

Let's Try Systemic Justice (For Once)

Even before the murder of George Floyd gave birth to an unprecedented number of protests across the country — and around the world — we all knew what systemic racism looked like.

Even before Black Lives Matter generated a clarion call of conscience that resonated with millions of Americans who were formerly content to sit on the sidelines pretending they were merely innocent bystanders, we understood the meaning of structural inequality on an intuitive level.

We could see it in the unequal distribution of goods and services distributed to our fellow citizens by a government that refused to be an honest broker or enforce a standard of “Justice for All” through the majority of our history as a nation.

We could see it in the contempt of those that willingly countenanced a century of Jim Crow segregation and racial terrorism after 246 years of slavery.

We all know people who refer to this period of profound moral stagnation as “the good old days.” They want to return to a time when more genteel forms of white supremacy — interspersed with occasional pogroms and lynchings — “kept America great.”

It was a time before the Bible “got kicked out of public schools,” a time before racial minorities “got uppity,” and a time before women saw themselves as “equal to men.”

It was the golden age of Christian civilization in America. We were truly a “City on a Hill” — albeit one with plenty of bloody doorknobs and “no trespassing” signs on slave mowed lawns.

In the sentimental retelling of that period, Jesus himself inspired the Founding Fathers to write a constitution that embraced the rights of white landowners at the expense of everyone else.

Apparently, Jesus lost all of his peaceful ambition once he turned white, abandoned righteousness, and became America's god. After baptizing as much systemic injustice as possible, he shackled up with a perfectly nice jezebel named

Capitalism and proceeded to create a new religion more suited to the amoral complexities of the times.

“Blessed are the rich. Everyone else has to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The Kingdom is theirs if they’re willing to work for it.

“Blessed are those who mourn for the nation’s lost greatness, for they will be comforted by Gog and Magog — nationalism and xenophobia.

“Blessed are those who are proud of America; they know their value and understand that they are entitled to the whole world. They will either inherit the earth or take it by force.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice — to be done to somebody else! Be merciful to those who deserve it and unmerciful to those who don’t.

“God blesses those who are pure of heart, but makes allowances for those who need to be graded on a blood-slicked curve, for they, as usual, will cut to the front of the line to see God first.

“Blessed are the war makers, for they shall be given discounts on all the latest weaponry. Blessed are the prosecutors because somebody’s got to fill these prisons with poor people.

“Blessed are the mockers, because they will be given space on social media to amplify my values. Do not cry when they are de-platformed, spat upon, and cast out into the wilderness. If they abide in me, they’ll arise from the darkness once again. Just ask my buddy, Satan.”

You get the point. The liberating spirit of Christ that is the antithesis of injustice was turned on its head to rationalize systemic injustice over four centuries.

Despite the ridiculous notion that we have ever been a Christian nation, our brutal history bears witness to this simple truth: Our current economic and political system represents the flowering of the seeds of exclusion, exploitation, inequality, and systemic injustice planted centuries ago.

Before we can even begin the hard work of systemic justice, America has to recognize that it was not born in the bosom of some liberty-loving Eden. We are a country that has its deepest roots in hell.

Consequently, as a nation, we have never pursued a coherent set of policies designed to facilitate justice, fairness, and equity of opportunity for all Americans. Every institution is fatally contaminated at the root. Even the church, despite

admirable pockets of resistance to the evil of inequality, has bowed to this narrative.

Sometimes this co-option takes absurd forms. We were all revolted by the ubiquity of Christian crosses and Jesus flags at the siege on the Capitol on January 6.

Large swaths of the American Evangelical and Charismatic movements have bought into a Christian nationalism that is only one sinner's prayer removed from American Nazism.

As previous speakers in this series have laid out, there's a reason why there are so many racially disparate outcomes in healthcare, education, criminal justice, and family wealth. There are reasons why systemic injustice is the rule and not the exception in America despite our patriotic propaganda to the contrary.

We are a structurally unjust nation. The Old Testament prophets, the writer of the Book of Revelation, and even Bob Marley used the same term for such a place — Babylon!

We have to wake up to this reality and stop believing in the myth of American innocence for us while handing off the burden of Original Sin to every other nation.

Even when we close our eyes, we can hear screams reverberating down history's haunted corridors that led to the slave ships. When we open our eyes, we see palm prints, blood, and feces smeared on the walls. There's no point in looking around for someone to blame when your own trembling hands are slick with blood.

We know intuitively even while refusing to think about it that genocide was inflicted on the people who occupied this vast and beautiful land for millennia before the European explorers arrived.

The people who were here had to be removed so that an economic system based on land acquisition and the transformation of natural resources into profit could take root. It was a system that was assumed to have the blessings of God, so any amount of violence and exploitation used to implement it in this New World was fine as far as the popes and princes of Europe were concerned.

After all, it's not like the Native peoples who would be decimated in the name of territorial expansion had laws, traditions, or notions of liberty the corrupt monarchies of Europe were obliged to respect. They were godless "heathens" whom the Lord had obviously singled out for conquest. As far as the Christians of Europe were concerned, the technologically inferior people who initially greeted them in friendship and curiosity were the moral equivalent of the Canaanites, the Hittites, and the Amorites that the Israelites happily decimated in the 40 year war for the Promised Land.

Because they weren't "Christian." Referring to the peoples scattered across this new continent as "savages" gave metaphysical and theological justification to the centuries of slaughter and dehumanization that followed.

It was not possible for the Christians of that era to accommodate the notion that the people they were in the process of displacing from the land, or the enslaved Africans pressed into 2 1/2 centuries of brutal and uncompensated servitude, had souls, much less any of the rights naturally accorded to men.

"These people are not made in the image of God," the Christians told themselves. "They are beasts — and beasts have no rights and subhumans have no souls."

That's the Original Sin of this nation. We're doomed to constantly confirm this twisted birthright unless we make a conscious effort to become circuit-breakers of oppression and eager architects of systemic justice.

We all know what systemic racism and structural inequality look like. As a society, we've lived with the contradictions between our democratic aspirations and our anti-democratic practices since before the founding of the Republic.

Martin Luther King Jr., the most quoted and most misunderstood of American icons, made a link between racial discrimination and economic oppression. He also tied structural racism and economic oppression to the injustice of the Vietnam War. Simply connecting the dots of racial attitudes, structural inequality, and war contributed to the conventional wisdom that made MLK the most unpopular man in America by the time he was assassinated in April 1968.

Because MLK is most often viewed through a gauzy haze of sentimentality, it is difficult for those who were alive at the time to remember how much his critique infuriated just about everybody. He was even denounced by other civil

rights leaders for the “un-American” tenor of his criticism. He was the Black Lives Matter of his time.

Folks who celebrate him now with hypocritical advice to young BLM activists to “be more like Martin, not Malcolm” have conveniently forgotten his proposal for a Marshall Plan-like effort to rebuild and revitalize urban and rural America. Just as the United States rebuilt Europe in the aftermath of WWII, MLK was demanding that the same resources be poured into urban Black America, Appalachia, Native American communities, and invested in the health and safety of migrant farm workers.

King demanded that hundreds of millions, perhaps a billion, be spent every year for at least a decade to underwrite a massive intervention by the federal government that was far more bullish about the role of job creation, education, housing reform, affirmative action, criminal justice reform, and healthcare than anything anyone of his stature and influence had ever proposed before.

He was determined to force whoever the Democratic candidate was for president to declare support for his plan. He wanted a candidate to agree publicly to work with Congress to underwrite housing, business opportunities, employment, enhanced healthcare, and improved educational options in Black, brown, and poor white communities. It would be a Herculean task by any president.

He called on the church to lead by example and vowed to lead a Poor Peoples’ March to Washington similar to his march in 1963 when he made his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. This time, MLK wouldn’t be bringing a “dream” that would give the powers-that-be room for complacency. He was hoping to lead a multi-racial coalition, with poor whites, anti-war activists, and students prominently featured this time, in what he hoped would be a tangible threat to both the Republican and Democratic presidential candidacies.

He knew that 1968 would also be the first year in American history in which Blacks in all regions of the country, including the deep South, could vote for the first time without submitting to a humiliating poll tax. Finally, America had become a multi-racial democracy for the first time in its history. Only South Africa and Rhodesia continued to deny Blacks access to the ballot box.

Fifty-two years later, we’re still trying to get to the Promised Land MLK pointed to in his last sermon before his assassination. When you think about it, it really wasn’t that long ago. It was within the lifetime of most people watching this.

I was born into an apartheid state, so that isn't something I can gloss over with stupid nostrums like "God Bless America."

That's why I was so encouraged when President Biden signed executive orders last week increasing racial equity. "We're in a battle for the soul of this nation, and the truth is our soul will be troubled as long as systemic racism is allowed to exist," Mr. Biden said. "I'm not promising that we can end it tomorrow, but I promise you that we're going to make strides to end systemic racism, and every branch of the White House and federal government will be part of that."

During his inauguration speech, Joe Biden singled out the scourge of both white supremacy and systemic racism, something none of his Democratic predecessors, including Barack Obama, had ever done. It was a particularly gutsy speech at a time when half of the nation had voted for his opponent and another four years like the term we'd just emerged from.

Of course, what Biden has proposed so far doesn't go nearly far enough, but he is the first person in our lifetime to acknowledge that what we have now is injustice and that it will require more than ad hoc patchwork to repair. He has surrounded himself with a Cabinet that will be dedicated to making justice an animating principle during their White House stint.

Biden is calling for something I've been calling systemic justice. Systemic justice is both attitudinal and programmatic. It requires dramatic paradigm shifts at every level of society, government, and interpersonal relations.

For instance, systemic justice would dictate that First Nations communities have state-of-the-art health care and a first-rate education system populated with the caliber of teachers that would be the envy of parents gaming the system to get their kids in exclusive schools in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Because Native Americans have been screwed over royally, justice demands that their traditionally overlooked communities, with their high poverty rates, alcoholism, and drug addiction, be allocated all the resources they need to reverse the descent into endless despair.

Casino money alone won't do that, especially with so many American partners and investors standing in line to get their piece of the action. Much of their culture was obliterated and their population decimated so that we could occupy the

land and profit from its resources. It was theft and genocide on such a grand level that it provided a blueprint for similar crimes in Central and South America.

Instead of being defensive about it, the implementation of systemic justice would begin with one question: How are we going to help make your communities whole after hundreds of years of barbaric treatment? How can we be a blessing to you instead of a curse?

In making a shift to this kind of thinking, we have to acknowledge that it is going to cost us — all of us. Why? Because we're all the beneficiaries of crimes and misdemeanors committed on a scale that is simply unimaginable. In fact, it could be argued that our entire nation is the remnant of a crime scene of epic proportions.

We all know that racism, greed, religious intolerance, and even science normalized massive theft, war, and destruction of whole peoples. Until we can honestly acknowledge that simple fact, our politics will remain distorted and the resentment against our Native American brethren will only grow because of unresolved guilt. Our conscience knows what's going on even if we prefer to suffer from self-imposed amnesia.

Ah, this sounds like good ol' fashioned guilt-manipulation and socialism, some of you may be thinking. To that, all I can say is "get thee behind me, Satan."

American Christianity grew out of the mindset I described at the beginning of this talk. It has never been a consistent ally of the downtrodden and the dispossessed. We all know by the ubiquity of our segregated churches every Sunday.

This was a conscious choice to disobey Jesus' word and example because granting humanity and fellowship to non-Europeans would have interfered with profits and forced the Beloved Community to actually be the Beloved Community. Institutionally speaking, the Christian church in America has been a loyal ally to those in power, especially those who have promised to protect its interests and champion its causes.

I believe this flight from the sort of systemic justice Jesus modeled is the reason why so much of the American church is both an apartheid wilderness and a feckless, irrelevant force for societal change and reform. The acts of many individual congregations shine in this sea of conformity, of course, but I'm talking

about the general drift of things in a year of COVID and Black Lives Matter protests.

Yes, there are more book groups in church assigning anti-racism literature and meeting over Zoom to discuss these ideas than ever before. This is arguably the best upside of the pandemic. Congregations are becoming more thoughtful and intentional about justice because they know what has been practiced in this country for centuries is not justice.

But there will always be a remnant of those who feel the demonic tug of Christian nationalism despite the clear and declarative admonitions of Jesus to love one's neighbor.

If you look at the world through a prism of American Exceptionalism, then the church is doing everything right when it scrupulously ignores the challenges of diversity, egalitarianism, liberalism, women's equality, LGBTQ rights, showing mercy to immigrants, criminal justice reform, capital punishment, expressing skepticism about war and making peace with the "Other."

Some of my favorite passages in scripture revolve around Jesus modeling some culturally shocking way of relating to those who were considered the have-nots of his time. Jesus was into systemic justice long before there was any consensus on truth or justice at all. In fact, Jesus kept using "the Other" to make his points about the primacy of love and justice even at the expense of his own people.

Look no further than the parable he tells about the Good Samaritan — a foreigner who stopped to help a Jewish victim of a robbery even though his own people, including religious dignitaries, left him by the side of the road to die. The Samaritan spent his own money to see to his injuries and pay for his lodging until he was well.

Or look at Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus enjoyed the back-and-forth with her even though treating a woman who was not a relative with respect usually given to men in a patriarchal society was considered beyond scandalous. His disciples were so shocked by his behavior that they were reduced to silence.

Jesus really rubbed it in about how superior the Samaritans were to his own people when he healed a group of 10 lepers, but only one of them — a Samaritan

— bothered to actually return and thank him for the opportunity to take his place in society again.

“What?” Jesus said feigning incredulity. “Didn’t I heal 10 men? So why is it that only one — this Samaritan — has come back to thank me?”

I’m sure Jesus’ love for the Samaritans got on everyone’s nerves, especially when he started wearing his “SLM” button — Samaritan Lives Matter. It was always a needless provocation in the circles they traveled in since Samaritans were considered barely human because of where they chose to worship.

That’s why it must have been a relief to the disciples when Jesus seemed to revert to cultural form in the way he initially treated the Canaanite woman who came to him to heal her demon-possessed daughter.

The Canaanites were considered even more “untouchable” than Samaritans because they were Gentiles, as well as descendants of the people the Israelites slaughtered to enter the Promised Land 2,000 years earlier.

You’ll recall that the Canaanite woman threw herself at Jesus’ feet to beg for his help in healing her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus, adopting the racial snobbery of the time, ignored her entreaties. The Canaanite mother wouldn’t give up and was determined to wear him down. Finally, she succeeded in getting him to react.

“Listen,” Jesus snapped. “I have come to the children of Israel. It is not cool to give bread for the children to their dogs!” The woman was too desperate for the life of the child to allow what she probably considered a typical blast of ethnocentric chauvinism to throw her off course. He was calling her a dog and her people dogs, but that didn’t matter. She was on a mission to save her child.

“Look,” she said in response to Jesus’ bigoted statement. “Even dogs have the expectation of receiving some of the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Every translation you read about this encounter emphasizes how taken aback Jesus was by the woman’s answer. She not only had the temerity to talk back to him; she was a Canaanite and she was a woman. That’s three very big strikes against her.

Still, he commended the woman's faith and immediately retreated from his previous hard line. He told the woman that her daughter was already healed and that she could return home to tend to her. She probably didn't stick around to kiss his feet or anything since she had gotten everything she wanted. She didn't labor under the illusion that he wanted to have much to do with her in any case.

Now I prefer to think Jesus was imitating the prevailing prejudice of his culture against Canaanites to make a point that even the most despised outsiders were deserving of justice and mercy.

But it could be that he did have cultural hang-ups like everyone else when it came to Canaanites, but he also understood he had a higher duty to work through those ridiculous prejudices. Had he not been crucified shortly after that, perhaps he would have told parables with Canaanite protagonists in them in an attempt to humanize them even more.

We can learn a lot from the biblical narratives about the need for practicing systemic justice. From Genesis to the Book of Revelation, we learn that the powers and principalities always resist reform because it is an affront to their sense of imperial privilege. Those in power, especially representatives and guardians of the status quo, resort to diversions by pointing to individuals or groups who are perceived as obnoxious or more worthy of scrutiny and skepticism than they are.

The system always wants to divert the crowd's revolutionary energy to an individual in isolation — the bigoted uncle, the racist grandma, the sexist co-worker.

No offense, but those people usually don't matter as much as banks and real estate companies that continue to informally practice redlining while also honoring racial covenants that have kept whole communities exclusively white for decades.

Because the mission to enact systemic justice requires a collective response to a collective problem, it is always important to remember you can't approach this alone and expect to achieve anything. You need a community working together intentionally to bring about a targeted good that will eventually redound to everyone's good.

All you have to do to understand the meaning of systemic justice is to remember this example of how one thing is connected to everything else: redlining determines neighborhood composition and its tax base — that, in turn, affects the quality of the schools because one's zip code correlates to one's opportunities.

Where you live also has implications for health care and whether or not you live in a food desert where only snacks and fast food are available, not healthy foods like fruit and vegetables. This also determines the infant mortality rate and the community's susceptibility to infectious diseases like COVID-19.

Where you live and how you look also determine how the cops will treat you should they encounter you in your community in ambivalent circumstances. That's just an irrefutable fact of life that should make everyone deeply ashamed.

“Love thy neighbor” isn't a mandate intended only for individuals toiling alone. It is a blueprint for collective action for communities intent on practicing systemic justice.

And let's be honest. Systemic justice is going to be a hassle sometimes. You'll occasionally end up in proximity to unruly people who don't look or think anything like you do. They have different experiences and sometimes different values, but that's OK.

I'm sure much of what I've said here is going to sound hopelessly pietistic to my non-Christian friends listening in, but that's OK, too. I believe pursuing systemic justice begins outside the political sphere and is later adopted by politicians desperately searching for relevance. All of us, regardless of creed or lack of creed, have a part to play in this great endeavor. The principled pursuit of systemic justice will free us all ultimately.

I believe the pursuit of systemic justice is becoming more evident by the day, even in the political realm where moral courage and clear-eyed appraisal of our various dilemmas are rare.

Thanks for tuning in. Now, if there are any questions...

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