

JUSTICE: FEBRUARY: BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Someone wrote me a few months ago complaining that when it came to race, my focus was on Latinos and not Blacks. He was right. (I work a lot with the CCHD-funded groups in the Archdiocese of Portland, many of which are Latino-focused.)

February is Black History Month. February 4 is the National Day of Prayer for the African American and African Family. I will use these opportunities to explore Blacks and racism.

"[R]acism ... is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation." *U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979*



During the aftermath of Charlottesville, Virginia, I met with a black acquaintance. She and her black friends had been keeping low profiles and staying indoors. They were frightened. KKK flyers had appeared on windshields in her neighborhood. I was embarrassed that I was oblivious that Blacks in Oregon would be personally affected by the events in Charlottesville.

Oregon is the 18th whitest state, where 75% of Oregonians are white. However, 75% is just a statistic that says nothing about our attitudes, practices, and realities. Only four states and the District of Columbia are less than 50% white. The United States is 61% white.

Statistic aside, what about our attitudes, practices, and realities? 13.3% of Oregonians struggle to live below the Federal Poverty Level. Unless you're Black, then it's 27%

The unemployment rate for Oregonians is 6.5%. Unless you're Black, then it's 11%. **We can do better.**

Friends point out that they're not racist. People argue that slavery happened a long time ago and ended a long time ago. Or that over 50 years ago, the United States enacted laws protecting the civil rights of Blacks. I was recently told that giving preference to Blacks is reverse-racism.

For 266 years, America committed the sin of slavery. Some of Oregon's early leaders were slave owners. The legacy, however, of "owning" Blacks did not end in 1865.

Terrorizing Blacks through lynching generally lasted until 1968.

Humiliating Blacks through segregation lasted until the 1980's. Segregation ended by laws. The grief and humiliation of segregation were not and cannot be ended by laws.

Keeping Blacks in poverty through redlining – steered by banks and realtors to certain neighborhoods, separate from whites – thus keeping property levels lower which deprived them of the opportunity to build asset wealth. Although eventually illegal, this practice continued through the 2010's.

Disadvantaging Blacks from entering the universities that provide America's ruling class and powerbrokers as admission offices give preference to children of alumni. Alumni are rarely Black, and neither are their children.

Removing Blacks from society through incarceration continues to this day.

- Blacks make up 1.8% of Oregon's population.
- Blacks make up 9.4% of Oregon's prison population.
- One of every 21 Black men in Oregon is in prison.
- Oregon imprisons Blacks at the seventh-highest rate in the country.
- In Oregon, Blacks are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. ([The Sentencing Project](#), 2016)

It's not that Blacks commit more crimes than whites do. "People of color are frequently given harsher sanctions because they are perceived as imposing a greater threat to public safety and are therefore deserving of greater social control and punishment" ([The Sentencing Project](#), 2016). We call this "implicit bias."

Prior to the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010, a first-time offender with 5 grams of crack cocaine was sentenced to a minimum of five years. A first-time offender needed to possess 500 grams of cocaine to receive a minimum of five-year sentence. Users of crack cocaine are usually Black; cocaine users are usually white.

Slavery was abolished 152 years ago; the legacy of slavery continues to this day.

I had heard that Portland is the whitest major city in the country. It is. I confirmed this by searching for the "10 whitest cities." Appearing on the same page of search results were links to the "10 safest cities."

Algorithms dictate which search results will appear first. The fact that a search for the "10 whitest cities" also brought up the "10 safest cities" is a sad commentary on our beliefs, manifested by our search habits, that white = safe.

We can do better!

- If you're a white male, understand that you especially benefitted, and continue to benefit, from society's practices and attitudes towards Blacks.
- All of us must understand that racism is more than individual prejudices and stereotypes. Racism permeates the systems and structures of society. Rather than personal sin (with personal culpability), this is what Saint John Paul II called "social sin:" the sins of our structures.

Society's attitudes towards Blacks must change. How can we change the sinful structures of society? Through advocacy. As advocates, we must stand with others.

- Acknowledge that we don't know if we intentionally or unintentionally engage in microracism, aka "microaggression" ("brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color").
- Accept that Black culture is ok and there is no need for Blacks to assimilate into white culture.
- Open ourselves to encounter:
 - Meet with Blacks.
 - Talk with Blacks.
 - Collaborate with Blacks.
 - Make decisions affecting Blacks *with* Blacks, not *for* them.

"Racism is an attack on the image of God that has been given to every one of us by the Creator (Gen. 5:1-3). Because each person has been created by God, we are all united together with the Lord and with each other. Racism rejects what God has done by refusing to acknowledge the image of God in the other, the stranger and the one who is different. **The fact that we were created in the image of God should remind us that each person is a living expression of God that must be respected and preserved and never dishonored.**" (*U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops*)

Less we forget, Jesus was not white. Neither were Mary and Joseph.