



Comparisons

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I have read many well-written, insightful articles recently comparing the coronavirus to the scourge of racism. The comparisons are apt. The virus and racism embed themselves in our communities, sometimes before any symptoms are recognized by general populus. The global scope of both merit comparison. The inverse is true: no single community – urban, suburban, or rural – is immune. Both the virus and racism destroy society and literally take lives. These comparisons feel timely and revealing. For me though, the comparison breaks down on one key point.

When we first recognized the coronavirus and its spread, we implemented social distancing and cleaning protocols. We shut down places where people would gather together, including our churches. I remember being struck by public health officials who warned, “If we do everything right, it will seem like nothing changed.” If we practiced social distancing, wore masks, and washed our hands, we could limit the number of positive cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. If we did everything right, we’d come out on the other side believing the virus wasn’t nearly so bad as we’d been told.

This is where the comparison to racism crumbles. With racism, if we do everything right, things are going to look very different. If we do everything right to combat racism, the change will be patent. If we do everything right to destroy systemic racism – not just tamp down acts of overt prejudice – we will come out on the other side knowing that racism was far worse than we’d been told.

We know change is hard. We’re the church. We’ve struggled with change for as long as we’ve been around. We wrestle with the color of our carpet, our choice of hymnal, and adapting to the styles of new worship leaders. We don’t change the format of the potluck because it’s become tradition. We grapple with the role of the church in a post-modern, post-Christian society. Change is hard.

In many cases, change is hard because it feels like loss. When it feels like the world is spinning out of control, the Church can feel like a sanctuary, steady and reliable. We don’t want to lose that. But, I have to say these hard words, Beloved Majority-White Church, if we are afraid to confront racism because we don’t like change, then we’ve lost our way. If we fear the changes that anti-racism work entails because we might lose something (our control, our preferences, our power, our style of worship, our sense of normalcy), then we need to remember who has called us to be the Church in the first place.

*Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that **I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.***

Jeremiah 9:23-24 (NRSV)

In that remembering, we are freed to shift from a sense of loss to the power of choice. I can choose to use my white privilege to seek justice for people of color. We can choose to let go of systems and structures that



benefit one group at the expense of the rest. We can freely choose actions that delight a God of steadfast love, justice, and righteousness for all. It might simply begin with our voluntarily giving up the presumption that racism doesn't exist anymore. What a gift for brothers and sisters of color! What a delight to our God of Justice!

If, however, our hesitation to act is not a fear of change or a sense of loss, but a paralysis about *what to do*, take heart. We can work with that. We begin by listening to the people of color who are choosing to speak into this moment, not out of obligation but a personal sense of call. We begin by doing homework about the history of racism in our country and its continuing, insidious effects.

Then we call out to the God of Justice and the Spirit of Righteousness to guide our steps. The ways in which we all lean into anti-racism work will be different and incremental. Some will march; others will use words to advocate from home; still others will steward their resources for lasting change. There is no one, best response. The problem is so widespread that everyone can discover a unique calling.

I have been touched by the words of Chicago educator Dwayne Reed: "White supremacy won't die until White people see it as a White issue they need to solve rather than a Black issue they need to empathize with."

We listen, we pray, and we act collectively and individually. We choose to act because we are obedient to the God of steadfast love, justice, and righteousness. We choose to act because it delights the Lord. Beloved Church, your witness and your action right now can help bring about change that is long, long overdue. How will you respond?