

“Original Goodness”
 Trinity A (June 7, 2020) - COVID-19 (Sunday 13)
 Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2:4a; 2 Corinthians 13:13
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>We ask, O God, that they, who bind a brother, may relent. And, Great Avenger, we do pray that the wrongdoer may repent. Amen. ~Abolitionist prayer by John Pierpont (1843)<<

There’s an old story about “an independent island [that] was attacked by the dictator of a nearby nation, a nation with vast resources and a mighty army. Upon landing on the island, this army moved with little resistance toward the capital city. With less than a day to decide what action to take, the leaders of the island desperately discussed what could be done They were hugely outnumbered, out-resourced, and out-skilled, so defeat seemed inevitable. The leaders never made a decision without first consulting with their religious oracle, so they approached her small dwelling on the edge of the city. The oracle was a woman who possessed great insight and had the ability to see into realms usually reserved only for the angels. Upon hearing about the invasion, she spent an entire day in deep meditation before finally coming to the leaders with a heavy heart, saying, ‘I bring sad news; I have been told that God himself has joined with our enemies and has put all of his power at their disposal.’ This ominous message sent deep fear and trembling through the hearts of the elders. In response one proclaimed, ‘We must surrender now and pray that they will have mercy on us.’ Then another responded, ‘No, let us make ready our fastest ships and set sail with as many people as we can. Perhaps we can sneak past their navy while it is dark.’ But the queen, a . . . [woman of] deep faith, remained calm throughout the debate. At the end of the discussion she said, ‘Please trust me, I know what to do in order to ensure that we make it through this dark hour.’ The queen was well respected by all, and so, in the absence of a plan, they reluctantly agreed to trust her. That day she called together all the [people] of the city who could fight. She then sent those with young children home, followed by those who had been married for less than a year. By the end of this process the remaining [people] numbered less than a few thousand, a tiny group in comparison to the army they would soon face. These brave [people] were then armed and told to march behind their queen toward the [approaching] army. [The battle that day was brutal] . . . but, to everyone’s utter surprise, by the end of the day the [opposing] army had . . . turned away in retreat. The entire island was dumbstruck as they heard of how the enemy had run in fear and trembling back to their homeland. The oracle however was more confused than most, for she [thought] . . . that God had joined the side of the enemy So the oracle approached the queen and said, ‘How did you know to fight when the odds were impossibly high and when you knew that God himself was pitted against you?’ But the queen merely smiled and replied, ‘Surely you know that it does not matter which side God is on. When God is involved [in any struggle, she said], the oppressed [will] win.’”¹

The story is fictional, but like any good piece of fiction it can speak truth. It’s a story that reminds me of those places in scripture where God acts powerfully on behalf of the least, the lost, the left behind, the last in line, the downtrodden, and the dehumanized. God, says the Psalmist in Psalm 146, “executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over

¹ Adapted from Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2015 [2009]), 111-113.

the strangers” – the aliens, the undocumented, the migrants. This is who God is, says the writer of Psalm 146. Or take the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who, after learning that she would give birth to the Christ, sang a song with lyrics that sound like Psalm 146: God scatters the proud, she sings; God pulls the powerful down from their thrones, lifts up the lowly, and fills hungry bellies. This is who God is, sings Mary. I could imagine her lyrics being turned into a chant, bursting out of the mouths of thousands as they march in the streets: *God scatters the proud, pulls the powerful down, lifts up the lowly, fills the belly! God scatters the proud, pulls the powerful down, lifts up the lowly, fills the belly!* I can imagine those words on placards and being chanted by thousands of protesters. When God is involved [in any struggle],” says the queen, “the oppressed [will eventually] win.” The arc of history is long, Dr. King once said, but it bends toward justice.

Maybe we’ve now reached what Malcolm Gladwell calls a “tipping point” as a nation, as we continue on this long arc of history. Confederate symbols are being torn down in the south. “Black Lives Matter” has been painted in yellow on a Washington DC street. NFL executives are starting to recognize that Colin Kaepernick had a point when he kneeled during the National Anthem. And *white* people are in the streets – not just black and brown people, but thousands and thousands of white people – putting *their* bodies on the line to tip the scales, move further along the arc, break the dam so that, as the Hebrew prophet Amos said, justice can roll down like water. Sitting on her uncle’s shoulders and looking out over the people in the street, George Floyd’s six-year-old daughter said, “Daddy changed the world.” Beautiful words, but also sad – sad that a little girl will grow up without a daddy, because yet another black body was sacrificed in the streets on the altar of racism. And yes, we should use this word – the “r” word. Because racism is more than just one’s personal hatred based on skin color. A white person may not personally hate a black person, but we white people benefit from a system that is not colorblind, but in fact privileges whiteness. I *think* we all know this down deep inside. It’s less clear how to fix it, because racism, as Beverly Daniel Tatum writes, “is like smog in the air.” It’s everywhere. Sometimes it’s visible, sometimes not – we breathe it, we live in it, we take it for granted even though we know it’s wrong. In his anti-poverty work in New York City, Wes Moore, CEO of Robin Hood Foundation, has said that race is the underlying factor in every issue his organization deals with – education, health care, food insecurity, unemployment, policing, incarceration, every issue. Smog.

Columbia Law School Professor Patricia Williams tells a personal story to illustrate the insidiousness of the smog.² “A few years ago, I purchased a house,” she says. “Because the house was in a different state than where I was located at the time, I obtained my mortgage by telephone. I am a prudent little squirrel when it comes to things financial,” she says, “always tucking away sufficient stores of nuts for the winter, and so I meet all the criteria of a quite good credit risk. My loan was approved almost immediately. A short time after, the contract came in the mail. Among the papers the bank forwarded were forms documenting compliance with what is called the Fair Housing Act. It is against the law to discriminate against black people in the housing market, and one of the pieces of legislation to that effect is the Fair Housing Act, a law that monitors lending practices to prevent banks from doing what is called ‘red-lining.’ Red-lining is a phenomenon whereby banks circle certain neighborhoods on the map and refuse to lend in those areas for reasons based on race. ... I should repeat,” says Patricia Williams, “that to this point my entire mortgage transaction had

² Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 38ff.

been conducted by telephone. I should also say that I speak what is considered in the [U.S.] a very Received-Standard-English, regionally northeastern perhaps, but not marked as black. With my credit history, with my job as a law professor, and no doubt with my accent, I am not only middle-class but match the cultural stereotype of a good white person. It is thus perhaps that the loan officer of this bank, whom I had never met in person, had checked off the box on the Fair Housing form indicating that I *was* ‘white.’ ... I took a deep breath, crossed out ‘white,’ checked the box marked ‘black,’ and sent the contract back to the bank. ... Suddenly,” she says, “said deal came to a screeching halt. The bank wanted more money as a down payment, they wanted me to pay more points, they wanted to raise the rate of interest. Suddenly I found myself facing great resistance and much more debt. ... [T]he reason [the bank] gave was that property values in that neighborhood were suddenly falling. They wanted more money to cover the increased risk. ... I am an extremely careful shopper,” says Williams, “and I had uncovered absolutely no indication that prices were falling at all. ... [I realized that] *I* was the reason the prices were in peril. The bank was proceeding according to demographic data that show any time black people move into a neighborhood in the States, whites are overwhelmingly likely to move out. ... Pulling every imaginable resource with them, from school funding to garbage collection to social workers who don’t want to work in black neighborhoods As for my mortgage,” she concludes, “I threatened to sue and eventually procured the loan on the original terms.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “One of the most blasphemous consequences” of racism is that it dehumanizes a person. Racism, he said, “can make a child of God doubt that [they are] a child of God. But no one is a [lesser child] of God,” he said. “No one.”

Which is why today’s lectionary reading from Genesis about the creation of the world is so timely for us. The creation story preserves God’s first statement about human beings. God gazed with delight at all creation, and at us in particular, and declared us to be “very good,” what Richard Rohr says is our “original goodness” as human beings. Today’s reading from Genesis begins “in the beginning” when God began to create the heavens and the earth. Notice in the story that God didn’t begin to create out of nothing. There *was something* there – it was “formless and void,” says the writer. It was colorless and gray. It was like a lump of clay thrown onto the wheel by a potter – formless, shapeless, awaiting the potter’s creative hands. And into the void, God breaks the silence and speaks, “Let there be light” – God applies God’s hands to the lump, pumps the pedal, and the wheel starts to spin. Attentive readers of this ancient story know that it’s not a literal tale; it’s a poetic one with a beautiful structure. If you have some time this afternoon, go back and reread the story, but read it structurally: days 1-3 match days 4-6. In days 1-3 God creates spaces – the heavens in Day 1, the waters and skies in Day 2, and the land in Day 3. In days 4-6 God creates the beings to inhabit those spaces – the sun, moon, and stars, the sea creatures and birds, the animals and humans. Day 1 matches Day 4. Day 2 matches Day 5. Day 3 matches Day 6. The spaces of Days 1-3 match the beings who populate those spaces in Days 4-6. It’s not a literal story; it’s a poetic one that’s trying to make a point.

The last beings God creates to populate the land are human beings. We are the only beings said to be created in God’s own image. I don’t think this means that God looks like us – ten fingers and toes, a mouth, ears, hair, skin, and teeth. To be created in God’s image is not a statement about what God looks like, but rather it’s a statement about basic human dignity and worth – about our “original goodness.” The creation story concludes with Potter God

delighting in the bowl she's created from the lump of clay. Before resting on the seventh day, she looks at the whole creation – the colors, the species, the celestial bodies, and the human beings – and declares it all – declares all of us – to be “very good.” Long before Adam and Eve ate the fruit, God's first declaration about human beings is that we are very good. Desmond Tutu says it's blasphemous to treat some human beings as lesser children of God – to call them thugs, or criminals, or animals, or to create systems that oppress and dehumanize. To be human – *just* to be human – is to be worthy of dignity, because God said so in Genesis.

In his book *God Has a Dream*,³ Desmond Tutu wrote about the first time one of his children became aware of racism: “When our children were young, Leah [my wife] and I used to have picnics on the beach in East London [South Africa]. South Africa has beautiful beaches, but the portion of the beach reserved for the blacks was the least attractive, with quite a few rocks lying around. Not far away was a playground with a miniature train, and our youngest [daughter] ... said, ‘Daddy, I want to go on the swings,’ and I said with a hollow voice and a deadweight in the pit of the tummy, ‘No, darling, you can't go.’ What do you say,” asks Desmond Tutu, “how do you feel when your baby says, ‘But, Daddy, there are other children playing there?’ How do you tell your little darling,” he asks, “that she could not go because she was a child ... but she was not really a child, not that kind of child? And you died many times and were not able to look your child in the eyes because you felt so dehumanized, so humiliated, so diminished.”

When those of us who are white hear a story like that, the appropriate response, according to writer Rebecca Carroll, is to feel “miserable.”⁴ When those of us who are white see a black man like George Floyd killed in the streets, the appropriate response, she says, is to feel “miserable.” That feeling, she says, is something we can build on. It's the first step toward clearing the smog. This will not be easy work. It's going to take time. It will take, as Dr. Luvelle Brown, Superintendent of the ICSD, wrote this week in a letter, “self-awareness,” “self-criticism,” and “self-examination.” Introspection is what our Christian tradition calls it.

Let me end today with the same words I quoted to conclude my letter to you this week. Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in America, Michael Curry, was asked in an interview about hope.⁵ This is what he said,

I believe if people of good will and human decency come together and say we're going to be a people of love, we're going to be a people of compassion. If we will stand up, speak up, and join hands across racial differences, across religious differences, across differences of sexual orientation, across all of our differences – join hands as brothers and sisters and siblings, and stand up and make this nation a loving, decent, freedom-loving, justice-reigning nation, then there will be peace in our streets.

Amen.

³ Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 45-46.

⁴ https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/damage-white-onlookers-inflict/612583/?utm_source=email&utm_medium=c&r&utm_campaign=jeff-letter-actives&utm_content=20200606&silverid-ref=MzEwMTU3NTQ2NjE0S0

⁵ <https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow/watch/episcopal-bishop-cites-christian-gospel-in-criticism-of-trump-84274757611>