



CHURCH of  
the SAVIOUR

## “Hold Up Your Corner”

October 31, 2021

Mark 2:1-12

Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

2537 Lee Road  
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-4136  
Telephone: 216-321-8880  
Website: [www.COTSumc.org](http://www.COTSumc.org)

As we conclude this sermon series that reminds us we’re “All In” when it comes to being intentionally anti-racist, I want to take us back to the story that framed our work with our 2020 Scholar-in-Residence, Rev. Dr. F. Willis Johnson. His book, *Holding Up Your Corner*, was our guide for individual and group study. As we renew our commitment to this work, it’s helpful to return to this story from Mark’s gospel and what we can learn from it in today.

Jesus had returned to Capernaum, the home base of his ministry with the disciples in Galilee. Word had spread of his teaching and miraculous healings throughout the region, and when people found out he was home, they flocked to see him. The crowd that gathered around the house was large – two and three deep around the door and windows – just to catch a glimpse or to hear the sound of his voice. Those who didn’t get there early had to crane their necks and cup their ears, climb up a nearby rock or tree to see over the others, or simply wait until the crowd thinned out. A man who was paralyzed wanted to see Jesus in hope of walking again. But he had no chance of getting in. At least not on his own.

But he wasn’t alone. Four people carried him by the corners of his mat. When they found the way blocked, they improvised. They took him up to the roof, pulled away the mud and wattle, and lowered him down in front of Jesus. Unfazed by the commotion and intrusion, Jesus healed the man and taught the religious leaders a lesson in the process.

Preachers and Sunday school teachers often refer to those who carried the man’s mat as his friends; who else would go to such lengths to get him the healing he desperately needed? But the text never says they were his friends. In fact, it never identifies them at all. We know nothing about them, if they had any relation to the man or to each other. What we do know is that they saw one who was in need, picked up his mat, and brought him to Jesus. None of them tried to carry him on their own. But each did their part.

We can visualize this story in our minds, can’t we? But just to make sure we get it, let’s do a demonstration of holding up your corner. I need four volunteers. Each of you reach down, take hold of a corner, then lift it together. That works pretty well. If you needed to, and with adequate space, you could carry that mat together a long distance, maybe even up to a roof. But what happens if one of you lets go? You not only drop your corner, but you upset the balance it takes for the entire operation to work. That’s what it means to hold up your corner.

Friends, there are people around us who have been left out and left behind, some by neglect and some by intentional action. We can’t stand by and do nothing. We can’t avert our eyes and walk past. Well, we *can*, but not if we want to live like Jesus. Willful *inaction* is oftentimes more damaging than deliberately unjust *action*. There remain in this country – and in this community – different standards depending on the color of one’s skin. Opportunities are not equal: we are divided by zip code, education, availability of food, housing, transportation, and job prospects. Once we see it, we can’t unsee it. Racism may not personally be your *issue*, but it is your *problem*. It’s *our* problem, together.

But the problem is too big, too pervasive, too multi-faceted for us to fix. When we think about the enormity of the task of dismantling racism, we can be overwhelmed. That’s why this image of holding up our corner is so helpful. We don’t have to do it alone. We don’t have to know every step to be taken or see how it will all turn out. We just have to care enough to do our own part and to trust that others will be provided who will pick up their corners, too.

There are four distinct actions in this story, each critical to the overall success of the operation. Let’s look at each one and its relevance to our work in addressing racial inequity:

1. *Identify your corner*. Each of the people in the story saw what was needed and did their part. They didn’t try to lift the man up by themselves. They didn’t try to create an intricate system for getting the man where he could find healing and wholeness. They saw what was needed and went to their corner of the mat.

If we’re going to hold up our corner, we need to start by identifying *what our corner is*. That starts with paying attention – observing not just *our* world, but the world outside our circle. We can expand our understanding through education. Read a book that addresses racial injustice (our library can help). Join a discussion group. Follow the YWCA’s racial justice work. Learn the history of racism in the U.S., not just the sanitized version we learned in school. Before you

do that, you should know that discussion has set off a firestorm with politicians and school boards across the country. But we can't become our best selves if we don't first understand who we are or how we got here. The racial history of this country has been 400 years in the making, from fabricated social theories to religious justifications for slavery, from state sponsored theft and atrocities thanks to the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny to the antebellum period, from Jim Crow to redlining, from the Civil Rights movement to Black Lives Matter. We can still live into our greatest aspirations if we educate ourselves and are willing to put in the work. We all have more to learn, and learning can help us find our corner.

2. *Pick it up.* The four who took their places at the corners of the mat didn't accomplish anything until they took it in their hands. Once we begin to see more deeply our place in the story, we need to do our part. Many of you shared with me your experiences after taking one of the bias self-assessments in week one of this series. A couple people expressed disappointment and even frustration when the results didn't match their conscious decision making, the people they strive to be – that's why we call it *unconscious* bias. Others weren't surprised by the results, knowing it takes intentional effort to overcome the bias each of us inherit and carry. Understanding the difference between our *conscious* decisions and our *unconscious* or *implicit* bias can help us develop the resolve to be more intentional in our actions to fight racism.

One person shared with me that the town where they grew up was very homogenous. They had a good home and a happy childhood, and an overall positive view of the world as they went away to college. After being in a university setting, traveling to different places, and establishing friendships with people of different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds, they began to see home in a different light. It wasn't that they stopped loving that community or that it something about it was particularly wrong; it was just missing the beautiful dimension of diversity. This person said they are now much more aware of the importance of living and growing in a diverse community, and they intentionally strive to foster diverse relationships. And they are committed to passing the joy of that experience on to the next generation.

Words are only words...until they become action. Intentions are only intentions...until they become action. Your corner won't pick itself up. It's up to you.

3. *Work together.* What would have happened if the four people who picked up the mat each headed off in their own direction? They wouldn't have been much help to the one who was hurt or to each other. Being oriented to anti-racism on our own is important, but we won't get very far if we try to go it alone. We need to find others who share our commitment and are doing the work so we can join with them and increase our impact. As a congregation, we have linked with other congregations across our denomination and with other churches here in our own community. We invest in partnerships with agencies who share our commitments to anti-racism and inclusion, organizations like the Black Futures Fund, the YWCA, the Greater Cleveland Food Bank and the Hunger Network, Habitat for Humanity, US Together, and others.

In her book, *The Sum of Us*, author and researcher Heather McGee exposes the way oppressors maintain their power by pitting people against each other, from labor unions to education to politics to communities in poverty. That strategy has been especially successful when it comes to race. By exploiting the polarization between racial groups, those who wield power in oppressive systems convince people to act not only against people of other races, but against their own self-interest, too. By dog-whistling and targeting people of color, they leverage fear to maintain their own status. In the end, everyone suffers (even the oppressors, it turns out, in the long run).

But sometimes, our passion for justice can get in the way of meaningful action. One COTS member shared with me an experience of leading a major community initiative. He had been asked to coordinate across multiple constituencies ranging from communities of color to major anchor institutions. Over a series of months, that work gained momentum and led to a large meeting to establish priorities and request funding. A disruption forced the cancellation of the meeting, but the big money players in the initiative met clandestinely on their own and announced the plan they would fund. He felt betrayed and used, and he was furious. Who were these fat cats to think they should determine how to serve the people without seriously engaging with the people themselves? He confessed that his initial instinct was to undermine the process and wrest control of the project back for the people it was supposed to benefit. But when he talked with people within those constituencies, he learned they had a different perspective. They saw the plan as a starting place and were willing to go along. He realized that in his outrage over perceived injustice, *he* had decided unilaterally what was needed; he was doing the very thing he had accused others of doing. *We have to work together.*

4. *Keep going.* The work of racial justice and reconciliation is exhausting. It took us 400 years to get here. (Or, it might be more accurately stated that, from a structural perspective, it took only a few nefariously racist strategies and 400 years of coordinated campaigns to support them.) It will take more than good intentions and a few initiatives to get us out. And it can be heartbreaking, when each step forward seems to be met with at least a partial step backward. Lives are shattered; lives are lost. But we are people of resurrection hope and revelation faith. We know that after Friday comes Sunday. God's justice will prevail, and we are called to partner with God in the sacred work it will take to realize that vision.

So, where do we go from here? As a church, we know this isn't a one-time commitment, something we work on for a month or two and then move on. That's why we're committed not only to being more intentionally anti-racist, but growing in that commitment over time. We continue to do that through education and training, internal audits, regular preaching and teaching, and through vital partnerships with places like the Cory-Glenville Community Center and investing in missions across the city.

Individually, we can each take intentional steps to grow in being more anti-racist. I want to invite you to reflect on the four action steps in our Gospel story: identify your corner, pick it up, work together, and keep going. Depending on where you are in your own journey, it may be more appropriate to focus on the early steps or the later steps. In your bulletin this morning is a handout for you to take with you today. On one side, it has the summary of the four steps in the Gospel lesson for your personal reflection. On the other side is space for you to write down three things you commit to doing to grow in your awareness, advocacy, and action. Those things might include reading a specific book or starting a reading program, taking a training event with the YWCA's "Until Justice...Just Is" program, or intentionally participating in cross-racial events, or joining and supporting a wider campaign locally or nationally. Post that where you'll see it and be reminded of your commitment. If you need help deciding what to do, talk with your small group or a pastor or church leader. We're committed to helping each other.

None of us will change the world alone. But we can each hold up our corner. Together, we can be the change we want to see. Let's recommit ourselves to this work for as long as it takes, until the day when there is no such thing as the "other." There is only us, the Beloved Community, made in God's image and redeemed by Christ. May it be so. Amen.