



“Called to Show the World a Better Way”

Scripture – Luke 5:1-11

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, February 10, 2019

How many of you saw the photo from the 1984 medical school yearbook showing a young man in blackface standing next to someone dressed in a Ku Klux Klan robe? When presented with the photograph, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam admitted that he was the one in the blackface. A few hours later, he reversed course, saying that he was neither of the people in the photograph. Following intense calls for his resignation, he called a press conference to quell the storm, but while he was attempting to clear his name, he admitted to rubbing shoe polish on his face to look like Michael Jackson for a dance contest. Instead of calming the controversy, when the hour long mea culpa ended the calls for his resignation intensified.

No sooner had eyes turned to the Lieutenant Governor, who would succeed the governor should he resign, than a woman stepped forward to say that he had sexually abused her. That prompted a chorus of voices to demand that he also step aside, including some who had demanded that Judge Kavanaugh get a free pass on similar charges. It made me wonder if the double standard has anything to do with the fact that the Lieutenant Governor is African American.

Third in line for the governorship is the Attorney General. Many hoped that he could step up and calm the chaos. But within days of the governor’s confession, he too, confessed to wearing blackface in college.

If the first three are swept aside, the fourth in line is the Majority leader of the Virginia State Senate. Before the end of the week it was revealed that he had been in charge of the Virginia Military Institute’s yearbook in 1968, the year Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. In that yearbook, there are several photos of young men in blackface and dotting some of the pages are racial slurs and anti-Semitic comments.

Blackface dates back to the 1830s when most African Americans were slaves. White men would paint their faces black and entertain white audiences by dancing like a buffoon, exaggerating black vernacular, and making ignorant statements to elicit roars of laughter from the audience. Blackface was intended to stereotype blacks as an inferior race undeserving of equality with whites. It was intended to silence the conscience of anyone who might be tempted to believe that all people are created in God’s image and worthy of respect and dignity.

Lest anyone imagine that racism is limited to the shores of our country, this past week on the other side of the pond, British actor Liam Neeson said in an interview that he had once pursued racist revenge. Years ago, a friend confided in him that she had been raped by a man who was black. Neeson said that to avenge the rape, he began walking through black neighborhoods carrying a bludgeon, hoping to get into a fight so that he could beat a black man to death.

A reporter for *The Guardian*, reminds us that “Neeson’s story describes an element of racism that takes root in white imaginations: the fantasy of violence. In Neeson’s mind, all black men were of one piece, an undifferentiated group that was uniformly menacing and collectively responsible for what happened to his friend.”¹

Let us return to Virginia 18 months ago, when white supremacists and Neo-Nazis terrorized Charlottesville, and one of their own rammed his car into a crowd of people, injuring several and killing a young woman. At the time, it was easy to point the finger at hate groups and thank God that we are not like them – overt bigots who openly declare that white people are superior to people of color.

However, that is neither the case with the Virginia politicians, nor the actor, Liam Neeson. These are well-educated, highly successful individuals who regularly work with people of different races and who would undoubtedly condemn racism. However, they seem to have a blind spot to the pain they have caused by some of their words and actions. They seem not to grasp their complicity in furthering notions of white supremacy.

I never wore blackface and was never around anyone who did, but over the years I have become increasingly aware of the subtle ways in which I used to think of white as normal, non-white as – well – different. I have begun to realize that white privilege has blinded me to the pain that African Americans suffer routinely.

I have never had someone follow me around in a department store because they assumed I was there to steal something. I have never been pulled over by a police officer because I was driving while white. I have never had anyone assume that the only way I could have landed in the best church in Delaware was because of Affirmative Action. No one has ever yelled a racial slur at me.

My undergraduate degree was in history and I never questioned the fact that we rarely studied the lives of people of color. Growing up in Tulsa, I was required to take a course in Oklahoma history. Yet, I was in my 50s before I ever heard of the Tulsa Race Riots which occurred in the 1921. The original report said that 36 African Americans were murdered, but a later report estimated that 100 to 300 blacks were murdered by mobs of white Tulsans. Why did my white teacher in my white school fail to mention an attack that “is considered one of the worst incidents of racial violence in the history of the United States?”²

It is easy to overlook injustice when it does not affect us personally. It is easy to ignore oppression when we are not the victims. But we avert our eyes at our own peril, because racism allows the evil of injustice to stretch its tentacles into every facet of our society and to strangle the bonds that unite us as children of God.

Today’s gospel lectionary reading tells of Jesus calling Peter to become one of his followers. We know how it turned out, but did you catch Peter’s initial reaction? He fell down at the knees of Jesus and said, “Go way from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

What did he mean? Did he think that since he was a fisherman he was a bit rough around the edges and drank too much to be in the company of Jesus? Maybe.

But it could be the same reason that so many others fail to follow Jesus, or set out with the intention of following Jesus, but eventually drift away. They do not really want to *follow*. They want to set their own agenda and not be responsible to a higher purpose. They want to plot out their own path and not be expected to live up to certain standards.

It is important to note that Peter had a choice. He was not under some mystical spell in which his personal freedom evaporated. Jesus did not coerce Peter to follow him; he invited him. Suddenly and without warning, Peter found himself at the most critical crossroad of his life. He could continue with what was comfortable – fishing – or he could risk it all on the promises of this compelling prophet. He could remain in his own village and keep his same friends, or he could walk away from it all and venture into a new future.

Is it any wonder Luke tells us that Peter was afraid? He was scared of making the wrong decision. He could continue his routine and eke out a living or he could shoot the moon. Becoming a follower of this amazing teacher sounded exciting, but what if Jesus' promise of a rich life turned out to be fool's gold?

When Jesus beckoned Peter, the fisherman had only a scant idea of what he was in for. Yet, over time as Peter walked the roads of Galilee, and Jesus filled in the picture of what a rich life entails, it began to take shape. Jesus would teach Peter and anyone who committed to following him to treat others with the same grace and generosity and fairness and dignity with which we want others to treat us.

Jesus underscored the commandments that were given to Moses and the teachings of the prophets, but he also superseded them. He crystallized God's intentions in a new commandment. It was not really new in the sense that it lurched in a new direction. Rather, it encapsulated the core teachings of God.

What we followers of Jesus often forget – or fail to fully embrace – is that Jesus does not request or suggest; rather, he **commands** us to love others as ourselves. And we fail to grasp the breadth of his commandment to love if we are not angered by injustice.

Religious faith that has no real-world consequences is not faith. There is no record of Jesus spending much time in synagogues and I suspect he would steer clear of churches today that are entirely self-focused. He called on his followers to engage in concrete actions to relieve suffering and he declared that the path to the kingdom of God runs through feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, freeing the oppressed and caring for those who have been beaten, abandoned, and forgotten. His core principal was love, and the way to love God is to love others – not with sentimental emotions, but actions focused on overcoming evil with what is right and true and just.

When Sir Ernest Shackleton proposed an expedition to the South Pole, he wondered if he could find enough hardy souls who would risk joining him. Whoever signed on would be expected to trek through blizzards with gale force winds and sub-zero temperatures that the human body might not be able to withstand. He assumed it would be a challenge to find enough recruits willing to make the march, “but he was inundated with letters from young and old, rich and poor, from every part of society, all desiring to share in that great adventure.”³

With racism running at high tide and respect slowing to a trickle, now is a golden opportunity for followers of Jesus to show the world a better way. It will be extremely challenging; it will require heroic acts; but we must stubbornly resist any thinking or action that treats “certain children of God as inferior and not deserving of equal justice and equal opportunity.”⁴

We resist evil by exposing it, by resisting it, and by overcoming it with a Christ-like love that will not rest until it cements justice for everyone – not simply whites, not simply heterosexuals, and not simply Christians – but EVERYONE.

God envisions a world where justice and mercy reign, and calls on us to become partners in making it happen. Yet, a new world cannot be born until we disentangle ourselves from a system of white privilege that benefits some while punishing others. Only then will we be able to imagine new ways of being in the world that provide opportunities for every single child of God to flourish.

NOTES

1. Moira Donegan, “Liam Neeson Laid Bare the Logic of Lynching, in All Its Horror,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2019.
2. Wikipedia, *Tulsa Race Riot*.
3. William Barclay, *Daily Devotions with William Barclay*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p.41.
4. Da’Shawn Mosley, “The Advocate,” *Sojourners*, February 2019, quoting Benjamin Crump, the attorney who defended Trayvon Martin.