

Wisdom from the Woods
6/5/2020
By
Chad Steffey

It has been a week of traumatic events, and this time it wasn't the pandemic of COVID-19. It was the societal pandemic of institutional racism. And like a biological pandemic, we should make every effort to understand how it spreads, take every measure to prevent it from spreading, and vaccinate against future outbreaks.

No matter what news and social media you follow, and no matter your worldview or political leanings, you probably had a strong reaction to George Floyd's death and the ensuing responses. What was your reaction? Was it emotional? Was it political? Did you take some action? Did you post on social media? Did you enter into conversation? Did you listen? Are you conflicted? Are you compelled to do something but don't know what to do? While our reactions to these traumatic events are likely emotional and personal, I pray we can move past our reactions in order to respond ... to respond as the church, to respond "in the way of love" (Bishop Curry), to respond with the love of Christ.

After the news of George Floyd's death, I started to react like I had before to similar events--as an observer, wondering how it would play out. How safe for me ... how neutral, how comfortable, how dismissive. But I was invited to respond, and it jolted me. One of our African American teachers at Justice High School (formerly J.E.B. Stuart HS) contacted each faculty member to share her personal story and offer a litany of educational resources about racial injustice; my black Air Force colleague sent all of her white FaceBook friends a plea to "please do the work and don't wait for me to tell you how"; and lest we forget, our own Rev. Marlene continually charged us to pursue justice ... and she still is, as you can see on her streaming sermons and prayer services. I've been personally invited to respond. I invite you to respond.

Jalisa Gary, my fellow teacher, said that beyond her outrage (yet again) is fatigue, but she is still hopeful. Sergeant Howard said she can't summon any more tears and can't keep asking for help; she is terrified for her teenage son. And as I write this, I am watching Rev. Marlene on FaceBook Live as she is marching with her clergy friends in Richmond. She just said, "Brothers and Sisters, stop spectating; get up and do something!" You all know and love Rev. Marlene ... don't let her down! There is a common message I hear from these three dear friends, and it echoes across social media and everywhere. I would summarize and paraphrase it like this: "I'm just so tired. Why did this happen again? I need my white friends to just do the work and quit asking me what to do."

So now what? What will you do? We must acknowledge our discomfort and move past it to have difficult conversations about race. We must admit that we don't know a lot, or nearly enough, about the history and structures of institutional racism. This means we will have to

learn a history not found in textbooks; read Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou; listen to voices that have lived experiences of discrimination; and pray that our hearts will not be hardened when we encounter something or someone who confronts us. Then we must act.

And of course, we should continually turn to Jesus, our teacher and Lord. We all know and agree that he crossed social boundaries, embraced the outcast, and showed compassion to the marginalized. We can all get on board with that. Of course, God loves everyone and as Christians so should we. We congratulate ourselves for our welcoming community, for our outreach and acts of charity. But are we willing to look Jesus in the eye and ask, "Lord, have I been faithful? Have I done enough?" We might not like the answer.

Since Jalisa and Sarah invited me to respond, I have been thinking about Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. It occurs in the first three Gospels (Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke 18) with very little variation (... must be important!). Jesus had been teaching many parables and was about to make his way to Jerusalem. A privileged and earnest young man approached Him and asked, "What must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus told him to keep the commandments, then named the Ten Commandments. The young man said that he had always kept them, so Jesus told the young man to sell all his possessions for the benefit of the poor and follow Him. The man walked away, despondent, because he was very wealthy. I'm sure that before he asked, the young man thought he had fulfilled Jesus' expectations and would receive an assuring (or at least an easy) answer about eternal life. That was not the case. The young man thought he had done the work, then he learned he had not even started.

Following Jesus means giving up a lot and taking on a lot of work. I'm sure we would all say, "I'm not racist." Of course, we aren't. And we would not actively discriminate. Of course not. We quickly condemn racism as abhorrent. But I think this is merely "keeping the commandments." I dare myself, and you, to ask Jesus, "What must I do to end racism?" We have kept the commandments, now we need to give up our preconceived notions, our self-satisfaction, our personal comfort and option to avoid conflict. Follow Jalisa, Sarah, and Rev. Marlene ... follow Jesus.

This is hard. It is hard to absorb the trauma around us, it is hard to confront my lifelong apathy, and it will be hard to join a conversation I have always avoided. I will start with Rev. Susan's invitation to participate on Thursday evenings on Zoom to read and discuss "Waking Up White, and Finding Myself in the Story of Race." (Please see your eNews for details. The Zoom meetings begin on June 11 at 7pm)

I leave you with the beloved Prayer of St. Francis, especially the supplication that we seek to understand before we seek to be understood:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;*

*where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.*