Ascension Sunday: Combatting Racism

Teaching Tolerance Interviews Robin DiAngelo: White Fragility in the Classroom

We saved our most intractable social justice problem until last: racism. In this video, Dr. Robin DiAngelo focuses on the oppressive behavior that is born out of white privilege. “Deconstructing White Privilege” describes the most obvious and explicit aspects of racism and white privilege, while going beyond the surface of racism.

Here are some other resources in combatting racism:

- Fr. Bryan Massingale speaking to the Ignatian Family Teach-In about racism.
- Fr. Bryan Massingale's article "The assumptions of white privilege and what we can do about it," from the National Catholic Reporter, Jun 1, 2020.
- The Springfield Dominicans have worked on dismantling racism.
- For help combatting racism in the Midwest, and as an example of local resources, see Crossroads Antiracism.

Example Homily

The story of the Acts of the Apostles which describes the experience of the Ascension of the Lord is actually a great commissioning. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1: 7-8). However, they were not very aware of the empowerment of Christ in their commissioning. After Jesus rose into the sky, the apostles got stuck. The angels of the Lord approached them and said, “why are you standing there looking at the sky?” (Acts 1:11).

The apostles were stuck. I wonder if the apostles after hearing this commission said: “Well, certainly we will leave the Middle East and go up into Europe where there is a better class of people. But he doesn’t really want "all" people's, does he? I mean, Africa gets pretty dicey below the Sahara.”

I don’t think so. They knew that Jesus meant “to the ends of the earth.” And not some people as "disciples plus" with others as "disciples minus". They are ALL made in the image of God, and God wants them all to be equally disciples.

We are not too sure. "Not those people" we secretly think. This includes me. I try not to be prejudiced, but I live in a culture that is shot through with it and I breath it in with every breath. I think that if you grew up in America, you learned to be prejudiced. I have looked nervously over my shoulder as a black man walks behind me, and I don't do that if he is white. And I tell myself "don't do that" or perhaps I justify my prejudice with "well, statistically speaking", and think "as long as I am not calling him names or calling the cops it is ok" but it is not.

Racial prejudice becomes racism when it influences a system of power to support one race over another, and we know that happens. Of course, when the system favors people like me, it is hard for me to see. Things seem fair to me. Things work fine for me and my people. This is why it is so important to get the perspective from someone on the other side of the divide. Things might look very different for them.

In this country, however, racism stares us in the face daily. Current events are always tricky to preach on. You never have the whole picture. But I cannot say something today about racism without mentioning the death of Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed black man who, while jogging, was killed by two white men armed with shot guns. I don't have to talk about "crime" or "sin". It is enough to note that if two armed black men would have driven down a white jogger and shot him dead in Georgia, the local police would not have said for two months "I am sure it was justified. We don't need to investigate."

And more than simply one example of an injustice we are called as Christians to oppose, racism is a key component of every other injustice that we fight. Wherever there is systemic injustice—injustice woven into the fabric of society—it is always to the advantage of the majority and the wealthy, at the expense of some "other" group. Racism is at the root of injustice in immigration: "We don't want any more of THOSE people." For abortion, inequality in healthcare and education, and economic injustice, in this country, the African American community is disproportionately affected. The worst examples of pollution and degraded environment are always centered in minority communities. You can't combat these other injustices without dealing with the racial components of them. You can't be against abortion without grappling with why a disproportionate number of babies aborted are black. You can't fight for a living wage only for white people.

But, what are we to do? It seems so intractable.

How about consciously working to overcome these divisions? I could go out and make friends across these divisions. Nothing breaks down barriers like friendship. That would be great, but it might be unrealistic. Making friends is hard work.

I could take the Great Commission seriously and go out and make disciples of ALL nations and ask if I am not always fishing in the same pond. Certainly, in America the percentage of African American who are Catholic is lower than the population at large. There are historical reasons for this, but if WE are to make disciples of ALL nations, perhaps I should work to bring in those who are underrepresented.

More importantly, we should work to listen to voices from the other side of the racial divide. This we can do every day by talking with people we meet, coworkers, casual acquaintances who are not demographically identical to myself. And when we see examples of injustice like the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, let us not leave it to someone else to raise a voice and demand justice.

Lastly, for every time we experience in ourselves that negative pre-judgement of someone who fits some demographic stereotype in our brain, for every one of these times, let us do some intentional act of kindness to break down that barrier or destroy that stereotype. Imagine how much positive action we would engender.