

*Pastor Jana Schofield*

*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*March 21, 2021*

*Fifth Sunday in Lent*

*Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33*

When David wrote Psalm 51 that we heard this morning, he was owning up to his sin of committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband Uriah murdered. After the prophet Nathan had confronted David with his sin, David pled with God, “have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; in your great compassion, blot out my offenses.” In his confession, David was admitting that his sin was ever before him. David knew his offenses, and he knew that he needed God to create a clean heart and a right spirit within him.

This morning in the confession with which we began worship, we lamented and owned up to the fact that we have, even unintentionally, caused harm due to racism. We admitted that we need God to create a clean heart and a right spirit within us. However, unlike David, our sins are not always known to us. We sometimes are not aware of our offenses. The sin of racism is an insidious sin that unless we are the recipients of it, we may not even know that we are perpetrating it.

The sin of racism shows up in our conscious or subconscious thinking. We may not realize that we tend to give more attention, or power, and or value to some people over others based on their skin color or culture. Or we may consciously do so, which means we do overtly think that all people are not created equally in God’s image.

The sin of racism also shows up in our *lack* of thinking. I have never once worried when I’ve walked out my front door if I will be verbally or physically accosted due to the color of my skin. As Peggy McIntosh, a white woman, once wrote, “I can go into a bookshop and count on finding the writing of my race represented, into a supermarket and find staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can deal with my hair; I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection; if a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race; I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me, etc., etc., etc.” I, like Peggy, have benefitted from being white in our society where I have unearned privilege solely because of the color of my skin. If I chose, I could live every day of my life without thinking about my race. Now you have to hear this, my life is hard sometimes—all of our lives are hard sometimes—but for me, it’s never because of my race. Unfortunately, because of white supremacy, the same is not true for those who are black, indigenous, or people of color.

One Asian American woman recently told Time Magazine, “The other day, I walked 40 blocks to avoid taking the bus or the subway. I’d rather be out in the open where I can run away if I have to. I wear big sunglasses, and my hair is ombré blond, so I wear a hat to cover the black hair so you can only see the blond.” And, as we have seen so horrifically in past months, elderly Asian Americans have been violently shoved to the ground for no reason other than their race, and this week in Georgia, the same tragic story of people of color losing their lives for reasons related to their race was repeated. If we think that racism isn’t really an issue in our country, just ask almost any person of color about their experiences, or those of their friends and family members.

The sad thing is that just how Martin Luther said we are sinners and saints at the same time, we can be racist and anti-racist at the same time, too. We are sinners, as David puts it in Psalm 51, from our mothers' wombs. Even when we don't realize how we have contributed to the sin of racism, we may be complicit in continuing it. We are deeply in need of God creating a clean heart and a right spirit within us.

You know how when you walk through an airport – even if you haven't done so in well over a year – and you hear the announcement over the loudspeakers that if you see an unaccompanied bag or anything troublesome to say something to someone? They encapsulate it by saying, "If you see something, say something." Well, I wonder if that is what God is expecting of each of us when it comes to racism. That when we see or hear something racist in ourselves or someone else, that we say something?

In the reading and dialogues I have done on anti-racism and white supremacy this past year, I have made a conscious decision and promise to God that if I see something racist, in myself or another, I will say something. I will, like David, admit to God that my sin of racism is ever before me. I will like the prophet Nathan hold a mirror up to others who contribute to the sin of racism, so that our offenses are known to us, and we can then ask God to create a clean heart and a right spirit within us.

In the gospel today, Jesus says that in order for a grain of wheat that falls to the earth to grow, what it once was must die so that new life can emerge. Just like how Nicha reminded us that in order to become a second grader, we have to no longer be a first grader, in order to become anti-racist, in order to see and love all people as God sees and loves all people, we have to no longer do those things that are racist. The only way that new life can emerge is by saying something about racism when we see it, by admitting it to ourselves or holding others accountable for when we see it in them. It is risky, it is uncomfortable, and yet it is the gospel.

The gift of this time of Lent is to stand in humility with the outline of the ash cross still on our foreheads in repentance for our sin of racism, and in gratitude that things can be different.

As the statement from the ELCA in observance of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination says, "Oppression is not inevitable or insurmountable. Things can change" when we challenge racism and white supremacy.

And that can happen only because we are loved and supported and called by a gracious God, who is patient with us, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. As so may we pray together, Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit. Amen.