

Preaching with Compassion While Dismantling Racism By Whitney Altopp

The year of 2020 unsettled us. COVID-19 revealed dimensions of our common life which had been covered, at least to some degree. Many people discovered the undercurrent of our societal structures; ways of relating to one another which the busy-ness and routine had masked. I know for myself and many of my white neighbors, the year revealed a depth of racism which previously had been unknown to us. This apocalypse increased our consciousness of suffering in all parts of society. There's a lot of ongoing suffering. Whereas we may have been able to control the level of awareness of suffering in our sermons prior to 2020, this is beyond our power now. To fail to incorporate our awareness of suffering in our sermons now appears to be an act of willful ignorance and determined indifference, both to our neighbor and to our compassionate God...the One who suffers with.

My predominantly white congregation, like other similar congregations, had many years of dedicated service attending to matters which are familiar challenges- feeding the hungry; clothing the naked; visiting those who are sick or in prison. The scriptures give a roadmap for such faithful effort. But what is a roadmap "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:8 and "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke" Isaiah 58:6? I wanted some guidance on how to lead in these new and uncertain times. Yet, how can a pastor shepherd his flock on a path he has yet to successfully complete? How does a white pastor of a white congregation motivate her congregation to faithful action when the action isn't easy to define or completely clear?

I quickly learned that the effort to bring about structural change in our religious communities proves no small feat- even in the noble efforts of dismantling white supremacy culture and anti-Black bias; even when people can agree that something needs to change. People want a place of familiarity when everything feels in flux. We may joke about our notorious use of the saying "It's always been this way." Yet this human resistance to change, combined with the entrenched segregation of Sunday mornings reveals to even the most faithful and committed white pastor of a white congregation their own doubt that "everything is possible with God." Philippians 4:13 Even when supported by congregants who want the radical love of Jesus to inform their actions, conversion is outside of our power as leaders.

Clergy remember that they're leaders of an institution. Most Christians attend church to be assured that God is on the throne and they are among the righteous. It's a matter of safety. No matter that the Apostle Paul had congregations which were always arguing about something as we see reflected in his letters. Most white Christians in the 21st century have an expectation that church is where everything feels okay. Thus, a white preacher to a white congregation knows they're stepping into dangerous territory if their call from the pulpit unsettles the listeners in ways differently than they expect.

This article shares my attempt to use the pulpit to erode the power of white supremacy culture and anti-Black bias. I wanted to consistently and constantly pick at the calcified assumptions of white supremacy culture and anti-Black bias in the church, yet, I wanted and needed to do this with a voice of compassion and instruction. I love my people. I turned to Black thought leaders and activists, both past and present, to illuminate my path. I might be stating the obvious, which can't be overstated- *it is paramount that white people allow themselves to be held accountable to Black folks in their work to undo racism.* The following ideas emerged for me within this accountability. Please forgive me if this seems insulting in any way.

Increasing and amplifying Black voices in our lives and communities so that we learn how to listen.

Reading Black authors of fiction and non-fiction can help tune one's ears to the stories that matter to Black folks. Reading is always available to us and thus can be always (literally) done. It increases one's capacity to hear and completely listen (to the end of the segment/episode) to the stories on the news and in our neighborhoods. And all of this makes us more open to noticing where the conversation wants to go with any Black person we engage in conversation. A foundational first step in dismantling systems of oppression is listening to those who have been oppressed and following their lead.

Including Black voices in *every* sermon

White people can fail to recognize that Black leaders are leaders for all people. If anyone is highlighting the call for liberation of God's people, confirming the worth of all people, challenging the status quo which denies people's humanity, then their voice should be included in a sermon. If anyone is articulating the plight of the weak or the burden of the poor or the trauma of suffering, we have an invitation to hear God's cry in them. Including the testimonies of God's faithfulness allows us to expand our understanding of the suffering Christ. Perhaps here- in the suffering Christ- is where the power of the white church needs some real theological work. Again, Black voices can help guide theological renewal. *Turn to Spirituals and countless Black speakers and writers to hear how God shows up in the difficulties and sufferings of life.* Hear how God breaks through the barriers of culture and prejudice to speak a word of hope. White Protestant theology frequently trains the eye to see Jesus only as the Resurrected One, ascended into heaven, with scars where the wounds were, failing to recognize the deep mystical truth that Jesus' trial, death and resurrection are constantly happening in our lives. Whereas Jesus' death was once for all, we enter into his life. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Galatians 3:27

Black National Convention— Movement for Black Lives (M4BL)

The summer before a national election political conventions are held. The Black National Convention is held in August. I tuned-in in 2020 since all of the conventions were on-line. There I learned of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). I signed up for their on-line mailing list to learn how I can be a part of the solutions advocated by this group. Then I found myself receiving invitations from the Working Families Party (WFP) and learned that M4BL had come under the umbrella of WFP. *By listening to solutions which address decades of problematic systems which have oppressed Black folks and others, white clergy can gain insight into how to*

be a part of systemic solutions. Attending teach-ins and showing up for organizing efforts gives real time relational ways to undo the confluence of systemic oppression. Breaking the chains of oppression and removing the yoke takes collective political effort. I've told people from the pulpit that I engage in political action, without telling them which political group I support. I've told my congregation from the pulpit what I'm fighting for. I repeatedly offer to tell them how they can be a part of this change if they simply ask me. Parishioners have asked me.

The Poor People's Campaign- a theological foundation for political action

The Poor People's Campaign (PPC) gives a solid foundation for theological grounding for political action. *Good preachers need good preachers to follow.* Rev. Dr. William Barber and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis demonstrate the theological foundation for this work.

Although the Poor People's Campaign is racially indiscriminate and there are many Black Americans who have significant wealth, the PPC reveals systemic ills and historical influence on the present inequalities. Historically, race and class have been yoked and enmeshed.

Practicing talking about systems of oppression with others who have more experience and knowledge empowers each of us to engage in conversations wherever we may be and helps us make relationships which can move us to action.

Furthermore, the Poor People's Campaign was initiated by Rev. Dr. King and was what he was working on when he was assassinated. Rev. Dr. Barber took up Dr. King's work and calls all of us to do the same.

Sharing the national church's efforts

Many wealthy, established predominantly or historically white congregations have had the financial means to operate outside of the awareness of The Episcopal Church's efforts to address racism on a national scale. Such "steeple" congregations are faced with trying to uphold the glorious institution of the past in an institution which is rapidly changing. *"White Supremacy Culture Characteristics" as outlined by Tema Okun can be seen in many facets of congregational life.* Black clergy acknowledge to one another that it's easier to become a bishop than it is to become a cardinal rector. Since we anticipate the demographics of our nation to become majority minority, white clergy can love their congregations into letting go of that which hinders them from witnessing and receiving God's abundance in God's people. It seems that God is doing a new thing. Will we see it? *Exploring The Episcopal Church website can illuminate points of access for engaging our congregations on the changing nature of the church.* This will allow us to notice where our congregants are ready to direct some of their energy together, as well as encourage us in the hard work of leadership from the pulpit.

And then there's Prayer

Prayer is our obvious beginning, middle, and end. Prayer allows us to enter into the mystery of God. The Christian mystics can assist us through their reflections on how suffering fits into a theological understanding of our humanity. They have each wrestled with the oppressive power of religion and society. James Finley is my favorite contemporary teacher of the Christian mystics. Through his podcast *Turning to the Mystics*, I began to see that oppression and legitimated violence have been a part of this world all along. The mystics show us that God is not deterred by these violent structures, but enters into the real locked rooms of our lives, just

like at that first Pentecost. *God did this for enslaved Black Americans in "hush harbors" out of which grew Spirituals.* Prayer reminds us that God makes a way where there is no way. White folks who have been taught that it is their power in society which makes a way will need to unlearn this un-Christian viewpoint. Prayer will play the primary role in this dismantling.

Listening and Acting

The question before religious leaders, especially white Episcopal clergy of mostly white congregations, is "How do we empower and affirm our congregation in the work of racial justice?" *When we see this as work which has already begun- work that we're now becoming conscious of and committing ourselves to joining- we can feel the strength and the encouragement of the Christian community.* We listen to the stories and tell the stories of God's on-going saving work. We can find the language to encourage our parishioners to remember the ways they've allowed God to guide their lives and to increase their trust that God will guide their lives in this holy work, too.

Contemplative prayer practice holds my weary and lost heart; heals and strengthens it for relationship. Contemplative prayer practice expands my heart's ability to trust God and my neighbor. This article is my prayer put forth in the world with hope that these examples encourage white clergy by affirming the myriad of opportunities available to them. I witness my white clergy friends express heartfelt care for dismantling racism. I see them weary from their brokenheartedness. I sense a sometimes paralyzing fear of doing this work wrong. My hope is that these examples soften convictions into regular action, trusting that God brings change through one faithful step following another. God's goodness and mercy follow us all our days, gently correcting us when we make a mistake. Since standing by in inaction is a mistake, we must allow God's mercy to penetrate our efforts to be agents of change.

I believe that God gives each of us the words to proclaim God's guidance in dismantling racism only to the extent that we move forward in the effort as an act of prayer. Growing in trust, we will discover God is guiding us along with our congregation-- together.