

“All Things Being Equal”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 16



Readings

My dear friends, please try to understand that whiteness is limitless possibility. It is universal and invisible. That’s why many of you are offended by any reference to race. You believe you are acting and thinking neutrally, objectively, without preference for one group or the next, including your own. You see yourselves as colorless until black folk dump the garbage of race on your heads. At your best moments you may concede that you started the race game, but you swear to the God you love that it is we black folk who keep it going. You have no idea how absurd that notion is, and yet we have grown accustomed to your defiance of common sense.

~ From *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*
by Michael Eric Dyson.

Here it is again, the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first.

~ Matthew 20:16
from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

I bring you greetings from the Community Congregational Church in Tiburon, CA. We are a progressive faith community seeking a collective voice for positive change in the world. And when I say “change,” I really mean “revolution.” To tell you what I mean by that, I am borrowing some recent words from my good friend Deborah Hughes, preacher, activist, President and CEO of the Susan B. Anthony Museum in Rochester, New York. She says,

The revolution we seek is to draw humanity into one family that has the wisdom and strength to recognize, acknowledge, and moderate the worst in human nature, while nurturing, celebrating, and empowering the very best.

It is fitting that we highlight today the very best in human nature, exhibited in the life and legacy of Ruth Bader Ginsberg, a model of this revolutionary wisdom. We have lost far more than an icon. Long before she graced the bench of our highest court, she was a pioneer: quiet, eloquent, and immovable. It's a rare thing to say, but she was indispensable, and it will take an immense gathering of eloquent, immovable people to carry her work forward. It's the kind of work that seeks to benefit all of us, everyone around us and among us, but particularly those who are locked in a struggle for equality and human rights. History tell us that it is an uphill battle, difficult but not insurmountable. Justice Ginsberg proved that as she argued cases before the courts that ended up advancing the rights of women. And though women's rights are far from guaranteed, and though the battle continues, everyone has benefitted from her victories.

The focus of our current battle, however, is the uphill climb to ensure that black lives matter, and I want to highlight something that happened not long ago in our part of the world that illustrates why this feels like such a difficult moment. I'd like you to take a close look at this photo.



Behind the obviously defaced sign in the foreground is a traveling art exhibit called "Pray Their Names," created by the Rev. Katie Morrison, wife of Curran Reichert, the former pastor of our church in Tiburon. The initial exhibit was at the First Congregational Church in Sonoma, but in July it became a traveling exhibit, currently residing in Fremont, California at the Niles Discovery Church, a community aligned with our denomination, the United Church of Christ, and with our sister denomination, the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. It is at this church where the photo was taken recently, and a replacement sign is currently in the works. I've shared this photo because it illustrates a sentiment that on the surface might seem completely logical. After all, when all is said and done, don't all lives matter? Of course, our respect extends to the dignity of all human life, to the earth, and to all sentient beings in our environment, but the impulse to deface this sign misses the point entirely. I can illustrate what I'm trying to say from the words of Jesus.

As a preacher, I've been trying—for decades, really—to understand and explain the words of Jesus, (often delivered with "attitude") about rich vs. poor, Samaritans vs. the scribes and priests, "sinners" vs. the self-righteous. At face value, some of the language can seem quite polarizing. For example, when Jesus said "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven," his disciples were perplexed, and wondered if there was hope for

anyone. They could not grasp the broader perspective of “The last shall be first, and the first, last.” I've never thought that Jesus hated anyone, let alone rich people, but as prophetic voices often do, he pushed the pendulum as far as he could in an opposing direction just to get the point across. I can imagine the rich man with a sullen look saying, "Don't the wealthy matter? Don't I matter? Indeed, does not everyone matter?" Of course they do, but again, this is not the point. The point is privilege. It's about inequality. It's about a system that will allow advancement only by certain segments of society. I won't speak for Jesus or put words in his mouth, but if I'd been there I might have said, "When the lives of the poor matter, then all lives will matter."

In its context, we have to underscore the tinder-dry situation in Palestine during Jesus's life. The Roman occupiers—in collusion with certain elite Jewish religious leaders—had gradually seized the land through exorbitant taxation, leaving all but the privileged few in a place of poverty. This led to the desperation of the masses which ripened into simmering insurrections. These uprisings were periodically squashed by public crucifixions of certain radicals who, like Jesus, gained the kind of following that the Romans found threatening.

It is my opinion that the followers of Jesus were more interested in finding a political messiah than a religious one, though it's nearly impossible to separate the two. But when someone is starving, naked, and sick, it's hard to engage them in a theological conversation. The followers of Jesus were looking for the kinds of solutions that would give them the luxury of looking at the bigger picture. Likewise, when an entire race of people comes from a history of enslavement, of lynchings, of segregation, of voter suppression, of unequal treatment by law enforcement (and the list is much longer than that), it is beyond absurd to suggest that everyone in society has the same opportunity to a happy, healthy, and prosperous life. Which brings me to Michael Eric Dyson in *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*, when he says,

My dear friends, please try to understand that whiteness is limitless possibility. It is universal and invisible. That's why many of you are offended by any reference to race. You believe you are acting and thinking neutrally, objectively, without preference for one group or the next, including your own. You see yourselves as colorless until black folk dump the garbage of race on your heads. At your best moments you may concede that you started the race game, but you swear to the God you love that it is we black folk who keep it going. You have no idea how absurd that notion is, and yet we have grown accustomed to your defiance of common sense.

Many of us who are white, especially those in progressive faith communities like ours, would insist that we are thinking objectively and without preference. We believe with all of our hearts that we are strong allies of the black community, pushing for civil rights, voting rights, and equal justice for all, and we are sincerely trying to do our very best for something we are passionate about. But until we can understand and own our white privilege, we will continue to miss the point. It isn't enough to say, "I'm not a racist." This is a rather passive statement. The active statement would be, "I am an anti-racist." Until we know the difference, there's little we can do to change our current trajectory. There's no moving the pendulum half-way. All things being equal (and they obviously aren't), "all lives" will never matter until black lives matter.