

March 15, 2020

Matthew 20:1-16

Our sermon series, Living a Just Peace Life, continues. This week we look at what living into being a Multi-Cultural, Multi-Racial church might mean. Foundational for being such a church, and therefore where we must begin today, is being willing to wrestle with the truths of racism, especially the truth of how we, as a predominately white church, benefit from systemic racism.

The very first thing we must be willing to do is to listen very closely and carefully. We must be prepared not to let negative reactions on our part cause us to miss what is being said. So, let me begin with the hardest thing for any of us to hear: Being called a racist. For most of us our reaction is quick and angry. “I am not!!”

We are so vehement, because we know racists are bad people. A racist says and does terrible things to people, especially against African-Americans. That is why I can’t be a racist, I rationalize. I don’t do those things. Besides, I say, to justify myself: “I work with blacks; I have black friends. I have black family members. I can’t be a racist.”

Just ten days ago I read an editorial in the Providence Journal written by someone making these very arguments. He was upset that someone had labeled him a racist. In his editorial it was clear to me that he did not understand the point of the person who had called him a racist. While racism does rear its ugly head in acts and words of violence, it is the institutional, systemic racism that is so horrifying. It is a system the world is caught up in, not by our own creation, not by our choice. We are caught up in being racists simply because of how the system works. The system works for me and against people of black and brown skin.

This means every time I benefit from a rigged system and do not speak out against that system or every time I do not speak up in support of someone disadvantaged by, put down or kept down by this rigged system, my actions or inaction make me a racist. I am not a bad person; the system is bad and I benefit, greatly, from it.

As we seek our way forward, the place to begin is with the Bible. If racism is a justice issue, what does God’s justice look like. As we turn to the Bible, I must acknowledge the Bible does not speak directly to racism. This is not because it is not important, rather it is because racism, as we know it today, did not exist in Jesus’ day. This is because, as Toni Morrison so eloquently wrote: “There is no such thing as race. None. There is just a human race — scientifically, anthropologically. Racism is a construct, a social construct and it has benefits. Money can be made off of it, people who don’t like themselves can feel better because of it, it can describe certain kinds of behavior that are wrong or misleading, so it has a social function, racism.”

Racism is “a social construct”; a construct that keeps the scales of justice off balance, most of the time in very subtle ways. When Jesus sought to bring the scales of justice into balance, he was often met with incredulity on the part of the powers that be. One example of this is today’s scripture lesson, the parable of The Laborers in the Vineyard. This parable continues to upset lots of people still today.

According to Jesus, God’s economics are different than Wall Street economics. For God, life is not about being “in the black” (making a profit), rather being “for Blacks” (being God’s prophet). This pushes the limits on being cute, but the point is still true: God challenges us to tip the scales of justice on the side of equality, on the side of providing everyone with enough to live.

In Jesus’ parable we are not given details about why some workers were given jobs and others had to wait. Some of us sympathize with those who worked a long, hard, hot day and received no more compensation or recognition than those who just worked an hour. It just doesn’t seem fair.

But, what about those without a job, the unemployed and under-employed? Are they really less deserving of enough food to sustain life or a home that is dry, warm, and safe? Are there some who abuse the system? Of course. I also know of people who have jobs they really aren’t qualified for and earn enormous paychecks. Are we vilifying them? They are abusing the system, too.

Maybe some are not employed, because they did so poorly in school. Both of my parents were college-educated and encouraged reading in the home. Is it someone's fault if they did not grow up in such a home? Or, what about people who went to school hungry, after spending the night in a car or a shelter? I can't imagine learning while hungry and tired. It is rare when I can sit and write a sermon with being rested and having a snack.

The racist system we all live under became rich on the backs of slaves, who when freed, found themselves in the servitude of "Jim Crow laws". When they moved north, the racism was much more covert. Chicago is the prime example of real estate red-lining and unjust mortgages. Chicago's racism may be blatant, but this racist system existed, and still exists, all over our country.

As laws were passed to challenge this, the system found ways to incarcerate blacks, primarily black men. Oh, we found ways to make it sound legal. It was all about drugs, as you may recall. But it was really just one more way for our system to keep whites on top.

What are we to do, if the system itself is rigged? How do we change that? There is no easy answer. As I have wrestled with understanding racism and my role in it, I am beginning to learn things and to see a little better. I make mistakes and hopefully I am learning from them.

One thing I am certain about is that we cannot legislate a true system change. While we must work to pass laws that liberate and laws that open access to the wealth of our nation to minorities, true change can only come as we change our hearts.

A change of our hearts can begin when we take in, sit with Lila Watson's words: "If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you recognize that your liberation and mine are bound up together, we can walk together."

What I am hearing from minorities in our country is that they are not looking for a hand out or even a hand up. What they want is an ally; someone willing to walk with them, just as Jesus walked with

the oppressed in his day. Walking includes listening, trying to understand that which is beyond our own experience.

Often our walking through life as privileged whites is marked by fearlessly speaking our mind. This is good, but when walking with another, let them speak their mind first. Let them lead, be willing to follow. And, when their words cut you to the core, such as, "You are a racist.", do not shut down, rather take a deep breath, and listen closer.

Finally, I share with you a theological truth given to me by my daughter, Bente:

As we try to "walk together" with those caught in racist constructs, "recognizing that our liberation and theirs are bound up together", hold on to Jesus' final words in today's Gospel lesson: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

If we want to get through the door into God's Kin-dom, into heaven, we must make certain that the last, the least among us, are able to go in first, otherwise no one will get in. This truth can be hard to understand and accept. Here is why it is hard to understand and accept, when, in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri, we heard the clarion call "Black Lives Matter", some in our country, displeased by this slogan, responded, "All Lives Matter." Jesus' words, "The last will be first," tells us that no lives matter until Black lives matter.

As Amicable Church struggles with this justice issue in the future, we must seek ways to walk together with those hurt by our racist system. We must be intentional about reaching out to communities of color in order to listen to their stories and find out how they think we might walk toward God's kin-dom together.

It will be as we truly wonder about the other that our hearts and theirs will be changed. And in time, by God's grace, our racist system will begin to crumble, all God's children will have a daily wage, and we will be in God's kin-dom.

May God give us just such a generous heart. Amen.