

On Racism

"I want to show you something." With obvious pride, Doyle walked me down the hallway to what seemed to be an ordinary linen closet in a typical ranch-style home in the Houston suburb where we lived next door to each other. "This is my armory," he declared as he opened the door to reveal more ammunition than most sporting good stores carry. From floor to ceiling, front to back, side to side, were boxes of ammunition for many different weapons. They created a wall of cardboard boxes that waited just behind the closet door. You could not have wedged a toothpick into that closet with a sledgehammer.

"Wow, that's impressive all right," I managed squeak out. Then gaining some confidence, "You sure have a lot of ammo!" Uncomfortable pause... "What's it for?"

"That's for the race war!" Doyle was dead serious as he laid it all out for me as if he were enlightening a child that had just asked why the sky is blue. "Race war is comin'. They're gonna rise up and try to take all our stuff. We'll barricade the end of the street and make our stand right here..." He went on to describe how it would take place and how many had already committed to defend our small, apparently all-white subdivision.

Doyle was afflicted with a bit stronger dose of racist paranoia than what I was familiar with. I decided to limit contact with my neighbor. We got along fairly good for the rest of the time I lived there, even though I never expressed any enthusiasm for his "militia." Eventually, he built an eight-foot-high fence between our houses.

That was 1992 and it seems like a lifetime ago, but I find myself thinking about Doyle these days. He represents the kind of racism that I grew up with—where a black man disappears at night and folks blame him for being out after dark. I've been accused of overreacting to racism. But it's serious. I wonder if people really understand that for every brick-throwing protester there is someone like Doyle with a closet full of bullets.

These days, Doyle is probably building barricades for Beverly Street and organizing his militia, telling them to be courageous because the time is at hand to defend what they have. Meanwhile on the other side, people are damaging property and committing assault for their cause—calling it courageous to thus demand what they have never had.

Caught in the middle of the two sides are two truly courageous groups. Peaceful protesters are called lukewarm by the "fighters," yet they face the same powers that the brick-throwers do. These people of peace are people of courage. Yet, the bravest of all in this conflict are those in law enforcement. Police, Sheriffs, State Troopers, and Guardsmen are literally keeping each side from killing the other. Some of the powerful cry out for law enforcement to get tough and open fire. I assure you that if they did so, then they would only be doing the work of Doyle and his kind.

Racism is about power, whether it is on an individual level or an institutional one. Today's revolution about race is forcing those in power to either fearfully defend itself and call it "courage," or to be *courageously compassionate*. You see, progress in overcoming racism—whether in the 1960's or today—is only made when the powerful yield their power. This takes courage—to look at ourselves and see what is really in us. It takes compassion—to see others as fully human and fully worthy. I encourage all of us to look past the angry rhetoric shouted through megaphones. Look for what God will show us about the speaker, not just the words spoken. People of color are interviewed on television and often what we hear offends us. Look for what God will show us about the perspective of the one taking—what makes them see things this way. Empathy leads to compassion. We need God's help. We need God's love for our neighbor.

Indeed, it will take God's power to loosen the grip we have on our own power. Instead of asking the question of the Pharisee, "Who is my neighbor?" we should be tending to the wounds of the one who would curse us. This is the way to "...inherit eternal life," (Luke 10:25-37).

Be the church, --pastor tony