

The Problem We All Live With

January 15, 2023

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Many of the most iconic artistic portrayals of the American experience were painted by Norman Rockwell for the Saturday Evening Post. Just mention his name, and paintings come to mind portraying first haircuts, loyal dogs, and first love.

For most of my life, the painting I most associated with him was entitled “Freedom From Want,” which portrays a family sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner. What I didn’t know as a child growing up in small town Wisconsin in the later part of the 20th century is that 20 years after painting “Freedom From Want,” Rockwell would end his almost 50-year relationship with the Saturday Evening Post.

Rockwell “decisively turned a corner, choosing to reject the airbrushed image of a nation implicitly populated with only happy, White, middle-class families.” (Andrew Yarrow) The editors of the Post tried to rein him in after they started getting hate mail over his inclusion of two Black children in his painting “The Golden Rule.”

After he left the Post, his first painting for Look magazine was “The Problem We All Live With,” which portrayed the torsos of four U.S. Marshalls flanking six-year-old Ruby Bridges, who needed a military escort to go to first grade because she was Black. In the painting, the word is scrawled above her.

In 1965 he painted “Southern Justice” which portrayed three slain civil rights workers, and in “New Kids in the Neighborhood” an adult looks on disapprovingly as Black and White children check each other out with a moving van in the background. In 1968, Rockwell said that he couldn’t have painted “Freedom From Want,” his famous Thanksgiving painting, in the ’60s, because “that kind of stuff is dead now, and I think it’s about time.”

Why am I talking with you today about a painter who died in 1978? Because all these years later, it is high time that we as Americans, and particularly those of us in predominantly white churches, take Rockwell’s lead and confront “the problem we all live with.” Andrew Yarrow, who teaches at George Mason University, points out, “Racism still has not been vanquished decades after the civil rights movement — evidence ranges from the murder of Ahmaud Arbery to a system of mass incarceration that locks up one in three Black men at some point in their lives. Yet Rockwell’s story is instructive, showing how America could, and can, change its attitudes about race.”

The Scriptures

Our scriptures for today barely need interpretation, and they were at the absolute foundation of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ministry: “You shall not hate in your heart anyone; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against anyone, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

(Leviticus 19:17-18)

And again, from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'" Jesus' teachings on the power of love, and particularly love of people who are different than you, is the bedrock of Rev. Dr. King's motivation, and it is why we as followers of Jesus need to carry King's torch.

What Do We Do With It?

Erin Hawkins, a leader in the United Methodist Church who serves their California-Pacific Conference, wrote a powerful piece after the January 6th Insurrection. I feel moved to quote it at length, because it is just so spot-on.

She writes:

"The world is changing – institutions are crumbling, economies imploding and power systems shifting. There is no going back, my friends. COVID-19, a global racial uprising, and now the clear instability of this experiment called democracy are testaments to that. And none of these destabilizing events has reached its peak or its natural conclusion. There is more for us to learn. We are witnessing the trauma and anxiety of a nation coming to grips with the fact that the principles of whiteness, cis-hetero patriarchy and settler/colonial capitalism that fuels it are unsustainable and dying. And because we are uncomfortable as a culture with the idea and process of death and dying, we cling, clutch, and plead for alternative narratives that we believe will 'save' us."

Hawkins goes on to say that one of the clearest ideas she heard in the days after January 6th came from Mitt Romney:

"The only way to honor ourselves is to embrace the truth. Our political system is broken and does not serve the common good. It has been an effective mechanism for inducing or lessening the pain of various people groups as the pendulum of power swings between ideological poles. But systems based on winners and losers, the haves and the have nots, the power- full and the power- less are never truly in service to humanity or the earth we inhabit...The malignancies of division, irrelevance and fear are so pervasive that recovery is not likely nor should it be desired. Spiritual Community (of all faiths and belief systems) however, where love, service and communion with the Divine prevail will continue. People are isolated, vulnerable and looking for change."

This idea, that systems based on winners and losers, on haves and have nots, doesn't truly serve humanity, THAT is the brilliance of Jesus' message. THAT is the legacy that the Rev. Dr. King carried to us, and THAT is the mantle we must now pick up, lest we all perish from this earth.

Friends, personal transformation is important, but it is not enough. I've shared Warren Buffet's concept of "The Ovarian Lottery" from this pulpit before, but it bears repeating. The idea is if

you were to design the way the world would work, and then had to play the lottery to determine who you would be within that system, what would you create?

My email column to you this week, and the insert in your bulletin today, invite you to participate in an offering that Worship Ministry is describing as “Royalties for the Spirituals.” The concept is that, as a predominantly white church, we have benefitted from the uncompensated work and creativity of Black people. If we’re being honest, the system was set up that we would receive, and very little regard was given to whether or not that was good or right or fair or just to those who created the work.

Today’s offering, which will go to We All Rise African American Resource Center, the organization founded and led by Ms. Scott who we heard from earlier in the service, is meant to be a small step toward a different way of being, a small step to acknowledge our indebtedness while at the same time building bridges of mutuality, building a different way forward.

Conclusion

Friends, I’ll be honest – I don’t expect that we’ll sing the spirituals all that well today. Ray will play them impeccably, the choir will help us to hit the right notes. But if I didn’t say something, I’m sure there would be jokes once you got into your cars about white people having no soul, no rhythm.

But singing the spirituals in worship here isn’t actually about musicality today. It’s about having a shared language. It’s about empathy. It’s about having an entree into the harrowing history of our sisters and brothers. It’s about being inspired to change the system so that all are free, so that all can sing verse two of “We Shall Overcome” with confidence, “I am not afraid, today.”

Norman Rockwell left the Saturday Evening Post after working there for almost 50 years because they didn’t want him to portray the reality of America. Jesus told his followers that if someone slaps them on the right cheek to offer them the left, if someone sues you for your coat to offer your cloak, if someone presses you into service, go an additional mile. He wasn’t telling us to be passive. Rather, he was telling us that the only way to overcome evil is with good. We also still need what Rev. King called “sense enough and courage and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate.” In a word, we need the sense, courage, and morality enough to overcome evil with good. May that be our prayer – for ourselves, our church, our nation, and our world. Alleluia and Amen.

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Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, Matthew 5:38-48
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