

Your Light Breaking Forth
Isaiah 58:1-12
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Epiphany 5, Year A
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Think for just a moment about how many white congregations are ignoring Black History Month. Why? Because they- including the pastors- do not fully embrace how much our own wholeness is connected with racial justice- and how much we all benefit by celebrating the contributions of Black Americans. Tragically, because of white privilege, we do not have to attend to Black History- or embrace it as our own- but we ignore systemic oppression to our detriment. We have the prophetic tradition and the Gospels to remind us of that.

The Black Church was instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement- and the long and arduous work that still continues. Loose the bonds of injustice and break every yoke... Racism is one such yoke. The work is our responsibility- racism is not our fault, but it is our responsibility. Elsewhere, the people were called upon to "Remember you were slaves in Egypt." God hates oppression. God had delivered them.

Curtis Powell is one of the Vice Presidents of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He and his wife, Renee whom I know through the MLK Committee and because she is president of the Troy NAACP, live in Brunswick Hills. It's a somewhat affluent suburb of Troy. On more than 1 occasion, Curtis has been stopped by police when he was driving in his neighborhood, on his way home. They ask "What are you doing here?" Once, his white neighbor said, If I didn't see that, I wouldn't have believed it!"

Here is white privilege- the fact that we can drive in our own town, to our own home and not be asked, "What are you doing here?"

Last week, I spoke about how the Prophet Micah, who railed against injustice, favored righteousness over cultic practice. This week, we hear from Isaiah (3rd Isaiah). The people have returned home after living in exile. They worshipped God, practiced prayer and fasting, but they felt God did not hear them. *Why do we fast, and you do not notice?* God wants integration of prayer and praxis. Even when we believe that what is deepest inside us is the goodness of God- It takes work to strive for a more just society, to attend to the oppression of others- and not be wrapped in our own concerns.

Recently, I was talking with a few Black women about anti racism work, and they asked, "What are they afraid of? Don't we all want to raise our children in safety, to make a living, to have a house and opportunity for a good and decent life? What do white people think they will lose?"

If only we could take the attitude- I am not diminished by your success. We can all succeed. We will be stronger together. Our well-being is Interwoven.

Zero sum thinking, the idea that if some succeed others must lose is a concept Heather McGhee challenges in her work, and I commend to you the upcoming book study on The Sum of Us, hosted by the Albany Presbytery Anti-Racism Task Force on Friday, Feb. 10 and 18 at 1 pm. Heather McGhee was the speaker on a recent webinar, and she told the very profound story about how beautiful public pools, such as one in Montgomery, Ala., were

built in the 1930's and 40's to embrace the common good. During the Civil Rights Movement, when the Supreme Court ordered the integration of public pools, many communities drained the pools or buried them under, rather than integrate them. They preferred to deny themselves and their children wonderful, recreational opportunities, rather than be with people of color. Heather McGhee calls this "drain pool politics."

Imagine, preferring our own detriment over the inclusion of others. What a distortion of the conviction that we all are created in God's own image!

But God says through the Prophet Isaiah, Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Feed the hungry, yes. Charity is important, but justice is transformational. Won't that be a great day, when the yoke of oppression is broken?!

Since Black households have an average of just 10% of the wealth of white households, how can we not see that there is a systemic problem?

A really fine aspect of this congregation is that not only do we attend to Black History in February, lay leaders here quote Black authors throughout the year. Aren't we all more whole if we try as best we can, as our brief statement of faith says, to "hear the voices of those long silenced?" Then we deepen our understanding of navigating this human journey together.

I love this text from Isaiah, in part because it doesn't stop with telling us to work for justice and to end oppression and call it a day. Instead of losing out by doing that, guess what? We all win!

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and YHWH will say, Here I am.

Break the chains of injustice and your Healing will spring up- the word for healing signifying growing new skin over a wound. This is a promise of blessing. There is no zero sum here!

"Then your light shall break forth like the dawn." St. Peter's is a wonderful justice-seeking, congregations. We are willing to enter challenging spaces, like Christianity's role in perpetuating white supremacy. We have to let our light shine, to invite others who may not know that a congregation like this one is possible.

Soon, we will have Ordination and installation of church officers. Do not let us become complacent- instead, officers, take up the task of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Lift challenging issues in prayer, like racism in policing and criminal justice system, and the plight of brown-skinned refugees.

Invite us to put our faith into practice-

Like supporting Black-owned businesses and organizations, studying and reading Black authors, getting to know predominantly black congregations.

We remember saints of Black History- Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon, first Black woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church (1976) “Even when they call your truth a lie, tell it anyway. Tell it anyway.”