

Our company was headed to Camp Robinson for our annual weapons qualification. For most of us that would be the rifle range where we would qualify on our M-14's. It was a regular weekend drill except we stayed at Camp Robinson Saturday night and if our training didn't go too late we could go out someplace nice to eat. We all looked forward to this weekend.

We passed Malvern when a state trooper pulled our convoy to the side of the road. We were ordered to go to Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The year before I had made a trip to London, England, but never in my life had I set foot in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Not that many days earlier Martin Luther King, Jr., had been shot in Memphis, TN. Incidents of unrest had occurred in some major cities and some not so major cities including Pine Bluff. So our unit had been called up by the state authorities for riot control duties in Pine Bluff.

After a day or so most of my company, Company B, a split company located in Hope and Texarkana, were released to go home. A few senior NCO's and a few junior officers – including one very green new Second Lieutenant from the Texarkana unit – were held back to carry out limited patrolling duties.

For me this consisted of riding around Pine Bluff to check out critical points – the city water plant, electric power station, that sort of place – in a jeep driven by an NCO. At intersections where we had to stop for the light, various local people would wave at us, smile, offer to get us a hamburger. I did notice that all the people who were so friendly happened to be white. There were not a lot of black people out on the streets.

At one intersection I particularly remember we stopped for the light as usual. And as usual the white people were smiling and giving us friendly greetings.

There happened to be a black lady, an older black lady standing at that intersection as well. She looked like a kindly grandmother, one who I'm sure who smothered her grandchildren with love and cookies.

She happened to turn and look straight at me.

She was not smiling. In just that brief moment her eyes asked me what was I doing – riding around in a military jeep, armed – in her town, in her home – at a time when every last one of us – black and white – should be in church on our knees together asking God how did this dreadful thing happen to this great and good man.

In a moment the light turned green and we drove on.

And life continued on for me. In a couple of years I was to move with my family to Little Rock, to begin a career with a Little Rock based life insurance company. When several years later that company was sold to a Kansas company, I moved to Kansas with that Kansas company. I discovered the Episcopal Church, joined it, moved back to Arkansas. There at St. Stephen's was ordained a Deacon, then was assigned by the Bishop to here at St. Luke's. That occurred during the penitential season of Lent as some of you may recall.

I did not forget that woman. I continued in the National Guard several more years. I remember when blacks first became members of our Guard units. I remember helping train men and women and black men and women to become officers as a Senior Instructor in our state Officers Candidate School.

I'm a little suspicious when someone starts talking about how good they are, or how they are kind and thoughtful to people who are "minorities" or "disadvantaged". I hope that I am. Because I try to treat all people as I would expect Christ would want me to treat all people and anyone. In gratitude for God's grace that is the only way to live.

I know that I do it imperfectly, because I am imperfect.

And if you listen to Christ's words carefully, I think that is sort of what He is saying to us this morning:

"Blessed are you who are poor...

"Blessed are you who are hungry...

"Blessed are you who weep now...

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude, revile you..."

Christ loves these people. And you know what? He expects us to love them as well. Have I always believed this?

No, I haven't. I don't think I ever was involved with overt discrimination. I don't think there was ever a picture taken of me in blackface. Yet I know good friends in my high school who were. Many of us did favor things then which supported policies and politics which we find repugnant today. I know better now – and I would hope how I live my life now is witness to that.

Our God is a God of forgiveness as well as One who looks to us to do the right thing.

At a recent Diocesan Convention our major speaker was a black lady born in Arkansas but now lives in another state. She has felt her calling in life is to point out the evils of segregation and “racism.”

She told a very moving story from her childhood here in Arkansas. Her brother became deathly ill. Her dad took him to a nearby Hospital in El Dorado, Arkansas. Because the boy was black the hospital would not accept him as a patient. Their dad – desperate now – drove the boy to a hospital in a north Louisiana town. By the time they made it to that hospital it was too late. The boy died.

An older woman now she still grieves the loss – the unnecessary loss – of her brother many, many years ago.

Some unthinking person might say, ‘she ought to get over it.’

That is certainly is not for any of us to say. When God tells her it is time that is soon enough. Until that time she will continue to fight the sort of prejudice that killed her brother.

Sometimes when someone does something nice, that good deed can have a life of its own:

The person who received the kindness can show a similar kindness to someone else whose life is so blessed, then that person does another similar deed of kindness to even someone else...

Unfortunately sometimes an evil deed can have a life that cannot be ended. Someone in that hospital observing bureaucratic certitude says, No, you cannot stay here because it goes against our policy directives. I suspect that person never learned what was the outcome of her bureaucratic certainty and evil.

And all the years since this sister of the dead boy has spread far and wide this true story about the evil of this El Dorado hospital.

If I were to ask all of you to pull out your cell phones – then turn them back on (because I know all of you put your cell phone on “airplane” mode shortly after taking you seat in your pew) and then asked you to pull up “Google” then look up “Peaceable Kingdom” I

know that most of you would be looking at the same painting by Edward Hicks of that name.

As some of you know I have one brother who with his family live in small town in Indiana about an hour's drive north of Indianapolis. The town is his wife's hometown. She had been raised in the Church of Christ. He now is also a member of that church.

When I visit and if my visit is over a weekend I insist they go to church on Sunday morning as they would do if I were not visiting. I've been visiting for many years now and they are on a second preacher. I enjoy the services and especially the preaching.

One year I happened to take notice of the black people attending the service – as best as I could make out there were about two large families of them.

And then the thing that was so strange about all this. Other than myself I don't think anyone in that church noticed that. They just happened to be members of that church so what's to notice. They may not have noticed it but I did. This is the Peaceable Kingdom in reality.

And this is my prayer for St. Luke's this year: That we may become even more so the Peaceable Kingdom in reality for North Little Rock.

Amen.