

Glimpses of the beloved community

They were black, Latino, and white. They were whispering and laughing together.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [March 1, 2017](#) issue



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My wife, Dawne, and I attended a fantastic men's basketball game between Princeton and Yale. The game was close, the players were acrobatic in their ability to drive to the basket, and I should have been riveted by the court action. But I kept looking around at the dozen students who were sitting near us.

They were black, Latino, and white. They were constantly nudging and hugging each other, whispering in each other's ears, laughing, and stealing French fries from the interracial couple in their midst. They were just being friends at a Saturday night basketball game.

I thought about how inconceivable this scene would have been to my grandparents, how bothered my parents would have been, and how often my own generation has dropped the ball in trying to create a society where such a scene is unremarkable.

Our society is fractured by racial stress. Minorities are dying on the street and incarcerated at horrifying rates. They still have to struggle to find their voice, which is judged by how it measures against the expectations of whiteness. Many have social and economic disadvantages that will never allow them to find themselves at a Princeton basketball game. And the systemic reasons for all of that are demonically legion.

All leaders in higher education deal with concerns about race on campus. We work on it as much as anything else we do. We set up new programs, host town hall meetings, hire diversity program directors, establish special faculty committees on multiculturalism, respond to petitions, find safe spaces, and knock ourselves out to hire professors of color. But we have a very long way to go. Mostly what we are after is creating a place where all students are honored and where they can learn and be formed through each other's stories.

At our seminary as at other divinity schools, people work hard to form a next generation of Christian leaders who have the cultural competency to proclaim hope to a multicultural society. Since 40 percent of our students are not white, and we are a residential school, we deal with difference all of the time. We make mistakes on race, but as I often say, this is the place to learn and repent from our mistakes. The goal of striving for God's beloved community is clear. But the path is complicated.

Sometimes we get a glimpse of what could be—like a dozen students of diverse races who make friendship look so easy. Those who work with young adults receive these precious glimpses from time to time.

In his farewell address in Chicago, Barack Obama said, "Let me tell you, this generation coming up—unselfish, altruistic, creative, patriotic—I've seen you in every corner of the country. You believe in a fair and just and inclusive America; you know that constant change has been America's hallmark, that it's not something to fear but something to embrace; you are willing to carry this hard work of democracy forward. You'll soon outnumber any of us, and I believe as a result the future is in good hands."

I find myself drawn to Obama's irrepressible optimism. He has a way of finding the good in us and holding it up for all to see in hopes that it will draw a fractured nation together in a common pursuit. He never tries to create an "us" by pointing to a "them" who are to blame for our problems.

Given the election of his successor, I have my doubts about whether Obama's hope changed our society dramatically. But he clearly moved the ball farther down the court. And so can the next generation.

After nine parishioners were gunned down at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015 by a white supremacist, the president traveled to Charleston and gave the eulogy. He talked about our historic ability to set hatred aside in order to form a more perfect union. My hunch is that this eulogy will be considered by historians to be something akin to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Lincoln said, "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us . . . that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."

Every generation will have a lunatic supremacist who brings a gun into a church Bible study, or a racist policeman who guns down an African-American person as if it didn't matter. But this next generation seems to have a capacity for moving beyond racist assumptions and cultivating interracial friendships. They honor differences and understand the stories of privilege and struggle. And they can easily enjoy each other's company at a basketball game.

Moments like these are enough to help us remain dedicated to the great task remaining before us.

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