

“They Will Know We Are Christians” 5/19/19

Most kids are said to be colorblind....and they aren't talking about whether you can see red or green. They are talking about whether you see someone's race----the color of someone's skin. Most kids playing in the sand box or on the slides at a park don't hesitate to make a friend because of race. Now this was true for me. Where I grew up outside of Washington Dc in Northern Virginia and there were all different kinds of people there. When the papers went home from my elementary school they went out in 10, 15 different languages. We had an international night and all of the families would bring in exotic dishes from their native countries. I had a friend named Osma and Vu. There was a boy in my class named Pawandeeep. He was not my friend.....But I did learn things by knowing him. My husband Michael also grew up in a place that was racially diverse. He grew up in Brockton, Massachusetts and he attended a high school that had over 4,000 kids in it and less than 20% of them are white. Now just because we had a racially diverse population doesn't mean that I am saying that things always went well relationally between us. There were gangs in my high school, separated by race, and in the neighborhoods in Brockton it wasn't some big melting pot. But Michael and I both benefited from growing up in a place where everyone didn't look like us.

Here in Maine we are -----well--- we are super white. Just under 95 % white. And I really didn't think about how that would affect my kids until I was in our local grocery store in Union one Summer with Carrick. Carrick was 3 at the time and there were a bunch of men in the grocery store who were who probably working for the blueberry farmers for the Summer and Carrick almost immediately piped up,” Why are there so many DARK people in here?” I quickly and quietly told Carrick that God made people of all different colors. “ But why are they so BLACK?” I almost passed out..... Now Carrick wasn't being hateful----he honestly wanted to know. We moved here when he was 6 months old and we don't travel a lot and we didn't have a t.v and so he had never seen a black person before. He was just curious. Now I want you all to close your eyes

and imagine Jesus. Imagine Jesus healing, Jesus preaching, Jesus on the cross. Okay--you can open them. Now --was the Jesus that you imagined white? I wouldn't be surprised if he was. From my first remembrances of Jesus I can picture this light skinned man with light brown hair and light brown eyes. His mother Mary being blond haired and blue eyed. I have only ever seen these images of Jesus. But Jesus was a middle- Eastern brown skinned Jew. He most certainly wasn't white. And neither was his mother. So why have we as a society been offered this white-washed image of our Savior? Who does that serve? We have a history in our nation of ostracizing immigrants, of turning away from people who are different from us.

What if we had grown up worshipping a Jesus who was brown? One that we acknowledged did not look like us? One that we acknowledged spoke a language other than English? Would our world look differently? Would we look differently at one another? Would we be more compassionate with those people whose skin is a different color than ours? I think we might.

So when I thought about this image of Jesus that was handed to me in my youth that is so blatantly incorrect, I began to wonder what else about my faith have I swallowed as truth without question? And then I started to look at the bible.

Growing up I heard all of the standard stories of the bible and thought that I knew the intent of the authors because of how those stories had been shared with me. Growing up I was taught that the bible is inerrant. But then a couple of years ago a friend gave me the book "What is the Bible?" by Rob Bell. In it he explains that when we read the bible we have to remember that Jesus was a first century Jew and that woven into the bible are hints and innuendo and Jewish politics and inside jokes and economics and common stories and that the more you knew about THAT world, the more his message would come to life. Since I have come to read this work, the more I read the bible with a discerning eye knowing that there is more going on there than I can see at first glance. And it has got me to thinking--- I have been worshipping this white Jesus and reading the bible and not getting the whole story, "What else have I missed?" "How have I gotten it wrong?"

And I started to think about that throughout history there have been churches that took Jesus' message of inclusivity and made it exclusive. The bible has been taken and wielded in such a way that it has kept certain groups in power. When I first heard of "white privilege, I bristled. It felt like the first time I remember hearing about being a sinner. I was very young and sitting in the pew and they were talking about the original sin and Adam and Eve and I remember saying to myself, "I ain't no sinner." Because it was like someone was trying to make me put on a set of filthy clothes that I had not soiled. I heard about white privilege and I felt the same....That's not something I did. My family didn't have slaves. I am not a racist. I am not a bigot. But when I started to be honest with myself, I realized that I might not have created the system, but I lived in that system and white privilege is real. Carrick's observation in the grocery store wasn't hateful, but it would never happen to me. No one would ever walk in this room and say, "Why are there so many white people in here?" Because we are the majority. We are not the "other." White people hold the power. And more historically, white men.

Throughout history the lust for power and dominance in our culture has been fueled by greed. People acting as if they are God. Manipulating the system to make sure that they are taken care of FIRST. Bending the rules in their favor, creating hurdles for "the other," making it hard for them to succeed or advance. And that group is white. And male. Like the Jesus I grew up worshipping.

But Jesus wasn't white. And that wasn't his message. Jesus fought AGAINST those in power. And when I hear Ute pray, I hear her say, "Our Father and Mother in heaven, hallowed be thy name." And I smile. Because leaders like that show that there are people who get it. There are people now in leadership roles who are willing to take us to places in theology where we have not been before. We are starting to be open to the fact that there are places in our own spiritual journeys where we have been fed an indoctrinated lie about who Jesus was and who we are called to be as his followers.

We are meant to be colorblind. We are called to be inclusive. We are meant to be open. We are called to be radicals, like Jesus. Radically loving, radically open, forgiving, WELCOMING to all ethnicities, to all genders, to all sexual orientations, to all abilities, to all languages, to all strengths and weaknesses.

But some people have taken Jesus' message and watered it down and tainted it almost beyond recognition and in careless hands it has been used to justify discrimination, violence and hatred beyond our ability to comprehend.

Henri Nouwen Says, "Our faith in Jesus is not our belief that Jesus, the Son of God, lived long ago, performed great miracles, presented wise teachings, died for us on the cross, and rose from the grave. It first of all means that we fully accept the truth that Jesus lives within us and fulfills his divine ministry in and through us. This spiritual knowledge of the Christ living in us is what allows us to affirm fully the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection as historic events. It is the Christ in us who reveals to us the Christ in History."

And so I would say that it is the work of those who live with Christ in them to show the world who Jesus was. You show it in who you put in power. You show it in how you spend your money. You show it in how you spend your time and who you spend your time with.

If in the bible Jesus spoke out against the Pharisees because of their narrow view of the path to God, then why 2000 years later are there churches standing in the position of telling others "we are in and you are out", "we are right and you are wrong", "we are going to heaven and you are going to hell." Isn't that the very thing that Jesus came to change? Now you might look around this room and think, "well, that is not us." I agree with you on that...that is not us. But I challenge you to think about those that are unchurched and question if this is the type of church that they think about when they hear church? One that is open and affirming? Do people think of people like us when they think of Christians?

In the scripture today from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says

Blessed are the meek

Blessed are the peaceful

Blessed are the merciful

I think that we could add:

Blessed are those that fight against inequality.

Blessed are those that challenge the notion that someone should be excluded from the pulpit or the sanctity of marriage because of their sexual orientation.

Blessed are those who embrace "the other."

Blessed are those who include.

In this church we do stand up for the marginalized. We stand against hate. With a female minister and 2 female moderators we acknowledge the value someone brings to the table regardless of gender. But we need to do more. I made it into my thirties before really starting to hear the truth about God. And I grew up in church!

As Christians we can promote change in our faith. We can counter the voices that exclude. We can ever so slowly make changes to better walk that path that Jesus laid for us. It is like this huge ship that has been headed in the wrong direction for so long and we are on that tugboat trying to turn it. It doesn't happen all at once and it doesn't happen quickly.

You know---I have a lot of secular friends. And sometimes I am brave enough to ask them why they don't go to church. Some say that they just didn't grow up doing that in their family. Some say that they went to church so much that they just couldn't wait to grow up and not have to spend their time that way. Some have been hurt by the church; shamed or pushed out for a variety of reasons. And some of them look at me with that look--I can't quite describe it----but it is that look that says they can't believe that I am so naive to believe in Jesus. And others who say that they could never believe in a God whose people stand so strongly in judgment of others. I have this acquaintance who has a bumper sticker on her car that says," God, please save me

from your followers.” The best bumper stickers are the ones that make you think and I think about that one a lot. It hurts for me. It hurts me to know that there are Christians that have screwed up the message so profoundly that churches actually turn people AWAY from God.

The text from John today says: **13:34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.**

13:35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

So Jesus didn't tell the disciples to hunker down. He didn't tell them to form a Christian huddle.....hanging out only with other people who believe what they believed. He told them to GO OUT! Show the world your love for each other and for others so that they might know me better.

Growing up I loved that version of the Amy Grant song. “They will know we are Christians by our LOVE by our LOVE....they will know we are Christians by our LOVE.” I can't tell you how much I want that to be true. To have people say-----I wasn't surprised to find out that you are a Christian because you are so loving with your life. Jesus loved with his life. His whole life. He died showing us that we must protest non violently against the powers that would control us. He died showing us that no matter how much hatred was thrown at Him.....his response would be LOVE. He loved the world. And the message about who Jesus was----who God is, needs to get out. Too many people miss out on a relationship with God because the only God they have heard about is one where women are less than, where gay people are not welcome, where God is judgmental, penal, and distant. I know that this is a progressive church and that many of these things are not struggles for us, but part of our mission needs to be to make sure that God's message of inclusivity and love is getting through to the

people who have never been to church and those who HAVE been to church but whose spiritual journey has not taken them on a path to hear the gospel this way.

You know--the bible is filled with all of these stories and the history of the Israelites and all of these people who were trying to connect with God and most of them failing miserably. And there are all of these understories and innuendos and buried meanings. Things we have been arguing over for centuries. But Jesus' life message was clear. To love God and one another. No commas there or semicolons.....no --as long as you are white. As long as you are straight. As long as you are not an addict or In the words of Brennan Manning----- "As long As long as your cheese isn't falling off your cracker."

In this region we can be a little private about our faith. In the most unchurched state in the country..... Ask yourself who in your life doesn't know you are a Christian? Who in your circle doesn't know that you live for the purpose of God's work? Who in your life doesn't know that God has this glorious and abundant love for us all.....regardless of the things that lead us wayward. Regardless of color, class, gender, politics or who we love. Who in your life doesn't know the radical love of God? A God whose love causes his followers to spill out their faith in their actions. Who might be curious about this God that calls us beloved?

We are called to love God and one another. To be a welcoming church. To make sure that Jesus' message of inclusivity be spread far and wide and not twisted. We are called to be a welcoming people whose response is always LOVE. Amen.

