

“I See Myself”

James 2:1-10

I know that feeling about giving a seat of honor to the one who has means. Perhaps, given the utilitarianism of how things work in our world, you do, as well.

In the year 312, the pagan Roman Emperor Constantine saw a sign of the cross in the sky as he went into a battle, hearing an accompanying voice promise: “In this sign conquer.” When he won the battle, Constantine converted to Christianity, not only making Christianity legal in the Roman Empire, but eventually making Christianity the state religion of Rome. Eventually, the church became more of a sovereign than a servant. In fact, we still wrestle with the effects of Constantine’s conversion to this day! Rodney Stark writes that it was encouraged by church leaders at the time. I don’t know if many would have done differently. If you were a leading Bishop like Eusebius of Caesarea or Alexander of Alexandria, would you have turned the Emperor down? Would you have welcomed him adorned with rings, telling those with dirty clothes, sit here at our feet?

As I talk about racism in the sermon series this month, this passage puts it to us. Helpfully, Robin DiAngelo defines bias and discrimination as

different from systemic racism to help those of us who are white to lower our anxieties as we deal with this subject. Take the passage we've read from James as an example. Certainly, the first century readers could have (as easily as we can) acknowledge that bias was present in the thoughts of those who would distinguish between the poor worshiper and the rich one. Bias is about seeing distinctions but not necessarily acting on them. According to DiAngelo, discrimination is the act of putting bias into practice. And if we look carefully at the passage from James, we see that the objection isn't in seeing that one worshiper is poor with little to offer to the offering plate, while the other has the capacity to make the annual budget really work! It's acting on our biases makes them into discrimination, suggests both James and DiAngelo. And it is the action that puts us in the wrong.

This is often where we, as white folks, get stuck with regard to race and racism. We've seen some very bad examples of people acting with discrimination – like Bull Connor commanding his deputies to wail on the likes of John Lewis on the Edmund Pettis Bridge, or neo-Nazis/white supremacists chanting “Blood and Soil” as they parade with tiki-torches in Charlottesville, or as Derek Chauvin applied deadly force when he put his knee on George Floyd's neck. “That's not me,” we rightly protest. Indeed, if

I might, I am happy when we find abhorrent such acts of discrimination that follow conscious or unconscious thoughts of bias.

The problem is that our anxiety at being lumped in with such repugnant behavior also leaves us resisting, and becoming complicit, in what is better described as systemic racism. DiAngelo defines systemic racism as a “group’s collective discrimination that is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, so that it is transformed into a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors.” Or as another wise person has put it: “racism is a structure not an event.”

By being anxious about any association with racism we don’t let its truth be told. For instance, we talk about the heroics of Jackie Robinson “breaking the color barrier,” but we don’t go near the real story – that all of the other talented players in the Negro Leagues were excluded from America’s pastime. And why? Instead of saying that we live in places considered to be safe because how few people of color live here, we talk about choosing good schools for our kids. We have all but forgotten that our suburban communities were created by redlining policies from federal agencies like HUD, reinforced by banks, realtors and neighborhood associations. We think it an offense to our “individualistic,” “meritocratic” ideals that our circumstances constantly advantage any who are

understood as white with favoritism while leaving those of color susceptible to fears, discriminations and even violence, at times. Those who are white are on top as those who control capital and power. We make the rules of the game resulting in privilege. By fearfully resisting any talk about race and racism we hide these difficult truths from ourselves and become complicit in the perpetuation of systemic racism.

American University professor, Ibram Kendi, puts it to us, suggesting that when we say that we don't see color, or are colorblind, we don't tell the truth. Of course we see color. Like Ron Campbell and I both confessed last week as we talked about having favorite baseball players of a different race. As young boys, we both liked and wished to emulate players of a different race, but it problematic. How did we get to that conclusion? And why was it not advisable for me as a white kid to pretend I was a black man, while it was forbidden for Ron to pretend he was a white man? Do you see the systemic nature of the racism there? I was giving up my whiteness in wanting to be Bob Gibson. Ron wasn't allowed to be Mickey Mantle because it was too much of a leap. And this is when we were six-years-old!!!! Kendi says that we don't have some in between colorblind choice between racism and antiracism. Either you're working on dismantling racism or you are tacitly supporting it by protecting the status quo.

The Book of James not only says how antithetical it is to the way of Jesus Christ to act with discrimination, but how destructive it is to the body of Christ. For this reason, I am so glad that we are having courageous conversations about race and racism in our congregation this month. I am glad that my friend, Phil Thompson, is here to help us to bring out into the open what racism and its effects are.

Phil is an attorney in Leesburg. He is a former Marine and very much has Marine toughness still. He was the President of the Loudoun Chapter of the NAACP a year ago. He is married to his wonderful wife, Tanja, who is a cancer survivor, having her own heroic story to tell about her fight against that deadly disease. She is a champion of funding for cancer research so that all can be survivors like she is.