

A nice person, and racist

By [Diane Roth](#)

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At my last congregation, I often preached at a small Saturday evening service in our chapel. I came to call it, affectionately, the "early edition." One of the occasional attendees was a nice older woman who I came to know pretty well. Sometimes she came early and we had an opportunity to visit.

Did I mention she is very nice? She liked my sermons. She said I gave a good "Lutheran" sermon. Sometimes she worshiped with the Methodists on Sunday, but she was a Lutheran at heart. I think we have pretty awesome theology, what with radical grace and the reality of brokenness and the paradox of being a saint and a sinner at the same time, so I would take this as a compliment, although every once in awhile, I am not so sure.

A few years ago, well, 2008, to be exact, I remember a conversation I had with her, either right before or right after the worship service. I remember because it was about the presidential election, and she was afraid. Very afraid. She was afraid that Barack Obama would become president. She was afraid of what would happen if he became president, and she was also afraid of what would happen if he did not become president, because if he lost, she was sure that "the blacks would riot," and terrible, terrible things would happen.

I could tell that she was genuinely afraid, which made me sad.

I like to think that I said something to her. After all, I had just read a book that traced the history of race riots back to the early part of the last century. Growing up I remember hearing about Los Angeles and Detroit. But I never knew about Tulsa or Florida or all of the other places where whites rioted and destroyed African American communities.

I like to think that I said something to her, but whatever it is, I am certain it was not awesome. It was not enough. I can blame the fact that I was too shocked to have a cogent response. But I think it was an excuse.

A number of years later, I was preaching the "early edition" again. My sermon topic was prayer. I used an illustration from a book I had purchased when my husband and I visited Martin Luther King Jr.'s home in Atlanta. The book was called *No Turning Back* and was about a white seminarian in the early days of the civil rights movement. There was a lovely story about the white seminarian learning to pray from one of the African American teenagers in a congregation. As a sideline, I got to say something about the struggle for civil rights.

My friend, the occasional visitor, was there again that evening. I had a conversation with her about the book and about our visit to Atlanta.

She told me that she had been to the South once, long ago, as a young woman. She loved it. She loved the people there. She told me that they felt so safe that they could sleep out on the porches at night in the summer.

She felt so safe back then. You know, during segregation.

My heart sank, a little. I like to think that I said something this time. I think I did. But in my heart of hearts, I know it was not awesome, what I said. If I had said something awesome, I would have remembered.

I also knew then that whatever I thought I was saying in my sermons, when I thought I was being brave, when I thought I was communicating clearly: I wasn't.

Racism doesn't just live in the Ku Klux Klan or in segregation or in hateful words of violence. It doesn't just live in the fear of this nice woman but in me and every one of us who has not, for some reason or another, spoken out clearly.

Maybe even more.

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