

Obama & preacher share message

I don't know whether its fortunate or unfortunate that race has become such a big topic of conversation over the last few weeks. It seems like it can bring out the best and worst in people. Did our nation really advance by having that beer party where everyone just got along at the White House? I have my doubts.

Even though I disagree with just about all his policy positions, I admire President Obama the person tremendously. There isn't a more powerfully positive, inspiring, game-changing image than a black man of great character devoted to his wife and family attaining the most important position in the world. And he did it while overcoming great obstacles, which included being raised by a single mother. Who would have ever believed it? Not I.

I just wish President Obama's Father's Day message — as well as his recent speech to the NAACP — would have generated an equal amount of media frenzy as the beer bash. You cannot underestimate how important his exhortation of personal responsibility and "No excuses" was. Now those were truly "teachable moments." His words were a rising tide that lifted the boats of every American who listened.

Ironically there was something more locally familiar about his message, cadence and delivery at those events. It reminded me so much of the Rev. June Jeffries' sermons at the First Baptist Church of North Vandergrift. Maybe the president has been listening to her tapes.

Over the last few months, I have had the opportunity to attend some services at First Baptist Church. All I can say is you don't need a "teachable moment" when you enter this church. All the colors of the rainbow blend into a beautiful



RAY MUTH

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It's an American tradition that strikes me as reflective of Emma Lazarus' famous poem engraved on a tablet within the pedestal on which the Statue of Liberty stands: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Let me interrupt myself for a moment. In case you couldn't tell by the funky-looking picture above, I am a grouchy, graying white guy. According to the 2000 census, 99.46 percent of us in Jefferson Township are not necessarily grouchy, but we are white. While I love where I live, I know it isn't exactly the

most demographically representative community in the U.S.

I'm sorry to say that very often the only contact I have with people of color is watching the Steelers through my television set. It's too bad that it takes a Steelers Super Bowl celebration for everyone of all colors to race Downtown, drop their guard and slap high fives and hug each other in the streets. I wish we could have more unifying celebrations like that.

Contrasting those fantastic Steelers moments, it has been my experience that our frail human condition sometimes makes us fear the things with which we are unfamiliar or ignorant. It's not always easy to mix with others of such different cultures. But First Baptist Church makes it effortless, because I'm happy to report that the most segregated hour of America has been completely eradicated there.

Just as the words of Lady Liberty were a shining beacon that brought hope to so many, the First Baptist Church stands as a shining beacon that brings an everlasting hope to those who walk through its doors — people of all shapes, sizes, socioeconomic class and color. In my mind it's even more beautiful than those Steelers celebrations.

My wife and I have had the privilege of joining June and her husband, Dave, for dinner from time to time. With three young kids, we don't get out too much. But do we ever enjoy our time breaking bread with two of the finest people we know. While we come from such different backgrounds, it's amazing how people of good faith are really all the same.

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