Lenten Study 2021

Understanding and Responding to Racism

Week Five ~ Reconciliation and Where to From Here

~ In this week’s reading assignment, Austin Channing Brown writes about how far we have NOT come with regard to addressing racism in our country. As she reflects on the continued pain of social hatred that is her reality, these are her words: “I ought to be immune by now; I know too much about our racial history to be surprised. I’ve learned about slavery and lynchings, about white riots and bombings. It’s not fair that my knowledge doesn’t save me, that I can still be hurt. But I am human. I am human. And I am still alive.” She goes on to describe seeking safety and solace in the Black church, where worship is decidedly different than in white churches. What is it about the Black church experience that provides such safety and solace to its members?

~ As we read Austin’s letter to her soon-to-be-born son, once again we are reminded of the privilege that belongs to those whose skin is white. She worries about the first time someone will call her son a nigger, the first time he will be pulled over by a cop because he looks suspicious, the many assumptions people will have about him because of the color of his skin. Even though most of us will never have to worry about these things, some of us will. How do we prepare our children/grandchildren to deal with the prejudice and hatred that are very much part of the world in which we live?

~ Ultimately, racial reconciliation needs to be our goal as people of faith, but reconciliation is far more than having a handful of members in our congregation who happen to be people of color. It is more than sharing a building with another, more diverse congregation; more than having one or two people of color among the church’s leaders; more that asking lots of racial questions over a cup of coffee; more than missions work, outreach work or urban ministry. Austin reminds us that reconciliation is revolutionary and oriented toward structural change. It is political, chooses sides, and the side is always justice. Many church folks are uncomfortable with “being political,” but polite conversation is not enough. She writes: “Dialogue is productive toward reconciliation only when it leads to action ~ when it inverts power and pursues justice for those who are most marginalized.” Listening to the hurt and pain of people of color is not the end of the road, but the beginning. What steps might we take as a faith community that would move us beyond the listening to meaningful action on behalf of our Black sisters and brothers?

~ During last week’s Lenten Study, quite a bit of our conversation revolved around how we talk about our encounters with, and our connections to, people of color (the Black FedEx man, the black cashier, etc.) We acknowledged that identifying persons as Black is not, in and of itself, problematic, and in many cases can even be affirming and helpful, but it all depends on how we tell the story. Robin DiAngelo calls attention to this in *White Fragility* when she points out that white people describe Jackie Robinson as being the first African American to break the color line and play in major-league baseball. In reality, Jackie Robinson was the first black man whites *allowed* to play major-league baseball. Can you see the difference between these two statements?

~ If we have learned anything over the course of the past five weeks, hopefully we have learned how complex and multi-layered addressing racism is. We have not arrived, even though we may feel we are far more enlightened and compassionate than torch-bearing members of the KKK or members of other white supremist groups. Hopefully, we are also able to embrace the wise words of Maya Angelou, whose poetry reminds us that “we are more alike, my friends, than we are unalike.” Regardless of the color of our skin, we have all been created in the Divine image, and that image, when reflected rightly, embodies grace, mercy, forgiveness, justice, compassion and love. Looking forward, what is one thing you will do differently as you relate to persons of color or different ethnicities around you? What might we do better at St. John’s?

~ *Love without justice is a Christian impossibility and can only be practiced by those who have divorced religion from life, who dismiss a concern for justice as “politics,” and who fear social change more than they fear God. ~ Alan Paton, anti-apartheid South African activist*