

Reflections by Sr. Colleen O'Toole
Sunday, January 20, 2018

Today we heard the words of Isaiah, centuries ago, proclaiming “I will not be silent.” We can look back throughout history and name many women and men who have spoken against injustice in the world, and this weekend, we celebrate one of those men, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Junior. You may have heard his words “The greatest sin of our time is not the few who have destroyed, but the vast majority who have sat idly by.”

I am a white woman who grew up in a white town, and I never even had to think about race. I couldn't tell you when I first realized I was white, but I can tell you this: my kindergarten students at Corryville absolutely know that they are Black. They know that many of the pictures of Jesus they see are white, that many books have white kids in them, and not Black kids. I have had to facilitate discussions with them about skin color, and buy special crayons so they can make accurate self-portraits. Some of them are scared of the police, and some of them have lost family members to violence. Their race is a part of their daily life in a way that my race will never be.

I tell you this not to make anyone feel guilty or upset, and certainly not to make you think I'm an amazing culturally competent teacher. Rather, it illustrates the difference of how white people treat race. We don't spend a lot of time thinking about it. Race is something that other people have; whiteness has become the default, on purpose or not. My students need extra crayons, I have to search for Black Barbies, their books are in the multicultural section of the library. The 'classic' children's books I read growing up are all by white authors. I had my pick of Barbie dolls with white skin, and I could draw a picture of myself perfectly well with a regular box of crayons.

If this is all true, that we see being white as the norm, what can we do about it? Why does it matter to us as Catholics?

Recently, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released a new pastoral letter focusing on racism. Titled ‘Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love,’ it lays down a history of racism in America and how Catholics must respond to it. Very early on in the letter, the bishops unequivocally state that racism is a sin. Racism in America today tends to be much more disguised than in the past. No one here would think to attend a cross burning, or refuse to hire or shelter a person of color.

But the bishops say that is not enough. They state “Every racist act—every such comment, every

joke, every disparaging look as a reaction to the color of skin, ethnicity, or place of origin—is a failure to acknowledge another person as a brother or sister, created in the image of God.” That means shouting racialized insults at another school’s sports team is a sin. Clutching your purse or locking your doors in certain areas is a sin. Saying “ I don’t see color”, or “race doesn’t matter” and ignoring the experiences of people of color, is a sin. And remaining silent in the face of injustice, despite our Scriptural call from Isaiah and our example of Martin Luther King Jr, is a sin.

Furthermore, the bishops proclaim racism as a life issue, on par with abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty. If we proclaim ourselves to be pro-life Catholics, then we must recognize that many of our social institutions discriminate against people of color. The letter reads “The cumulative effects of personal sins of racism have led to social structures of injustice and violence that makes us all accomplices in racism.” It is in the historical red-lining that leads to segregated neighborhoods by design, in the uneven incarceration rates between Black and white Americans, in constant efforts to make voting more difficult.

Then what to do? What is our penance, our reparation? I offer a few suggestions, as someone who has made a commitment as a Sister of Mercy to anti-racism, and who works in and worships with the Black community at the Church of the Resurrection in Bond Hill. These steps have been helpful in my journey of anti-racism work, and have helped me become a more effective teacher at Corryville. First, adopt a stance of openness. We have been soaked in white history and told that it is the only story. When you encounter someone else’s experience, assume you don’t know anything about it, be willing to ask questions and admit there are things you do not know and you do not understand. Take this up in prayer as well!

Next, learn about the history of our country; its racism as well as those who have resisted it. As Paul wrote, we’re all given different gifts by the Holy Spirit. We may know well the story of Rosa Parks and segregation on buses, but we must go further. Learn about Bayard Rustin, the architect of the March on Washington, or Fannie Lou Hamer, who fought against poll taxes at the voting booth. For every oppressed fieldhand, there is a Dolores Huerta and a Cesar Chavez. Learn about our Black saints and theologians! Learn about the Black Church in America, especially its role in the struggle for civil rights.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, learn to listen. Listen well, without defense, without thinking of what you’ll say next. Learn to listen and reflect. The bishops say “As Christians, we are called to listen and know the stories of our brothers and sisters. We must create opportunities to hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are to be moved with empathy to promote justice.”

When a person of color speaks to you, about their life, their family, the news, listen. If you don't know any people of color well enough to have real conversations with them, think about why that might be. Seek out current Black voices. Subscribe to the Cincinnati Herald. Make it a point to read something by a Black author. Visit a Black church! My parish, the Church of the Resurrection, loves visitors, and you'll get a whole new view of Christianity. You'll see statues of the Holy Family as Africans, see Saint Augustine in stained glass with a brown face, hear songs that carried slaves through years of abuse, and still help the Black community through times of trauma and struggle today..

The temptation while you're listening will be to respond. To say, "I'm not a racist. I'm a good person." We have to accept that both can be true. We don't set out to hurt people, but we have absorbed harmful ideas from the larger culture anyway. However, as good people, we are called to examine that racism within ourselves.

Who will absolve us? It can only be God. The God who, in today's Gospel, turns water to wine as a sign of our covenant. The God who made each of us unique individuals, endowed with dignity and worth, the God of coastlands and heartlands, of mountains and valleys, the God of every culture and society since time immemorial.

Pray to God that we are given the strength to do what we can with what we have today, and forever, to fight against the stain of racism on our souls. When we begin to do so, as Isaiah says, we will be called God's Delight.