

MATTHEW 25:34b-40

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom 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 clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

Then the righteous will answer him: Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

THE ANTIDOTE

Matthew 25:34b-40

In a review of last year's documentary on the life and work of Fred Rogers, a writer for "Variety" noted, "Rogers' real secret was that the call to love your neighbor as yourself isn't a slogan to hang in your kitchen with flowers around it—it's a decision you make at every moment, to view every man, woman and child on earth as your neighbor. If you don't see and feel that, and act on it, then you're just another narcissist with a kitchen slogan."

What an excellent thought for us to ponder on this Martin Luther King holiday weekend. Two Thousand and Twenty may turn out to be one of the worst years in the history of our country—but 21 sure hasn't begun too well! And I could spend all of my time today elaborating on the racist underpinnings of our nation and the systemic institutionalization of white privilege which has sewed discrimination against all people of color into the very fabric of our laws and public policies.

But I am not going to do that. And the reason I am going to proceed in another direction

is because I do not see how adding poison to an already poisonous situation will be The Antidote for anything. In point of fact, I actually think it may be counterproductive to continuously berate White America about its racism. Why? Because it seldom induces soul searching. Instead, it is more likely to produce defensiveness, anger and denial. Those in the White Supremacy movement—and we've had our fill of them lately! —never admit that racism is their motivation. They just say they want their own country where they don't have to mix cultures and customs. And what's wrong with that?

In one of his debates with Joe Biden, the President for now proclaimed that he was the least racist person in the room. I have no doubt whatever that he really believed that even though his rhetoric and his policies over the past four years clearly said otherwise. Nobody likes to be accused of racism because it is very difficult to amount a defense against it and at its core, the accusation is an attempt to shame a person into changing their beliefs through stigmatization.

Research conducted on this subject reveal that shaming does not work as an agent of change. If anything, it is actually more likely to have the opposite effect of further entrenching the behavior, the attitude or belief you are trying to alter. This is exactly why those who believe the pandemic is a hoax steadfastly stand their ground in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. People do not like to change their minds about anything because doing so amounts to admitting they were wrong in the first place.

All of this is to say that those of us who would like to be active in combatting racism are left with a dilemma. How do we go about it without actually producing the opposite result? _ Author Elie Wiesel who survived the Holocaust and became a fierce opponent of racism wrote, "When you face evil, don't let it grow, fight it right away. Anyone who is suffering, *anyone* who is threatened becomes your responsibility...It is not the end—I do not know how to end hatred, I truly wish I did—but recognizing our shared humanity is a good beginning."

I suppose one could argue, "Well, if I can't directly oppose it, perhaps I should just ignore

it and it will go away.” No, it will not. And as Christians, we have the absolute **imperative** to oppose it. Otherwise, we become enablers of it. Deniers and ignorers always become enablers. The coronavirus loves these folks. They are the super spreaders. And while we can always say to ourselves, “They got what they deserved” when they get infected, the fact is that we are indeed all in this together and until the virus is eradicated, we all pay the price for anyone’s infection.

And so it is with racism. There will be no peace in this country until we overcome it. But if confronting it directly is likely to enflame it, is there a more effective approach? Isn’t it perfectly outlined for us in Matthew 25? The Antidote is right there before our eyes. *I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.*

There is a prior assumption underlying this passage. And that is the notion that there is a unifying Presence at the center of everyone and everything, a unity that binds us all together. If you take this as your starting point, the next step is to affirm the sacredness of the entire creation of which every living thing is a part. God does not make distinctions among people. Doesn’t Jesus imply that no one can ever enter the Kingdom of God without desiring to take all others with him? Whom are you going to exclude and why? Explain that to God.

On the other hand, when you begin to practice seeing all living things as intentional expressions of the Divine (and believe me, it does take practice!), your perceptions will begin to change. For haven’t we have been conditioned to view and understand the world through a process of sorting and separating? And while there are some very necessary reasons to do that, a cow is not a pig and a horse is not a goat and we need to understand how they are different. But the problem arises in making judgments about the value of each and arriving at conclusions which do not take into consideration the inherent Divine Presence.

We sort and separate all the time. We plant vegetables, but we pull other living green

things we call weeds; we like cardinals, but we are disgusted by starlings. And when we start doing that with people—now we have a problem—a BIG problem. It has contaminated every social system to have ever existed on this planet. And the suffering it has caused is beyond comprehension. And it is a suffering we have all either endured or enabled—perhaps both. And while it is not something that it is simply going to go away, it is something we can all begin to work harder on. We must! Let's forget stigmatizing others. Let's instead start with ourselves. Let's really practice to view all of creation as holy and deserving of our care. Take time every day to meditate on this. And then let's see where it leads us. *For truly I say to you, even as you have done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me.*

Reverend Thomas Dunlap January 17, 2021