

“A World Turned Upside-Down”
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Amos 5:14-15, 21-24

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Matthew 25:31-40

Jesus said, “Now, when the Human One comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear, I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’

Then those who are righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

“Then the king will answer them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these sisters and brothers of mine, you have done it for me.’

One thing we are learning from this pandemic is that our social safety net is woefully inadequate. I am not talking about socialism but about people’s right to work in safety, families’ rights to basic healthcare, ways to support individuals when – through no fault of their own – they simply cannot work.

You may have heard that the people protesting distancing guidelines are generally white. Why is that? Blacks, Latinx, Native Americans work many of the low paying jobs with few if any benefits. Their communities are at higher risk. Persons of color have less access to healthcare and, when they have it, it is often of lesser quality.

COVID-19 is not The Great Equalizer. White people like me, and most of you, are less likely to be struck down. And if we are, we are likely to receive better medical care, should we need it. When New Orleans was a COVID-19 hotspot, 70% of those who died were black. Yet African Americans make up only 33% of the population there.

This is injustice. The kind we read about in the Bible.

Before Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and killed 52 years ago, he called for our nation to do better: “Justice will not be guaranteed to me until we have built a culture ensuring justice for everyone.” We will have to repent not only “for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.” His words are still relevant today.

All my life, my color, education, career choices, everything but my gender has put me in the top tier of privilege. Thought you may not think so, most of you live with privilege as well. It’s like the water in the fish’s bowl: we see it but not the fish.

You are all good people. You would not knowingly say or do anything prejudiced. But what happens at a family gathering when someone says something xenophobic? When you speak up, the whole room gets quiet until somebody thinks of a way to change the subject. So often, we keep quiet. But the thing about prejudice is that if we ignore it, it becomes more pervasive. Hatred never just goes away. It grows.

When I went to seminary, I heard a lot about confronting our racism. I thought, racism? I taught five years in Navajoland, among the poorest, most underserved people in the nation. I laughed with my band students at their silly jokes. I cried with my girl choir when 12-year-old Linda Manuelito committed suicide. I loved my students. I wasn’t racist!

And yet, like you, I was socialized from infancy to accept and fit into white culture and white attitudes. This upbringing continues to influence me in ways I will never recognize on my own. My white skin and my ways give me advantages I don’t even notice. My mother did not have to take brown colored pencils to the characters of my early readers so that I would see people like me. When I look in the mirror, I see someone who is the norm. I don’t have to mentally prepare myself before stepping out the door.

Some years ago, I watched some Looney Tunes with my niece and nephews. I was appalled. I used to watch this every Saturday morning. Now, I see the violence, the racism. I cannot change my childhood, but I can be aware of how it shaped me.

Why do I talk about this on Mother’s Day, of all days?

Let me share a little history: In 1872, Julia Ward Howe called for a “Mother’s Day for Peace” to honor mothers who lost sons and husbands during the Civil War. Howe called on mothers of all nations to lead their countries in not only rejecting war, but also working for peace “in the name of womanhood and of humanity.”

Decades later, Anna Jarvis, a Methodist, observed Howe’s day of peace as Mother’s Friendship Day, bringing together families and neighbors divided by the Civil War. She devoted herself to lobbying for an official Mother’s Day declaration. In 1914, Woodrow Wilson declared that the second Sunday in May would be commemorated annually as Mother’s Day.

Over time, the connection between Mother’s Day and peace and justice has largely been forgotten. Yet women continue to lead such efforts, from the 10,000 women in Northern Ireland who protested violence and demanded peace to the millions who, in 2017, marched and demonstrated for the human rights and dignity of all people.

Martin Luther King, again: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” I cannot be free, you cannot be free, until all persons are free. We cannot be safe until all persons are safe.

When people face a situation, when we acknowledge that a problem exists, we can begin fixing it. Our nation has proved this time and again. We need a cure, or a victory, or a way through a prickly problem so we set our best people and the best resources to it. Similarly, when we don't acknowledge a problem, it does not get resolved. This happens not only in nations but in families and in churches and businesses. We are at our best when we are ready to learn, even when growing and changing leave us uncomfortable.

I was surprised by people's seeming disinterest after my pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine a year-and-a-half ago. It was a life-changing experience for those of us who went – not because we saw the Church of the Holy Sepulchre but because of time spent among the Palestinian people.

We saw the wall surrounding the Aida Refugee Camp that holds Palestinians whose homes have been taken by Israelis. We watched a video showing teargas canisters being shot into the only area of the camp where children could play and were told that this happens daily. We visited the camp and talked with the people there.

We walked a segment of the wall that was being build around Bethlehem. Saw how it separates the city. Usama, one of our leaders, a Palestinian Christian, told us that his 7-year-old daughter asked him, "Daddy, are we dangerous?"

Israel built this wall as the world looked on. It is an abusive act of power over a people who welcomed Jewish people into their land after WWII. The U.N. condemned the construction of this wall. Sadly, since many conservative Christians see a strong Israel as a step toward bringing closer the Second Coming of Christ, the U.S. has supported this unjust treatment of the Palestinian people.

Not trusting my memory, I sent those last paragraphs to a fellow traveler on that Living Stones Pilgrimage. While affirming that my recollections were correct, she also wrote that because what I just said "is so counter to everyone's frame of reference and their understanding of history as it has been taught" and because the media long portrayed anyone wearing a keffiyeh as a terrorist, it's hard for people to grasp its significance. For these reasons, my last sentence can come across as propaganda.

I recall our last day at the Church of the Sermon on the Mount in Israel. We were warned that we would be labeled antisemitic when we spoke of what we had learned during our ten days together. You may be thinking this now. Please ask yourself: When we recognize a situation in which people, any people, are being treated unjustly, are we not called by God to do something about it? Is Christ's call to treat "the least of these" with compassion and justice only about the ones we like? Or are we called to practice love-in-action on every person?

In the last three years, we have witnessed increased incivility, hatred and fear. We have experienced more acts of overt racism and tacit approval for them, not only in the U.S. but around the world. In honesty, this "us" versus "them" division has been building for decades.

They tell us things will be different when we emerge from this emergency. I hope so. The coronavirus pandemic is revealing our weaknesses – personally, in what we have taken for granted, and societally, in what we have chosen not to notice and work to fix.

As humans, created in God's image, we are supposed to be moved by *anyone's* suffering. We are affected, at least indirectly, whenever people – white or brown – have to put themselves at risk during pandemic to support their families or when someone whose biggest crime was being too

poor to afford decent representation dies of COVID-19 in prison. We may try to distance ourselves but we harm ourselves in the process.

When asked why he hung out with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus said, "It's not the well who need a doctor but the sick." This is where we need to be as well. They need us. But even more importantly, we need them.

Amen.