

Overusing the R-word
by REV. DANTE MURPHY, March 11, 2021
Southern Coalition for Equal Protections Under Law (SCEPUL)

Recently I engaged in a series of email exchanges with a prominent attorney. On the surface it appeared that the two of us were engaging in nothing more than a social media cat fight. A number of people were on the cc list, and later that night I received a phone call from a trusted friend who asked me why I was being so nice to a racist. “No,” I said, “He’s not racist—just because I’m black and he’s white.” The attorney was stating his true thoughts, his opinions. He was doing his best to be honest and transparent. What more can we ask of a person?

It is true that during the exchange I was being challenged. The attorney questioned my status as a reverend. But the exchange, on a different, maybe a deeper level, offers a chance to look at race relations in America—to see the need for open, honest dialogue. Without name-calling.

During the email exchange the attorney expressed a number of concerns. One was that I, a “Reverend,” had engaged in “harassing” behaviors. These behaviors apparently contradicted his understanding of what a “normal” reverend would do—that is, be concerned with preaching the Gospel and promoting love, peace, and harmony. He even questioned, rather forcefully, whether or not I was a reverend. I admit that when I read his words my first thought was, this guy is a racist. I could only see a White man challenging me as a Black man. Seeing him as a racist quickly took advantage of how that term is sometimes used.

Let me try to unpack the term “racist” just a bit. When people of color are unfairly attacked, disenfranchised, or unequally treated as a consequence of not being White, that is racist. And so, for a moment it seemed reasonable for me to think of the attorney as a racist. But what is inherently racist about an individual’s opinion that I was harassing someone and also might not be a reverend? I doubt that he understands that the historical context of the African American church and clergy are synonymous with pushback against government failures with regard to Blacks and minorities? Perhaps his opinion was just an opinion—given from one person to another.

In these times, is the word racist sometimes used as loosely as the word nigger—thrown out as an expression of frustration, anger, or resentment? Does the word racist sometimes get in the way of understanding and reconciliation? Yes. Like the infamous use of the n-word, the r-word is generally directed toward one class of people, in this case, Whites. The urge to attack an individual as a racist is so easy and tempting. But we must carefully consider the over-use of some words. Throwing them at individuals with whom we disagree may blind us to the real fact of systemic racism. And the urge to attack is especially strong when Blacks and Whites are on opposite ends of an imagined, carefully orchestrated, spectrum.

The attorney and I may continue to disagree on an array of issues, and may even take our disagreements to the courtroom or to the North Carolina Bar Association; but the reality is that honest and open people articulating their true thoughts and feelings—without name calling—will move us along toward the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.