

CHRIST IN COMMUNITY: RACISM (2)

Romans 4:1-5; 13-17

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March 12, 2017

“Christ in Community” is the name of the series because one of the absolute truths I know about Jesus is that he came to live in and among us – to be in communion with us – to live in community with us. Christ with us – all of us – all of God’s creation. Jesus did not come to keep himself above us – demonstrating from afar his divine nature. He came to offer us salvation and to sit among us, befriending those we might not befriend, helping those who were hurting, embodying the law and the love of God in his very human form. People liked Jesus, they liked to invite him over for dinner, they felt free to disagree with him, they liked to hang out with him. The only people in the Bible who seemed not to like Jesus were the religious authorities and they probably disliked him because others liked him too much. Jesus’s charisma and standing disrupted the Pharisees’ ideas of who should be the authority figure in the religious community.

Because of Jesus’s love of communal life, it is fitting in Lent to talk about the community —our community — and its concerns. Today’s topic is racism. Galatians 3:28 from the J. B. Phillips translation, “Gone is the distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free [person], male and female—you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Our reading from Romans reminds us that God’s grace is what brings us righteousness, not our own works. And because of that grace, we can hope that the vision in Galatians that there would be no hierarchical distinction between classes, races, or genders in God’s kingdom.

Racism persists *in* the church and *outside* of it, despite the Apostle Paul’s and Jesus’s messages to us. And while we know that our righteousness only comes from God’s grace, how do we partner with God to work on bringing God’s vision of the kingdom into reality. How do we modern Christians continue the battle, the moral battle, to ensure that in our church and in our world diversity is seen as a gift, a blessing from God, and

not a way to divide and subjugate peoples? How do we remind people and ourselves, that diversity is not a threat, especially when we live and work and study in a rather non-diverse place?

We do it through what Archbishop Desmond Tutu called the “spirituality of transformation.” Or as Pope Francis said, “it was a Christian calling “to not raise walls but bridges, to not respond to evil with evil, to overcome evil with good”¹ We do it as bridge builders and transformers, in the name of Jesus, even when we don’t feel very transformational or adept at building.

In the reading from Romans, the Apostle Paul, who built and destroyed bridges all his life and was certainly transformed and transformational, wrote that it is our faith and God’s grace that allows us to do God’s work in the world. We do not have to rely on our own feeble powers but rather can and must lean on God’s grace and the Spirit’s transformational power in our lives to do the work that God has for us to do.

Racism is such an entrenched idea in our minds that it is difficult to imagine that there was a time when the concept did not exist. There was a time when this idea was created in order to justify the white European genocide on the Native American population and the enslavement of primarily African people. Certainly hatred and distrust of “others” has always existed as far as we know in human history but it hasn’t always been a racial issue.

Perhaps one way to begin is to examine our own biases and assumptions because these are often not visible to us. One way to do this is to think about our stereotypes. For example, if I say, “nurse” what image comes into your mind? Do you think of a young woman, older woman, a man? I imagine you think of a woman, just as you might if I said secretary or administrative assistant. However, if I say senator or doctor, you would probably think of a man, right? To overcome that stereotype, we say “male nurse” or “woman doctor” to distinguish from the other. What about if I said welfare queen, homeless derelict or terrorist. What picture do you get in your mind? Perhaps a black woman, a black man and an Arab man? We all have these images in

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/08/pope-francis-walls-bridges-donald-trump>

our minds and when we are considering how to build bridges among people of different races and cultures, it may be helpful to examine them and help ourselves to understand them. There is an online test from Harvard that you can take, if you are online. It examines your implicit bias across a number of different categories – black, white; Asian, white; young, old; male, female. You can take that test to see what that tells you about your own implicit biases. If you Google Harvard, implicit and bias, you will find it. Or go to implicit.harvard.edu if you can remember that.

Another thing that we all can do is to have a discussion with a person of another race about their experience of racism in this country. The best thing is to get permission, and ask for the other person's stories and experiences, while refraining from offering our own stories in the beginning. White people tend to get defensive when the subject of race comes up for discussion and it is important, if you truly want to learn about racism from a person of another race's perspective to simply listen and learn. This is probably the most accessible yet transformative exercise you can try! I commend it to you. Just go with an open heart and mind, to love and listen as Jesus did.

Another tactic which also raises a lot of hidden emotions for people is to try this: decide during a week, a day, an hour, whatever to identify all white people in your conversation as such. We do that with Hispanic people and Mexicans, Muslims and black people, etc. but it is very anxiety-provoking to turn the tables ourselves. So for example, I may say, "I am going to the worship service with my white friends Stephanie and Beth." Or, "my white doctor recommended that I get more exercise." Give it a try and then, if you do it, examine all the emotions it brought up in you, most likely emotions of embarrassment, shame and defensiveness. One author's theory is that all white people have shame buried inside them from their childhoods when they were chastised for not recognizing the racial divides. If you asked to bring a friend over to play or to date a certain person but were told you couldn't because that friend was African American you may be carrying around residual feelings of shame. You unknowingly broke a family rule and that is shame inducing.

It is not as easy an exercise to go as if I had asked you to do the opposite – identify the minority races, that is for sure. And that is because, in this culture, we have the privilege of taking “white” for granted. Those of us who are white have the benefit in this country of being the “default” race. The same thing happens with gender, of course. Male is the default gender for bank presidents and judges in our minds, most generally and female is the default gender for teachers and nurses, no matter what gender the actual occupants of those jobs are. As I said, our brains like to classify things!

But, that being said, it is important to remember that racism is a structural evil. It is not something we can resolve by our personal good will or deeds. We always need the word beyond ourselves to set us free from the powers and principalities of evil in the world. We need the word of God and the hope of God. We need to put on the spiritual armor of God and actively wage warfare with those powers and principalities.

We need to acknowledge the sin of racism is actively alive in our country and work to understand, repent and root out the evil structures at work. We need to stop living with the idea that we are not part of the problem. We need to affirm that Christian unity is God dream. No more should arrests, deaths, failing schools, graduation rates, imprisonments, health care options, housing options and infant mortality figures be clearly reflective of the racism at work in our society

Let’s put our faith back in God’s ability t bring about the reality of God’s kingdom – through our hands, feet and God’s grace. Amen.