

The Need for Racial Healing: Healing the Wound of Racism  
John 8:48-9; Galatians 3:27-8; Acts 10:9-15

I want to talk about racial healing today. The time is upon us to face the truth of centuries of systemic racism and racial inequity which have been devastating to people of color throughout our history on to the present. The slaying of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor have brought to the surface this manifest evil. We can look away, or we can turn our faces to the truth, which is the deep meaning of conversion.

On the night of November 9, 1938 in Germany the violence against Jews turned open and official. Jewish homes, synagogues and businesses were ransacked. Holy books were burned, sacred vessels were smashed. It is called *Kristallnacht*, The Night of Broken Glass. That night Dietrich Bonhoeffer who would be executed for helping Jews and opposing Hitler, opened his Bible to Psalm 74. In the margin of his Bible he wrote: "How long, O God, shall I be a bystander?" That is our question today.

I

When I speak of the healing of racism, I recognize that racism is a crippling and grievous wound. Wendell Berry called it such in his book, *The Hidden Wound*.<sup>1</sup> For white people it has been mostly hidden, deep in our psyche, blind to the ravages of racism in other's lives. This wound has harmed black persons since

the first slave ship landed in 1619. The tortures and humiliations of black enslavement over the centuries have wounded the minds and spirits of black persons. It is a wound that must be cleaned before it can heal. We must attend to the wound.

In his book, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, Edward Baptist documents how slavery made America rich in a period when cotton was the most prized commodity in the world. Slave owners mastered the techniques of physical and mental torture as a way of maximizing production. Capitalism rose in America as we made black bodies a commodity to be bought, sold and used up.<sup>2</sup>

But while black persons suffered the most grievous wound, a wound still open today, white men and women have received their own wound, a disorder in their minds and a disordered society. It has been a moral injury of the most profound kind.

We are being called today to a re-ordering of our minds and souls and to a re-ordering of our society diseased by racism and caste.

## II

The term “systemic racism” has suddenly entered the public vocabulary. Some deny its existence, but as the saying goes, the fish is the last to notice the water. And too many profit on its existence.

The term means that racism is embedded not only in our minds and hearts but also in the structures of society, its institutions and customs. This disease has been passed down from generation to generation, as the Bible speaks of the sins of the fathers visited on the generations to come.

Many Christians, and many of us, have been raised to think of sin only in individual, personal terms. But the Bible and history itself tell us that sin is social too, bound up in social structures. The Hebrew prophets made the point over and over again: social sin destroys lives and even the earth itself. Sin has to do with the boardroom, not just the bedroom, public policy not just private wrong doing. What we need then is not just personal transformation but also social transformation.

Through systemic racism people of color have through the centuries have been shut out of opportunities we take for granted. Racial inequity has been built into our laws, our institutions of education and commerce, where we can live and how easy or hard it is to vote.

We must not keep looking away. Among the most terrible truths is that racism and white supremacy were built into our religious institutions and teachings too. Slave owners gave the slaves a Slave Bible, with all the passages that might cause them to question slavery, that might incite revolt carefully excised.

The church in America has used the Bible to justify slavery as the Will of God. They argued from the Old Testament depictions of slavery in Hebrew society. They argued that Jesus was silent on the issue. (He wasn't). They danced around the book of Exodus and God's deliverance of the Hebrew people for slavery. And they cherry-picked the passages of Paul that seemed to approve of slavery and ignored the rest.

In one of the most damning interpretations of scripture they used the story of Ham, who looked upon his drunken father, Noah's, nakedness to say that through God's punishment of Ham's son, Canaan, the black race was cursed to become the servant of the white race. I still see it in white-supremacist literature today.

Baptists through the centuries in America have been champions of racial equality and have stood against slavery, segregation and Jim Crow. But these have been minority voices. Reverend Richard Fuller of South Carolina said in 1845: "What God sanctioned in the Old Testament and permitted in the New

cannot be a sin.” Richard Furman, pastor the First Baptist Church, Charleston S.C. addressed the Governor of South Carolina in 1822 and set forth a “biblical defense of slavery” as a “positive good”. John C. Calhoun would later take up this phrase in his defense of the Southern economic system.

In 1845 the Southern Baptist Convention was formed. Why? Northern Baptists insisted that missionaries could not own slaves.

### III

But there’s another way to look at scriptures, especially if we read it through the lens of Jesus. His inaugural sermon in his hometown Nazareth proclaimed the release of captives and liberty to the oppressed. “Today!” he said. It did not go over well.

He crossed the boundaries of race, class, gender and religion which separated people into “clean” and “unclean”, “righteous” and sinner”. This included his care for Gentiles and especially Samaritans. Samaritans were despised by the Jews of his time. They had intermarried with other races and religions. They were half-breeds, and religious traitors.

But Jesus showed his love for Samaritans. He made them the heroes of some of his stories. His opponents pounced. Maybe Jesus *was* a Samaritan! In John 8 the religious leaders came to him and said, “Are we not right in saying

that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” Birtherism was around then too! “People are saying that you are a Samaritan.” I love Jesus’ response. He took issue with the second accusation, “I do not have a demon”, he said, but he let the accusation of his being a Samaritan hang in the air. He would not play into their racism. If they wanted to accuse him of being a Samaritan, that was okay with him. He was everyone cast off and despised. He was saying: “I am the woman at the well, the leper, the young black man shot jogging in the streets, the immigrant child in the cage, Matthew Shepherd the young gay man strapped to a post and brutally murdered, the untouchable person at the bottom of the caste system.”

#### IV

Now let’s look at the verse of Paul’s the slave master hid from the slaves: the one which challenged the racism, sexism and religious bigotry of his day—and ours:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

With these words he put a powder keg under the unjust social systems of his day. It is we who have extended the fuse, even to this day!

And let's not forget Simon Peter and his struggle with racial and religious bigotry. Gentiles were unclean racially and religiously. His position: "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it."

But one day, after the cross and resurrection, Peter was sleeping on a rooftop in Joppa. In a kind of trance he saw a vision, of a great table cloth being lowered from heaven to earth. Rousing awake he was hungry. The table cloth was filled with unclean animals, the kind Jews were forbidden to eat. A voice came from heaven: "Kill and eat!" Peter responded with a kind of indignation only righteous people can muster: "Lord, I have never!" Unclean food has never passed my lips! (Have you ever said or heard, "I have never!"/?)

Then the voice spoke again: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common. It all began to click: Unclean animals, unclean people: Clean animals, clean people. *God has made all people clean!*

Moments later, guess what, he got an invitation to go to a Gentile's house and eat. And he went where he had never gone before.

## V

The invitation is on two levels today. The first is to acknowledge what one has described as the "reflex of racism", those almost automatic reactions deep in our minds and hearts. If so, we can begin to loosen its hold on us.

The second is to become an “anti-racist”! The good news is that you don’t have to be cleansed of every trace of racism to be an antiracist.

This phrase, used more and more, is explained in Ibram X. Kendi’s new book *How to be an Antiracist*.<sup>3</sup> He gives us some definitions for us to ponder, and ponder again:

Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.<sup>4</sup>

And this, an *antiracist idea*, he says, affirms the equality of all races and argues “that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities.”<sup>5</sup>

We can be both racist or antiracist at any point. What we cannot be is “unracist”. There is not such thing! He writes:

“Racist” and “antiracist” are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos.<sup>6</sup>

So let’s ponder how we can be antiracist persons and an antiracist church. How we can help one other peel off the one name tag and put on the other.



This past Friday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, we celebrated the 57<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s soaring I Have a Dream speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Years earlier there was another who voiced a dream, Langston Hughes, the great American poet, poet of the Harlem Renaissance. His poem is called, "I Dream A World:"

I dream a world where man  
No other man will scorn,  
Where love will bless the earth  
And peace its paths adorn  
I dream a world where all  
Will know sweet freedom's way,  
Where greed no longer saps the soul  
Nor avarice blights our day.  
A world I dream where black or white,  
Whatever race you be,  
Will share the bounties of the earth  
And every man is free.  
Where wretchedness will hang its head  
And joy, like a pearl,

Attends the needs of all mankind—

Of such I dream, my world!

God has been whispering that sweet dream forever! Let's make it a shout!

1. Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (San Francisco, North Point Press, 1989).
2. Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 2016).
3. Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (N.Y.: One World, 2019).
4. Ibid, pp.17-18
5. Ibid, pp.20
6. Ibid, p.23