

Deciding What To See

Sarah Gallop

July 19, 2020

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.
 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.
 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.
 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"
 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.
 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.
 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Good morning First Congregational of Winchester – how we miss all of you!

Like many of you, I've been trying to take a deep dive into racial issues since the murder of George Floyd. Here at church, our Adult Faith Exploration and Outreach ministries teamed up to compile resources, host a Zoom discussion, and plan a summer FCCW Reads activity (the book is "How to be an Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi), with follow up small group discussions planned for the fall. I have so much to learn. Society has so much to learn. I hope we can learn it this time.

The resource list we created is overwhelming. It includes books, articles, podcasts, TED talks, documentaries, movies, events, workbooks, classes, webinars, poetry, visual art, music, and TV series – and it goes on for 12 pages. It's long and it feels heavy. But 250 years of slavery, 90 years of Jim Crow laws, 60 years of separate but equal policies, and 35 years of racist housing policy feels long and heavy too. Instead of seeing the list as overwhelming, maybe I can decide to see it as a gift – my personal opportunity to finally learn what I should have been learning all along.

Lately, I've been trying to decide what I am. Am I a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) supporter? Do I advocate for fairness and justice? Do I truly care? Am I an ally? Do I recognize that I walk around with White Privilege? Do I understand that I look at the world through my own pre-conditioned lens? Am I blessed, or am I opportunity-hoarding? The answer to all of that is yes.

Am I a nonracist? Now, I know there's no such thing. Am I an antiracist? No, not yet.

At the Network for Social Justice community conversation last week, the leaders defined antiracism as “the active process of seeing and being in the world with the intention of working to identify, challenge, and change the values, structures and behaviors that perpetuate structural racism.” Okay, so maybe I can decide to see my role not just as being supportive and caring and advocating for inclusion and fairness (I feel like I try to do all that), but begin to see my role as 1) learning, and 2) turning my learning and values into action. If I’m not taking action, I’m not helping.

It’s not enough to be a good person anymore, as Debby Irving who wrote “Waking Up White” discusses. We’re all good people. It’s not about being good or bad. It’s about what we decide to see and do. It’s about whether we are helping to break the patterns of injustice.

When I look at our beautiful, serene, and leafy green town with its quintessential white congregational church on the hill, and I notice that not many black people live here, do I wonder in a passing way why black families don’t want to live here, or do I decide to see that years of zoning and housing policy in our town and others across the country have served to segregate and oppress black families for decades? I can decide to think inactively or actively. Just like I can think of myself as not racist, or decide to try to become antiracist.

We were so undertaught about racism in school. I’m embarrassed to admit that I didn’t even know about Black Wall Street or what happened in Tulsa in 1921 until I read about the outcry in reaction to the President’s planned rally on Juneteenth there. I barely knew what Juneteenth was. How is this possible? I do know that I was horrified in my youth reading about the Middle Passage and watching the series Roots. And I remember thinking that I didn’t want to know much more about this history because it was so upsetting and unfathomable to me.

Now, instead of deciding to see this history (although the word “history” feels fully inadequate as a way of describing the atrocities that took place, that continue take place) – but, still, can I decide to see this history not just as upsetting and unfathomable, but recognize it as the process that brought about systemic inequality and invalidation for black people? If I see it that way, then I might be able to put aside my visceral feelings and have the courage to really look at it – the history – to understand it, and then, to add my actions to those of antiracists around the world.

Ibram X. Kendi says “The heartbeat of antiracism is confession.” Here’s where God comes in for me. Psalm 139, that Andy read, says that God knows me, my thoughts, my heart, and all my ways. God, I am so ashamed. I confess to you that I have not acknowledged the deep trauma of racism as experienced by Black people. I have not fought against racial inequities. I have engaged in ignorance and denial.

God, I am complicit in perpetuating systemic racism.

Psalm 139 also says that God will test me, see my wicked ways, and lead me. Maybe I can decide to see God's described role not just as today's required reading (the July 19th lectionary), but as a path forward for me — a path, accompanied by God, towards becoming an antiracist.

This looking in the mirror feels like the right first step for me. I want to take action, but how can I know what actions to take when I am only beginning to understand that my expressions of love, fairness, and kindness aren't going to make a dent in the systemic framework of racism.

My actions need to contribute to new policies – changes in zoning laws, housing practices, education reform, election processes, and banking systems. All things that produce and reproduce inequitable outcomes. In other words, I need to engage in activism. My actions need to contribute to the dissolution of political self-interest that serves to keep racism alive and well. In other words, I need to engage in the voting process.

But, I'm overwhelmed again. How can I do any of these things? How can one person make any difference amidst such widespread and deeply rooted policies and behaviors? And now of course that makes us think of Margaret Mead who said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I believe in that.

So maybe I can decide to see the real work of antiracism not as daunting and unachievable — and so I will pass on it because that's easier — but instead choose to see it as the only way to begin to make a difference. I'm learning that becoming antiracist requires intense personal daily work. I'm up for that up. Or I guess these days I should say I'm "down" for that.

It sounds like it will be hard, but, there are also lots of little things that I can do as part of a daily practice of trying to become more "woke." For example:

- Rather than engaging in micro aggressions (commonplace thoughts and actions that communicate prejudice), I can decide to engage in micro inclusions (acts of humanity that signal to people on the margins that they are included). Several of us learned about this practice at an event on civilized discussion led by Civic Designer Ceasar McDowell.
- I can publicly applaud Band Aid's introduction, after 100 years, of a collection of Band Aids that match Black and Brown skin tones.

- I can publicly support the removal of Confederate statues because I don't believe they are benign symbols of America's past. I believe they are symbols of white supremacy.
- I can personally learn about the evolving meaning and usage of the words African American, People of Color, Black, Brown, and BIPOC (which stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and use them appropriately.
- I can support organizations that are working to dismantle racial systems and to create opportunities for marginalized communities.

We have the opportunity to learn deeply about these issues. We have the ability to decide what we want to see. We can all make our own lists of things to do. These compilations of actions are deeply personal. Each one of ours will look different, as they should, because we are different people. But all of our lists will be authentic and meaningful. We can make a difference.

I'm sure I didn't say everything right in my comments today. I have so much learning to do. But, I'm not really focused on saying the right thing right now. I want to learn how to do the right thing — and I'm grateful that God will be with me as I go down that path, along with all of you, and many others, as we try to build a 21st century equitable society.

Amen.

Benediction

Dear God, we are so glad that you know us; our thoughts, our way, and our hearts. And we are grateful that you are on the journey with us. Please awaken us to the needs of the world. Lead us to a place of courage and deeper understanding so that we may take actions to bring about equity, fairness, and justice for all people in our society. We are ready to walk with you down this path. Amen