

Christ in Community: Racism

Matthew 4:1-11

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This Lent we will walk through the desert of our Lenten practice with Christ in community. If we stop with Christ in the desert, it is too easy to think we just need to practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Scripture readings, worship, and fasting. There is, after all, not much to do in the desert other than confront evil, and we too easily turn from confronting the embodiment of evil as Jesus did to the well worn paths of looking over our own small evils – grumbling too much, caring too little, eating too much, failing in ways small and large. While it is a good thing to examine our own shortcomings, it is too easy to retread well-worn path and not see the larger evils that confront us in community. Although the first of Jesus’s temptations was to feed himself, the other two were temptations against God and against society. Our own temptations probably fall into all those categories as well which means it isn’t healthy to focus solely on our own selves.

Therefore, over the next 6 weeks I am going to talk about some of the large issues of our society, and, I would submit, of our faith. They are: racism, sexual orientation, and immigration. All 3 of these issues are currently very much in the news. We hear condemnation of racism and threats to those who are “other” everyday on the news – the police shooting of young black men, the sacking of Jewish cemeteries, the threats against Muslims in particular and immigration in general, the whole brouhaha over bathroom use and targeting of people in the night club in Orlando because they were in a “gay” club, just to name a few of the incidents that have been in the news lately.

Today we are going to talk about racism. Racism is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race; (2) a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles b : a political or social system founded on racism. In our understanding of

racism and for it to be actualized into an effective system, there has to be power over the other, as well, I believe.

We live in a deeply racist society. Most of us identify as white, although not all of us. And whites benefit in this society. If you don't believe that you only have to look at the statistic. The rate of poverty for blacks is 26%, Hispanics 24%, whites 10% and Asians 12%. The rate for whites of at least a 2-year college degree was 47% while for blacks it was 33% and Latinos 23%. Blacks are 7 times more likely than whites to be arrested and Hispanics are 3 times more likely. Crime rates are down in this country but the idea out there is that crime is running rampant and that the most likely criminals are men of color. Infant mortality, high school completion, age at death – rates are better for whites than for Native Americans, blacks, or Hispanics. This society has a deeply pervasive system of racism at work. But, for those of us who consider ourselves white, we never have to look at it and our denial helps to sustain it.

Jesus worked against the racism of his time by meeting and speaking with those considered social outcasts, eating with them, honoring them, doing all the things that the society said a “good” Jew doesn't do. Many white Americans look at race as an individual problem – a person is racist or not. But indeed racism is a systemic problem – something that is supported by and even strengthened by our institutions – both secular and religious. Something that in the United States has been furthered by and sustained by the church.

Early in the history of our country and our denomination, an African American, Richard Allen was ordained an elder at the Christmas Conference, the founding conference of the Methodist Church in America, in 1784. He was not allowed to vote at the Christmas conference, although he had been ordained. Often he and his primarily black congregation was relegated to very early morning hours and locations away from the main sanctuary for worship. Finally, in 1787, he and Absalom Jones led the congregation away. They founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

So you can see the institution of our Methodist church has a long history of racism. When we consider racism, we need not immediately to jump to the conclusion, I am not racist, we need also to look at the ways in which the society we live in and we are part of also fosters racism.

St Paul wrote, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.” (Gal 3:28-4:1 NRS) This was part of the earliest baptismal covenants and it was not to deny the differences – class, race, gender, among people but to say that in Christ we celebrate those differences and live together in unity working to further God's kingdom here on earth.

Jim Wallis clip.