

First Congregational United Church of Christ

“Indisposable”
Mark 1:40-45

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Sunday, February 12, 2012

Who do we intentionally exclude? Who do we consider to be “unclean”? Who do we consider disposable? Who faces discrimination in our society? I pondered and continue to ponder these questions as I wonder on the text we heard this morning; Jesus reaching out beyond all first century cultural and religious barriers to touch the man with leprosy and make him whole, draw him back into society, back into the religious community, back into relationship with God. Jesus saw the person and not the leper.

As I was pondering these questions - who do we exclude, who do we consider unclean, who faces discrimination in our society - I realized that a clue to identifying the people we consider disposable is found in our language about people. When we identify someone by their economic situation, their color, their religion, their sexual orientation, their anything, before we identify a person as a person or a people as people that’s an indicator we are looking at someone as less than who they are in their fullness as a human being created in the image of God.

I believe that as a faith community, we probably do better than the culture at large in regard to these matters or at least have some sense of humility about who we are and have some willingness to recognize our prejudices and to discuss and move beyond them. To be sure we have work to do on our relationship building with all kinds of people who are beloved children of God. And, I would like to believe that most of us recognize that simply because we may think or believe someone is “unclean,” to use biblical language, that does not place them beyond God’s love and God’s healing presence.

Really, the thought that came to me as I read this text this time was not so much who do we knowingly discriminate against and consider to be beyond God, but rather, who are we missing? Whose separation from us as people of faith and from society are we, or am I, ignoring? Put most sharply and painfully, “Who do we unknowingly treat as if they were disposable?”

Partly this came to me as a result of reading a powerfully disturbing and important book by Dr. James Cone, who is the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and, one of the most highly regarded theologians in America. Dr. Cone’s book is titled *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Should you choose to read this book bring an open spirit, a compassionate heart, a keen mind, and a strong stomach. Dr. Cone, with an enormous generosity of spirit, documents the horrific reality of the lynching of thousands of African American men, women, and children in the late 19th and well into the 20th century in America. These events occurred within the lived memory of some of us here today and, were events which were almost entirely ignored by us, the church of Jesus Christ. I had no idea. Truly. I was stunned by both the extent of the horror and by my ignorance. My parents, no doubt, intentionally shielded me entirely from any awareness of these events. You may have had that same experience.

Dr. Cone comments, in particular, on the witness of one of his colleagues at Union and probably the greatest voice of the liberal Protestant church during the early part of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr is one of my favorite theologians and ethicists. His insight into the nature of humanity is profound. And, he was concerned about both racial and economic justice and advocated both. Still, Dr. Niebuhr was reluctant to challenge white supremacy, particularly in the South, and he never connected “the cross in the time of Jesus [which] was the most ‘barbaric form of execution of the utmost cruelty,’ the absolute opposite of human value systems” and the “lynching tree in America,” to quote Dr. Cone (James N. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Orbis, 2011, page 35).

Dr. Cone devotes an entire chapter to Dr. Niebuhr, whom he clearly respects and to whom he is kind. Dr. Niebuhr simply missed making this connection. Who are we missing? Or, perhaps more accurately,

“Who’s experience are we ignoring?”

And, lest you think that such a violent form of racism is a thing of the past let me assure you this is not the case. On Monday, January 16, 2012, just one day after we celebrated the Ragtime Festival and honored the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at 3:00 a.m. Barbara Collins Hicks answered a “frightening knock on [her] front door” and opened it to see her car explode in flames, according to the Green County Democrat (The Green County Democrat, January 26, 2012). As it turned out, the roof of the Collins’ home was also burned in what the fire marshals determined was an attempt to burn down the family home. It was a fire intentionally set and is being treated “as a racially motivated hate crime” (The Green County Democrat, January 26, 2012). Robert Hicks, Barbara’s father, founded “the Bogalusa [Louisiana] Chapter of Deacons for Defense and Justice established to protect his family and unarmed civil rights demonstrators from the Ku Klux Klan” in the mid-sixties (The Green County Democrat, January 26, 2012). He led protests demanding the “rights guaranteed by the 1964 Civil Rights Act” (The Green County Democrat, January 26, 2012). He also initiated legal action that “integrated schools and businesses, reformed hiring practices..., and put the local police under a federal judge’s control” (The Green County Democrat, January 26, 2012).

A “fire of ‘undetermined causes’” destroyed the Hicks’ home on October 24, 2007. The family rebuilt. The fire in 2012 was no accident.

To her credit, revealing an exquisite generosity of spirit, the late Robert Hicks’ wife Valeria Hicks said, “I am so grateful to God that we are unharmed. I am truly heartbroken that there are people so misguided... . They really need someone to love them. If I was near them, I’d give them a hug” (The Green County Democrat, January 26, 2012). My goodness. What grace!

What or who do we know about and out of fear, or lack of imagination (which is how Dr. Cone talks about an inability to feel empathy for someone whose experience is other than your own), or preoccupation with other things, or not wanting to rock the boat or cause controversy in an already mean-spirited time, or whatever the reason, fail to adequately address? I know that is hard to imagine in a congregation which, for its size, pursues a magnificent array of mission ministries and supports them with extraordinary generosity. But, people of God though we may be, we are also finite and flawed and consequently have the capacity not only to miss things, but to ignore them.

Not only does racism still hold God’s people - red, yellow, black, white - in its grasp, but still, while slavery is illegal world-wide, “‘the average price of a human being today... is about \$90.’ That’s the price averaged across the global market. In North America, slaves go for between \$3,000 to \$8,000. In India or Nepal you can buy a human being for about \$5 to \$10” (Rose Marie Berger, *Slaves in Our Family*, found in Sojourners Magazine, February 2012, page 47). That stunning statistic quoted by Rose Marie Berger in a little article titled *Slaves in Our Family*, comes from researcher Kevin Bale’s new book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*. Ms. Berger also quotes Elizabeth Wheaton, an economist, who “writes that within the next ten years human trafficking is expected to surpass drugs and arms trafficking. As people become vulnerable to exploitation and businesses continually seek the lowest-cost labor sources... trafficking human beings generates profit and a market for human trafficking is created” (Berger, page 47).

The darling of the tech world, Apple, is dealing with issues on the edge of this reality right now with challenges to one of its suppliers’ factories in China “where employees have complained about nonstop shifts, arduous overtime, crowded dormitories, mental health (nearly 20 workers... have committed suicide over two years), and a hazardous working environment that’s led to at least one explosion, in May 2011” (Adrienne Mong, *The Chinese Want Jobs Too!*, MSNBC Online, February 1, 2012). These workers earn \$261 a month including dorm housing and food.

According to Stewart Burns there may well be over “a million children... who... could

tell stories of torment and torture... as sex or labor slaves or child soldiers (at least 300,000 are fighting in more than a dozen countries” (Stewart Burns, *Humankind’s Most Savage Cruelty*, Sojourners, February 2012, page 17). In one small way, through our Okora Sustainability Project, we are helping former child soldiers, their families, and their neighbors to rebuild their lives. Closer to home, “one estimate is that as many 100,000 girls are trafficked as sex slaves in the U.S.” (Burns, page 17). The average age of a child entering this dark world is twelve to fourteen” (Abayea Pelt, *Here?*, Sojourners, February 2012, page 19). A student at a Washington, D.C. high school “disclosed that she had been sold from age eleven to eighteen” (Pelt, page 20). In a workshop supported by “Fair Girls, a Washington, D.C. based non-profit dedicated to preventing human trafficking” (Pelt, page 19), a thirteen year old student wrote a poem about a ten year old who committed suicide because of her inner pain at being sold into prostitution. Ten years old.

Apparently the Super Bowl “attracts traffickers,” reports Duane Shank of Sojourners (Duane Shank, *Super Bowl XLVI: Real Battles Off the Field*, SojoMail, Thursday, February 2, 2012) During the weeks leading up to the game “11 orders of Catholic sisters, joined by students, compiled a list of the managers at 220 hotels in the Indianapolis area. They... [called] ... to see if managers were aware of the... issue and whether they wanted materials to help educate their staff” (Shank, page 2). Two hundred managers took the call. Ninety nine requested materials. Forty five had already planned to train their staffs. Cab drivers also volunteered to help (Shank, page 2).

According to Mark’s gospel, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs... . And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:13-16). He said this at a time when slavery was a cultural norm and children were considered to be property. Yet, they were clearly not disposable consumables for Jesus.

In today’s text from Mark’s gospel, the verse which speaks to Jesus’ motivation for healing the leper is typically translated, “moved with pity” (Mark 1:41). Another reading is: “moved with anger” (Mark 1:41). And when you hear Jesus’ syntax later, this seems a fitting reading. You can hear the edge in the short clipped sentences: “I do choose. Be made clean!” (Mark 1:41). You can hear his anger at a religious system which is intentionally designed to exclude the people who most need to be connected with God; a system which effectively excluded people considered to be ritually unclean. They were disposable. Jesus would not let that stand. From his point of view no one is disposable.

I don’t have a nifty solution to or program of action for addressing either racism or human trafficking. I suppose saying the words out loud before God and each other is something. I do know that we can strive to be a safe sanctuary for all people. We can strive to reach out to people who have been treated as if they were disposable, and, with Jesus, proclaim: “You are a beloved child of God and citizen of God’s realm.” We can pray for the eyes to see each person, first, as a person and with the compassion of Jesus. You remember Mrs. Hicks’ comment on the people who set her house on fire: “I am truly heartbroken that there are people so misguided... . They really need someone to love them. If I was near them, I’d give them a hug.” Surely, we can pray for both the discernment and the disposition to stretch out our hand with the offer of a healing touch, even as Jesus crosses all barriers to touch us and to make us whole for, it is in his touch that we come to know that each of us and all of us are indisposable and loved by God. “God,” who, as the Rev. John Buchanan beautifully writes, “loves us apart from anything we have done or neglected to do; ... loves us apart from our theological sophistication or lack of it; ...loves us when we are weak and vulnerable and totally dependent; ...loves us not because of anything about us other than the fact that we are, we have being and we bear within us the image of the One who created us” (Christian Century, February 8, 2012, page 3).