their income was*. This is called “redlining,” and it was terribly unfair. Many poor whites were granted mortgages; many middle- and upper-income blacks were not. This led to increased segregation in housing, the decay of many inner-city neighborhoods, and the creation of urban ghettos.

Nearly two million blacks were drafted after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. Units were still segregated. The draft revealed the inequalities of the education system in the South: a third of the blacks in the South who were drafted were illiterate. 84% of the Southern blacks fell into the lowest

categories on an aptitude test. The Army had to teach 150,000 black men how to read and write.

The war created another massive labor shortage in the North, and also in the West. Defense employers recruited blacks from the South, offering higher wages and better opportunities. Five million blacks left the South for the North and West in the “Second Great Migration.” Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, Phoenix, Seattle, and Portland received *huge* influxes of black laborers. The pay was better; the schools were better; they could vote; yet blacks were often still the targets of racial discrimination.

FDR tried hard to help the black working class. He increased the representation of blacks in the defense industry from 3% to 8% between 1942 and 1945. He instituted fines and other punishments for agencies that were found to be discriminating against blacks. As the war progressed, some politicians, ministers, and newspaper editors began a campaign called “Double V”: victory over Germany and Japan abroad, and victory over discrimination at home. A new civil rights group was formed in 1942, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), led by both whites and blacks. At demonstrations outside segregated restaurants, CORE members held up signs saying, “We Die Together, Let’s Eat Together.”

To help the returning soldiers, Congress passed the G.I. Bill, which provided benefits to veterans, including low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans, unemployment compensation, and financial assistance for school expenses. In theory, the benefits should have helped blacks as much as they did whites. But it was all administered at the *local* level – and many local officials discriminated relentlessly against blacks. Banks refused to grant blacks mortgages or loans; superintendents and admissions officers refused to accept black students. The historically black colleges and universities were *flooded* with applications – far more than they could handle. In the New York City area, 67,000 mortgages were insured through the G.I. Bill. Fewer than 100 of them went to non-whites. The net result of the way the Bill was administered was that the educational and economic gap between whites and blacks widened.

After the war ended, calls for desegregation increased. Many blacks – both men and women – felt they had *earned* the right to be treated as more than second-class citizens. Some whites agreed. Happy Chandler, the Baseball Commissioner, said, “if they can fight and die on Okinawa, Guadalcanal (and) in the South Pacific, they can play ball in America.” Branch Rickey, the manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, agreed. He wanted a black player with strong talent who could handle the abuse that would inevitably come his way. “Suppose I’m a player,” Rickey said to an interviewee, “in the heat of an important ball game. Suppose I collide with you at second base. When I get up, I yell, ‘You black, dirty, son of a —!’ What do you do?” “Mr. Rickey,” the player said, “do you want a ballplayer who’s afraid to fight back?” Rickey replied: “I want a ballplayer with enough guts *not* to fight back!” Rickey pressed him on every scenario he could imagine, both on and off the field. “Now I’m playing against you in the World Series! I’m a hotheaded player. I want to win that game, so I go into you spikes first, but you don’t give ground. You stand there and you jab the ball into my ribs and the umpire yells, ‘Out!’ I flare up—all I see is your face—that black face right on top of me—so I haul off and punch you right in the cheek!” – and Rickey nearly did just that, swinging his fist and barely missing the player’s cheek. “*What do you do?*” “Mr. Rickey,” the player replied quietly, “I’ve got two cheeks. That it?” And with that, Jackie Robinson was signed to a Dodgers farm team. The color barrier had been broken. But Rickey had been right. Robinson was denied hotel rooms; ballparks refused to let him in; pitchers refused to pitch to him; players deliberately injured him; teams threatened to strike; he was called names, and told to go back to “picking cotton.” He withstood it all, and eventually helped the Dodgers win the World Series.

A year after Robinson’s major league debut in 1947, President Harry Truman ordered the

desegregation of the Armed Forces. But when the Korean War broke out in 1950, Army units were still segregated. The American forces took very heavy losses, and the Army – in desperation – started sending in blacks to replace fallen whites. The soldiers fought together *remarkably* well – and the Army noticed. In July 1951, three years after Truman’s order, the Army announced its plans to desegregate.

That same year, a black elementary school student in Topeka, Kansas was forbidden to attend the school closest to her home. She had to take a bus to a black school. This was standard practice, but her family decided to challenge it. The U.S. District Court ruled against the family, on the basis of the Supreme Court’s 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which had allowed for “separate but equal” facilities. The family appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court. Their lawyer was Thurgood Marshall – who eventually became the first black member of the Supreme Court. The Justice Department filed a Friend of the Court brief, articulating how racial segregation was hurting the United States. “The United States is under constant attack in the foreign press, over the foreign radio, and in such international bodies as the United Nations because of various practices of discrimination in this country.” In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled, unanimously, that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,” and therefore unconstitutional. They said: “To separate [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone.” Many whites in the South were outraged – and *determined* to resist. Many school districts tried to delay implementation as long as possible, or made only token gestures. Many black teachers were fired. Some white teachers who supported integration were also fired. In some cities, white students held demonstrations or boycotted classes to protest integration. Many private schools were created for white students only; many of those schools were affiliated with or sponsored by white Protestant churches. In May 1955, the Supreme Court revisited the case, ruling that desegregation must occur “with all deliberate speed.” Later that year, the Supreme Court banned segregation in public parks and playgrounds. Some states considered closing all their public parks and playgrounds rather than allow them to be desegregated.

In December 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, a bus driver instructed a black woman to give her seat to a white man. Blacks were expected to stand at the back of the bus, if necessary, to ensure that there were enough seats for whites. She refused. This was not the first time a black person had refused to move; Jackie Robinson had done that back in 1944; a 15-year-old girl had refused earlier in 1955; there had been many others. What happened next was typical: the driver called the police; the woman was arrested; she was bailed out, and awaited a trial. She later wrote: “People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day.... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.” Her name was Rosa Parks. She was the secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP. The chapter’s president decided it was time to *take a stand*. That Sunday, 35,000 copies of a handout were distributed at black churches in the city. It read: “We are ... asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial ... You can afford to stay out of school for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don’t ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off the buses Monday.” And they did. Nearly 40,000 blacks in the city walked to school or work – in the rain – sometimes for *miles*. That night, a group gathered at one of the black churches to talk about next steps. They formed an organization to keep the bus boycott going, and they chose a young, local, black Baptist pastor to lead it: the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. He was about to change the world.

© 2020 Rev. Bill Pinches