

The Reverend Canon Leroy Lyons will be with us on Wednesday, September 16th at 5.30 as the culmination of our Good Shepherd Summer Book Club.

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This essay (which we are invited to read and then discuss with Canon Lyons) is online at St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church, Elizabeth, NJ <https://www.stelizabethschurchnj.org/living-like-job>

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER**

### **What's Next**

Abraham Lincoln, at the start of the Civil War, would have agreed to have slaves remain in captivity. He would have accepted the Confederates remain in the Union with their slaves while keeping the Union intact. *How, then, did he become the Great Emancipator, the Great Savior who freed the enslaved peoples of America?* His transformation was due, in large part, to the character of the man; he pursued the truth. Lincoln would not easily, certainly not for self-aggrandizing purposes, allow himself to be convinced to agree to any poorly conceived political plan. Lincoln simply cannot be pigeon-hold with the term the *Leader of a 'team of rivals'*; it was truth that was the one characteristic irrevocably embedded in him. The philosophy of searching for and following the truth was baked into his personality and affected every decision of his life.

The social context of our lives, the culture, the politics, the economic circumstances, our entire community determine who we are and what we shall become. And, in the time of slavery, we can well assume the institution of slavery did not engender the kind of moral outrage, even in good people, we could ever come to hope for. *BUT*, because of the kind of person Lincoln was, circumstances would lead him to a dramatic change of heart. When one is always disposed to seek the truth and to live by it, one's values can change with enlightenment, and one can learn and grow and change with time. Truth remained his virtual North Star and centered his moral compass.

Our concept of 'falling from grace' is often viewed, much like the concept of Humpty Dumpty falling off the wall; that at one time we are whole and perfect, and as tragedy strikes, all of a sudden, we find ourselves shattered and broken to bits. Subsequent to this fall, our growth becomes a struggle to put Humpty back together again. The truth is, we are always in the process of becoming, and we do not begin in a perfect place. It is not a surprise we become frustrated with ourselves as we struggle towards some figment of perfection. *Why are we not as good as we ought to be? Why are we not perfect?* We are broken and imperfect human beings. We merely strive towards perfection. When we fail to grapple with the truth and weight of this concept, we run the risk of exposing ourselves to hypocrisy.

How often we hear from our white, liberal friends, recently freed from the ignorance of bigotry (just like the person who recently quit smoking or drinking) ranting and raving over the evils of segregation and its twin 'White Privilege'. These are folks who used to live in abject comfort with bigotry and racism in all their ugly forms and enjoyed privileges attached to the color of their skin. They have suddenly found religion! On the one hand, we are somewhat relieved with their apparent conversion. *But, on the other hand, can we again be mistaken? Can these new converts be trusted with our truth, our history, our feelings? How real is their newly acquired zeal? Might it now be the new craze?* There is always a test to determine its genuineness. The test is in their ability to deal with the truth about the world we live in and the truth about themselves. Lincoln did change, he became genuinely committed to freeing the enslaved of this Union. It was no novelty, the change came because of his character, the capacity deal *'with a team of rivals' and to understand the truth.*

The *Black Lives Matter* movement is definitely a chapter in this Country's move towards *'a more perfect union'*. It is not an attempt to put Humpty back together again. If there was a Humpty, he was more abstract than real. We are fooling ourselves to allow those, who are delighted with the new platform, a new-fangled and popular movement, to come running with glee and superficial commitment and who tire easily, who are shallow, who are not willing and ready to make the painful changes this new, important movement demands. We must determine whether this new zeal is a new face for the same gratuitous satisfaction and comfort held in the existence of white privileges and advantages, or whether this new enthusiasm comes

from personal anguish and pain over the *sitz im leben* of which we are already now a part; a culture of injustice baked into a society which needs to be dismantled and rebuilt for the sake of one truth and one justice for all.

We are not dealing with a simple problem. Racism is prevalent, systemic. Here is an incident which is a template for our understanding of the all-consuming complexity of racism:

*Frederick Douglas told this story almost inadvertently. But, this story expresses, in all its simplicity, the overwhelming implications and manifestations of what racism is.* Douglas tells us that after five years of pampering by his grandmother, the time came for him to be presented to his owner and the owner of Wye House Farms. On his way to the 'big house', one of the first things he noticed and upset him to no end was seeing the enslaved children being fed like pigs in a trough. He could not bring himself to be a part of this humiliation. A simple yet poignant story, BUT here are the implications:

- What Douglas was looking at (children fighting for food in a trough), was a creation of the white masters. (The precursor to today's ghetto using redlining housing laws).
- That this behavior was interpreted as inhuman and savage and demonized the enslaved children in the eyes of the master and of his kin.
- The behavior categorized as inhuman and savage subjected the participants to the cruelest punishment.
- Frederick himself looked on his own kin with shame and even disrespect.
- The enslaved children felt bad about themselves and about each other.

Here indeed are the fundamentals of racism: a practice created by white people. A practice demonized by white people. A practice punished by white people. It was a practice resulting in a sense of estrangement, distrust and disrespect, and engendered a sense of worthlessness in the victims and amongst themselves.

This is the problem of racism. The victims are powerless and helpless. You cannot be proactive when you are a victim.

To lament over racism in all its degrading and disgusting aspects is merely shouting at Humpty lying at the base of the wall in shambles. In real terms, Humpty got there by a simple and deliberate act of separating people; by offering privileges to one and denying privileges to others on the basis of their color. The separation grows, and the cavern of hatred and ignorance proliferates exponentially as more and more stipulations are added to solidify distinctions. This tragedy was and still is facilitated by the explicit help and support of the wealthy, the church and the government.

The Country has sunk into an irretrievable quagmire. The damage is ongoing. The damage boomerangs on its purveyors with worse ferocity than it was when originally propelled. Being shocked into a realization of the wrongdoing of racism, the sin of the Country, is definitely a right and good start. Diagnosis of the problem may be a beginning, BUT it is sheer hypocrisy to come shouting and flag waving unless we are committed to accepting complicity in the whole affair. Unless there is willingness and determination to change and be prepared for the personal sacrifices this acceptance demands, we are wasting time. Slavery was wrong and sinful. We cannot have it both ways; we cannot believe in and fight slavery while we celebrate symbols of its sinfulness (monuments) and keep holding on to the practices of its decadent past. White people have the responsibility to solve a problem they created. **THE PROBLEM IS AORIST.** Failure to do so is sheer hypocrisy (the aorist tense in Greek is defined as an action created in the past whose consequences continue to the present). How legal enactments in a society, those of the founding fathers were misguided! How effective and destructive! How all encompassing! The slave laws have left, in their wake a deep, virulent and seemingly irreversible hatred. How the church created a theological foundation for such an evil system to prevail is diabolic.

Jumping on a bandwagon today without some realization and accepting of the personal cost, self-examination, and acknowledgement of guilt, as well as, some corrective behavior on our part will do no good. Ranting and raving about past evils with no obvious and deliberate move to change character, leaves the impression modern day protagonists will do the same thing wherever and whenever the setting will allow. Racism was constructed brick by brick. Racism has to be dismantled brick by brick.