

Mary Had a Little Lamb

John 1:29-42

Recently, I came across an unexpected and startling quote (without any Russian help) from a well-known person while he was campaigning for the nation's highest office.

I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality...I will add to this that I have never seen, to my knowledge, a man, woman, or child who was in favor of producing a perfect equality, social and political, between negroes and white men. ¹

The person who said this is none other than Abraham Lincoln—one of the greatest Presidents of our country and author of the Emancipation Proclamation! Needless to say, if Lincoln had made these comments in our present day, it's unlikely he would have been viewed in any other way than as a racist (which, apparently, still doesn't negate his electability!).

I suppose, there are two ways to look at this. It's possible that Lincoln made these comments, but later regretted them, once life experience broadened his mind and taught him otherwise. Such a transformation in thinking is not uncommon and has occurred with many people. They have spoken out of ignorance and then, once enlightened, felt remorse and would never utter such a bigoted word again. However, historians are divided on this; they are not sure Lincoln ever expressed a change of heart.

Another way to look at it is to suggest that there were two sides to President Lincoln. Publicly, he said what was politically correct and

¹Alan Singer, "Abraham Lincoln Never Believed in Racial Equality," www.historynewsnetwork.org, retrieved January 5, 2017.

expedient for him to get into office and govern. What he thought privately was something altogether different. Again, historians are not of one mind in their interpretation of Lincoln's beliefs about race. He could have been a closeted racist or a repentant one. This might explain Frederick Douglas' frustration and disappointment with old honest Abe.

Nevertheless, it illustrates quite well the nature of racism—something we still wrestle with in this country, even as a new administration is being vetted and sworn into office. Old ways die hard; the racism upon which this nation was founded has not been easily overcome or eradicated. Obviously, whites and blacks began in vastly different places in this country—one with privilege, one as property—thus, the path to equality has been very steep and stony.

In less than 150 years, the descendants of slaves have had to cross even the most fundamental threshold of simply being acknowledged as human, which has not been an even road around the landscape of this country. Most have had to rise out of severe social oppression and chronic poverty, which still exists as a generational pattern in the rural South and the urban North. They have had to strive for the same opportunities for education and protection as their white peers which, on many levels, is still not guaranteed. They have had to fight for a dignified presence in the mainstream media, TV, movies, and professional sports, which has only been manifest in the last few generations.

All of this lies against a backdrop of continual racist opposition, mostly subtle, though sometimes quite explicit. There are still many folks who grew up in households assuming blacks were categorically inferior and, with few exceptions, untrustworthy with anything that really mattered to the larger world white people dominated.

This isn't ancient history. It's still the current state in certain sectors of our society. That's why the election of Barack Obama eight years ago was such a watershed moment in race relations and why so many are amazed he served two terms without paying dearly for it. It also explains why President-elect Trump appealed to many disgruntled whites when he questioned the legitimacy of Obama's birth certificate. Some saw it merely as a political stunt; many blacks viewed it as a racist attack, and with good reason. Racism that had been carefully hidden or only strident on the margins has suddenly become tolerated and amplified by the mainstream in just the past couple years (Alt-Right, KKK, Aryan Nation, etc.). Ironically, unlike a decade or two ago, it's possible someone as explicitly racist as Abe Lincoln could be elected in these times!

That's the uncomfortable conundrum we face in this country, isn't it? What do people really believe about those of other races and the current state of race relations? Has our society truly evolved from its racist past, or are many white people merely being polite on the surface or in public, while privately remaining suspicious, distrustful, fearful, or racially demeaning of minorities?

I thought the former was substantially true until the last couple years; now I honestly don't know. Racism is like a systemic disease or virus within people that cannot be easily cured. This is one of the reasons more work has to be done to heal the racial divide in this country and to improve relations. It takes time to unmask and diagnose it in each generation, but even longer to experience and embrace its remedy.

One of the root causes of racism is something I mentioned last Sunday, i.e., tribalism. Everyone gains an identity from some source—usually the race or ethnic lineage they arise from, often the familial,

religious, or cultural worldviews that shape them, as well as a host of other factors, such as career, geographical location, sexual orientation, language group, circle of friends, educational achievements, and so forth. For the sake of self-esteem, in that mix is a pride that latches onto any or all of these tribal characteristics, which give to an individual a sense of self and a community to which they belong and are loyal.

Frequently, it's in that context of tribal identity where what the Bible refers to as "sinfulness" takes shape. Sin is what we do to others—unjustly, immorally, or callously—that protects or enhances our sense of self, usually at the expense of another. That is what the Bible calls "sin." It is what biblical prophets railed against: social injustice, greed, murder, abuses of power and privilege, sexual and physical violence, stealing, dishonesty and fraud, deception, manipulation, and other reprehensible acts or behaviors. Sin is unnecessarily harming another in some way—doing harm when you didn't need to do it. Racism fits right into this, where power and cultural influence is used to protect one's own tribal turf and interests.

This more forceful sense of sin is different than many of us learned sin to be. The conventional notion of "sin" is more along the lines of individual moral indiscretions and profane conduct and attitudes. It focuses more on personal mistakes and wrongdoing that deflect from things that really matter in society. It's symbolized by the Catholic confessional, where a person goes to privately confess their sins and misdemeanors to a priest and do penance in order to receive forgiveness to cover oneself until the next time. There's little to provoke a soulful transformation; the motive is more about getting out of trouble with God.

In my evangelical upbringing, from my earliest memories, I was taught something similar—that sin was when I did something wrong, like

when I misbehaved or didn't do what I was told. The remedy to pray for forgiveness and trust God's atonement through the blood of Jesus, who died for our sins. Faith was mainly about self-interest—making amends before facing judgment when you die.

However, it was my first Sunday School teacher who illustrated something that ultimately matters more to me than being relieved of my personal sense of guilt. Mrs. Decker, who was my Kindergarten teacher at the Milo Elementary School, also taught the Primary Class at church. Hence, I saw her all through the week and then again on Sunday morning. Since there was only one elementary school in town, there tended to be overlap between what she taught in church and public school.

Such as when Mrs. Decker taught us about Jesus being the Lamb of God—a biblical concept that made no sense to little minds. So she began to sing very slowly the nursery song we sang at school, “Mary Had a Little Lamb” (*Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb; Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow...*), at which time she pulled out a picture-book illustration of Jesus as a little boy with his mother, Mary. Jesus was portrayed as a cute little kid with blondish curly locks and light brown eyes, playing with other children gathered all around him. That was something we could identify with, even a five-year-old. Mrs. Decker's clever point was that Jesus would always be with us everywhere we'd go like Mary's little lamb. So every time I saw a reference to Jesus being the Lamb of God, I'd remember Florence Decker and singing, “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

However, what I didn't realize until much later was an underlying impression that stuck with me on a subconscious level. Namely, the image of Jesus was of a handsome young white boy, whose mother was also fair-

skinned and who surrounded himself with children like him. The image of a lily white Jesus was repeated in virtually every Bible and Sunday School illustration I ever saw throughout my childhood and youth. In fact, it has become such a stock image of Jesus in many American churches that it boggles the mind how we haven't recognized how inaccurate it was and how subtly it reinforces a false sense of superiority for white people! (Mind you, this still holds true by and large in churches and in popular culture; at this year's Tournament of Roses parade there was a float titled "Celebrate Jesus!" with a smiling, long-haired, Caucasian Christ figure standing in a white robe waving to the crowd! Go figure.).

Except, Jesus wasn't of European descent, was he? He was Semitic and physically would have possessed darker features similar to those native to the Middle East. But because we live in a largely Euro-white-dominated world, Jesus was portrayed with physical features just like us. That's tribalism.

Certainly, looking back, sweet Mrs. Decker wasn't intentionally trying to convey a racist message to her Sunday School class, but it revealed a natural bias of the white culture in making Jesus a part of our "tribe." That's how subtle all of this can be because of dominant norms and status. Jesus, the Lamb of God, had fleece (or flesh) that was white as snow. If children from another race had come to class, they wouldn't have had a Savior who looked like them. But that probably wouldn't have entered anyone's mind in 1960 Milo, Maine or many other places in our country, for as Dr. King observed, "11 a.m. on a Sunday is the most segregated hour in this nation." That's still largely true. Religion, carrying out its normal customs, does more to maintain racial segregation than virtually any other institution in America.

Minorities recognize this bias very easily. For generations, they were expected to assimilate into the Euro-white culture. It's only in recent decades where it's been resisted and altered. This is long overdue. Why should they have to assimilate if it places their own identity as secondary and less desirable relative to the dominant one? Rather than milky white, either Jesus should come in every shade and race or he should just remain as Semitic as he naturally would have been.

The point is, more often than we realize, the sins that truly impact this world and which need to be forgiven are much deeper than our personal indiscretions and moral mistakes. The sins that require a transformation of our souls are rooted in and related to our personal identity and tribe—they being our pride and sense of superiority over others, our closed minds toward others, our fear and distrust of others, our biases and conventional norms expressed without consideration for others, our inability to see beyond the stereotypes we maintain of others.

So when we read, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”—the sins we might reckon with are that which segregate and divide us from all of humanity—all the colors and peoples of the world—all of those who have been unnecessarily harmed by domination and conquest, by imposition and enslavement, by assimilation and by segregation, by racial violence and nationalism—all the tribal elements fueled by competition and rivalry, instead of being transformed by empathy and cooperation.

When we're able to break through the barriers of our consciousness to realize the way racism exists and is perpetuated in our society and world, then we are more able to appreciate why it's still a problem for all of us. Then, we might be better able to empathize with a black or brown

American's perspective on the world and their place within it, to appreciate their story and culture, to sense the pain and shame they often bear with in life, to recognize the obstacles, disadvantages, and injustices they have to overcome. If so, then we're able to transform our view of each other and embrace each other as brothers and sisters—just like Dr. King envisioned. We start knocking out the bricks in the walls that separate us. We overcome sin by being more like the Lamb of God, who came to take away the sins of the world by teaching us how to love and embrace our enemies and strangers, as much as we do our neighbors (who are usually just like us).

Dr. King once summarized the American experience: “We may have all come on different ships but we're all in the same boat now.” We certainly are. Rather than regress into our racist past, we have to continually overcome its presence today in order to give hope for the future.

Martin also said this:

I refuse to accept the view that [humanity] is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality...I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

Fifty years after his death, we know this great prophet among us lived into those words, as did many others; as did Jesus, the Lamb of God, whose Spirit will continue to rise up in every generation to show us how to take away the sins of the world, so that someday all of God's children—*all of God's children*—may be beloved, equal, and free.

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