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## “Finding Our Corner” September 13, 2020

Mark 2:1-5  
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Today begins a six-week series titled, “Holding Up Our Corner,” Church of the Saviour’s initiative to become an intentionally anti-racist congregation. Pastors and leaders of the church have been moved by God to lean into this work together, and we are drawing inspiration and guidance from our Scholar-in-Residence, Rev. Dr. F. Willis Johnson, whose book *Holding Up Your Corner* provides our roadmap.

It may be helpful to pause here to define the term “anti-racist.” Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, defines an anti-racist as “one who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and that none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Kendi asserts that “The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘anti-racist.’”<sup>2</sup> Thankfully, there are few people in the world who self-identify as racist, yet that does not keep people from having racist views or supporting racist structures or systems. We are taking the step together to do more than *avoid* racist ideology; we are taking steps to *combat* and *dismantle* it, to remove the scourge of racism from ourselves, our community, our society.

*Why this?* Let’s first consider what racism is. Racism is defined by Merriam Webster as “a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race;” or, in a second definition added just this summer, “the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another.”

As Christians for whom the Bible is our rule of faith and life, we recognize God’s beautifully diverse design found in the first chapter of Genesis: “God created humanity in God’s own image” (Genesis 1:27, CEB). It isn’t any particular racial group, but *all humanity*, that bears the image of God. To hold a belief that one race is superior is to subvert God’s created order, to diminish the value of people of other races, and to deny the image of God in them. And when we deny the sacred worth of God’s creation, we commit sin. *Racism is sin*, intentional or not.

We *must* undertake the work to become anti-racist because we have a moral imperative to do so. If we know that racism is wrong and do nothing about it, we are guilty of what is known as a *sin of omission*. James 4:17 says, “It is a sin when someone knows the right thing to do and doesn’t do it.” In the words of Jesus found in Matthew 25, “I assure you that when you haven’t (taken care of) one of the least of these, you haven’t done it for me.”

*Why now?* Three months ago, Black Lives Matter protests swept across this country and around the world, sparked by the unjust killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, names forever burned into our consciousness, deaths notable not for their uniqueness but because they are all too common. One cannot have witnessed the events of this spring and summer and believe we have racial equity in this country. Now, support for the movement has begun to fade a little. That could be attributed to discomfort with destruction of property that has sometimes accompanied protests, compassion fatigue, the fickleness of society to remain committed to a cause, or a coordinated campaign to discredit the Black Lives Matter organization and distract from the policy change needed to meaningfully address systemic racial injustice. We don’t have to align perfectly with the organization or all their stated views to stand for the truth of the tenet that *black lives matter*. But as Paul instructs in his letter the Galatians, “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.” (Galatians 6:9, NRSV)

Church of the Saviour pastors, leaders, and congregants shared in public lament and participated in community gatherings following the murder of George Floyd. We did not issue a public statement. That was a deliberate choice on our part. Public statements can become a mask for inaction, a panacea of words that do little to change the situation. Instead, we focused on what we could do to create a sustained response, an action plan that would lead to lasting change in our church and in our community. That plan begins with Holding Up Our Corner.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibram X. Kendi. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. New York: One World (2019), 22.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 8.

We frame our work together on a story found in Mark, chapter 2. It is the story of an unnamed man known only by his affliction; he is paralyzed. The setting is a house in Capernaum, the home base of Jesus in Galilee. Jesus has returned there after visiting neighboring villages to teach and heal, and word has gotten out. The house in which Jesus is teaching is filled with people eager to hear what he has to say. There are so many that the doorway is completely blocked and no one else can get near him. Four men arrive, carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. Unable to get to Jesus by normal means, they carry him up to the roof. Palestinian homes at the time were constructed with beams overlaid with branches and covered in mud. The four men tear a hole in the roof, showering the crowd below with dust and debris, then lower the mat with the paralyzed man on it into the room. Jesus, apparently unfazed by all the fuss, looks at the man before him and says, "Child, your sins are forgiven."

This is a fascinating story. It makes for colorful reading: a crowded house, mud and thatch dropping all around, a confrontation with legal experts, and a dramatic healing. But there are also several instructive elements that can speak to our situation today.

Many of us grew up with Sunday School lessons that describe the people carrying the mat as *friends* of the paralyzed man. But nowhere in the text does it identify them as his friends. They could have been complete strangers for all we know. Neither the paralyzed man nor those who carry the mat ever speak a word in the story – not in this version nor in the parallels in Matthew and Luke. Who were they? What did they expect to happen? Why were they moved to this extraordinary act?

Whoever they were and whatever they intended, they refused to be denied by the obstacles before them. *They saw one who was hurt and they acted.* Each one took hold of a corner of the mat and carried the man to help. When they approached the house, getting in seemed impossible. *But they found a way.* They created an opportunity where there was none.

When Jesus saw them, he was moved by their faith. Did you catch that? It wasn't the man's apparent needs or the expectations of the crowd or any words of petition that stirred Jesus' heart, but the *faith* of those who took up the mat, who refused to be denied, who found a creative solution to the problem, and who brought the man to the One who could help him.

Jesus looked at the man before him and told him his sins were forgiven. That's curious, isn't it? The man didn't ask Jesus for forgiveness. There's no apparent connection between his physical condition and sin. Jesus could have addressed his physical needs without the spiritual absolution. But perhaps Jesus knew that it wasn't just the paralyzed man who needed healing, but the entire community. Think about it. How long had the man been paralyzed? Why was he lying on a mat, waiting for help? Had he been relegated to begging at the town gates like so many others in biblical narratives? When the men carrying the mat approached the house, why didn't people step aside and make room for them to get in? Why did it take extraordinary bravery and brazen act of vandalism to change the situation? Sin was decidedly present.

Not surprisingly, the power brokers in the room – the scribes – were incensed. Who did Jesus think he was, forgiving someone's sins? Only God could do that! Teaching and healing is one thing. Offering forgiveness? That's blasphemy! We see already the charges being formed that would eventually lead to Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus senses the scribes' unrest and challenges them by asking, "which is easier, to say 'your sins are forgiven,' or 'stand up and walk?'" Then he demonstrates his authority by raising up the paralyzed man, who picks up his mat and walks out of the room, completely restored. It shouldn't be lost on us that the word Jesus speaks to the man – *get up* – is the same word in Greek that the angel speaks later to the disciples and Mary in the garden: He *is risen*. This is more than a healing story.

Where do we imagine ourselves in the story? Are we the one who is unable to walk, lying hurt and helpless on the ground? Some of us are. Some know all too well the pain of being left out, left behind, cast aside, devalued and diminished. Are we those who see the one in need and provide the help that leads to healing? We can look at the brokenness of the world and pass it by, or we can take responsibility, take up our corner, and do our part. ...Or are we the crowds, gathered around the house to see Jesus, but creating a barrier to the one who needs help? A lot of well-intentioned church folk have knowingly or unknowingly kept away the very people Jesus came to save. Are we the scribes, the authority figures who were so offended by the audacity of breaking the rules that they couldn't celebrate the new life Jesus offered? When the situation is urgent, being orderly and civil won't cut it. Action is required.

Sometimes the gap between who we want to be and who we really are is painfully wide. It takes strength to look objectively at our failings and measure how far we have to go. It's easier to make it someone else's problem, to blame the system or the society, or even to blame those who are most deeply hurt for their own condition. Truly, we can all do

better. As followers of Jesus, we *must* do better. But dismantling broken systems and rebuilding something more just and sustainable is hard work, sometimes painful work, and it requires deliberative action and an open mind. It also requires something else: radical love.

None of us may have intentionally participated in racist actions or knowingly supported racist systems, but that doesn't excuse us from responsibility for the world in which we live. As Dr. Johnson teaches, *it may not be our fault, but it is our fight*.

I serve as the leader of a diverse congregation. We are white, Black, Asian, Latinx, female and male, gay and straight, wealthy and poor, and everywhere on the spectrum in each of those demographics. At the same time, I am a white, male, cisgender, straight, middle-class, highly educated, middle-age man, and I carry all of those identities into my ministry as well as my everyday life. And though we strive to be an inclusive church that reflects the rich diversity of God's creation, we are still a majority white congregation striving to become something we have never fully been before.

There are pitfalls for well-intentioned white people on the path toward becoming anti-racist. I want to name two of them from experience. One is that we can become so wracked with guilt for being white in a society that privileges whiteness that we become paralyzed into inaction. We see in every possible action some unintended consequence and we are afraid of making things worse or even appearing insensitive. So, we settle for beating ourselves up, which gets us nowhere. A very different danger with a similar outcome is the pitfall of self-righteousness. We can begin to think of ourselves as enlightened, more aware, more "woke" than those other people. That leads to indignation and self-satisfaction, while not actually *doing* anything with the apparent knowledge we're so proud to have acquired.

We're embarking on this journey as a congregation, not just the *white* people in this congregation. Racism may be a uniquely white problem; Black people do not need white people to tell them that they are equal in worth, rights, or dignity. And our Asian, Latinx, indigenous, and LGBT siblings experience inequality and injustice that also has life and death consequences. I cannot know the full measure of all those perspectives and experiences even when my heart longs to be in solidarity. My hope and my prayer is that we can all find an entry point, that we can all find our corner, and that we will work together – Black, white, and everything else – to build a more just, equitable, and sustainable community together. To put it another way, I pray that we can work together to build something that resembles the kingdom of God.

I wonder about the four that held up their corner that day. When Jesus saw their faith, he was moved. What was the substance of their faith? Did they expect a miracle? Did they believe Jesus was the Son of God? Were they regular attenders of the local synagogue, or just curious onlookers who wanted to know what Jesus was all about? What they *believed* is never mentioned, but what they *did* made all the difference. Their faith was manifest in action. May it be so for us, as well. Thanks be to God. Amen.