

St. James' E-pistle: **SPECIAL EDITION**

A Letter from the Rector for May 29, 2020

Dear People of St. James',

On Sunday, we are going to celebrate the Feast Day of Pentecost, when we will remember the tongues of fire that rested upon the first apostles of Jesus, as they received the power of the Holy Spirit to carry the Good News of Jesus throughout the world. But our gaze at this moment is instead fixed upon the flames that are engulfing buildings in Minneapolis in response to the killing of George Floyd, the most recent explosion of fury at the systemic racism that continues to plague our nation. As Christians, we are standing today at a painful crossroads. Our Pentecost story proclaims without qualification or exception God's embrace of diversity in all of God's creation. And yet, despite the deep Christian roots of our nation, we have never managed rid ourselves of evils of domination, exploitation, and greed in our midst, powers that use our God-given diversity to turn us against God and one another.

Many white Christians in America like me have taken great pains at times to rationalize and excuse and explain our way out of culpability or even benefit from the racism that surrounds us. We affirm that we are "color-blind," that we abhor racist language, slurs and humor, and that we really and truly do affirm the dignity of every human being. True, all those claims may be an good start in our aim to purge racism from our own thoughts, emotions, and actions. But as Christians, "not being racist" only takes us so far. In our Baptismal Covenant, we not only affirm that we will "respect the dignity of every human being." We also say that we will "*resist evil*" and "*strive for justice*." Yes, the "respecting of dignity" piece, I think we are quite good at. Perhaps that is because barely does "respecting" ruffle feathers, cause a disturbance, or invite a rebuke or reprisal. "Resistance" and "Strife," however, are a different matter. **Resisting Evil**, after all, is bound to draw the attention and then the attacks of "The Evil One," to borrow an expression from Jesus himself. **Striving for Justice** is, by definition, difficult, challenging, and uncomfortable work. But those more forceful elements of the Covenant that we all have made, and that we affirm on days like Pentecost, they are what call us beyond a comfortable position of "not being racist" and into that more active and less tolerant (of evil) work of "anti-racism."

For many of us whites folks, that sort of call to action is daunting. Our intentions may be wholly good, but we just don't know where to begin, what to do, or what to say. A recommendation that I have heard frequently during Anti-Racism trainings and workshops is simply this: "Don't Talk—Just Listen." Listen to the voices of those who have suffered from systemic racism every day of their lives. Listen without comment. Listen without justification. Listen without explanation. Just listen, and suspend the urge to react or defend. Because as we listen, and listen, and listen some more, we will find truth revealed to us. And when we then prayerfully seek to be changed by those truths, then may we begin to find the direction and courage for action that lies at the heart of our covenantal mandate to resist and to strive.

One of the ways we can do that work of listening during these pandemic days is to read the words of just such voices. If St. James' has not yet engaged with these texts, two excellent resources I can suggest on the legacy of racism in the United States are Michelle Alexander's "[The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#)" and Bryan Stevenson's "[Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#)." For those seeking a more explicitly Christian theological perspective, I can also recommend Jim Wallis' "[America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to the New America](#)," and Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey's "[The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America](#)." If, after hearing these voices speaking through these texts, there is an interest in gathering together for an online conversation together to unpack their messages for us, I would be happy to help get us together. Drop me a line if you would like to take part.

Most of us have, throughout our lives, been deeply embedded in a social system here in the United States that has born a centuries-old legacy of racism. While it may be true that none of us alone will transform that massive structure into God's Kingdom in the near future, we can begin somewhere. We can begin with ourselves. We can set the flint of our neighbor's words of truth to the steel of our hearts, and see what sparks might leap forth in that uncomfortable scraping with reality. And then, aided by the breath of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who knows what flames might alight within us?

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Dustin+