Lenten Study 2021

Understanding and Responding to Racism

Week Two ~ Continuing to Define the Terms and Address the Issues

~ “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” These are the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Why are we hesitant to speak up and act when we see or hear things that are clearly racist?

~ Amid the beautifully disturbing words of Mary’s song (often referred to as *The* *Magnificat*), Mary describes the Mighty One in this way: “His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 2:50-53) How do these words relate to white privilege and the power structures that hold sway over our society?

~ When we proudly proclaim that we do not see color or that we treat everyone the same, we are doing harm rather than good with regard to addressing racism. It is crucial that we see color and that we understand it is impossible to treat everyone the same . . . nor should we want to. What does “seeing color” mean to you? Why is it both dangerous and unrealistic to treat everyone the same?

~ “Equal rights for others does not mean fewer rights for you. It is not pie.” Why are those of us who are white so protective of the rights and privileges that are ours? Why does affirmative action stir feelings of anger among so many white people? Is there such a thing as reverse discrimination?

~ “Jesus tried to change people by loving and healing them. His harshest words of judgment were reserved for those who perpetuated systems of inequality and oppression and who, through religion itself, thought they were sinless and untouchable.” (Richard Rohr) Matthew 23 is full of harsh words of judgment for the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. How different are we from those leaders in the way we live our lives and silently pass judgment on others while viewing ourselves as having “arrived” and as surely being acceptable in God’s eyes?

~ In the assigned reading for this week, Austin Channing Brown describes her experience working in a faith-based setting “committed to diversity.” As is the case in many well-intentioned workplaces and institutions, what occurs is that those who are not white are expected to “fit in,” to embrace white ways as normative and preferrable, to be assimilated. Assimilation can be summarized as wanting diversity without diversity of thought and culture. It wants to see a Black person at the table but does not want to hear a dissenting viewpoint. Are churches guilty of this? What about St. John’s ~ are we genuinely willing to listen to others whose ethnicity and skin color differ from our own? Are we willing to embrace their ideas and act upon them?

~ If we dare to be honest with ourselves, we know there is more we can and must do to level the playing field, to challenge systems that perpetuate racism. We have all made mistakes, but it is not helpful to wallow in guilt because guilt does not lead to change. In fact, guilt is what we feel when we do not want to change. Instead, may our consciences be disturbed enough to want to act, to do things differently. C.S. Lewis wisely reminds us: “You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.” What one thing will you do in the week ahead to address the racism you see around you?

**\*\*\*\* Homework Assignment for March 10: Read chapters 6-8 of *I’m Still* Here by Austin Channing Brown**