

# Homily for the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 20-21, 2020

Readings: Jeremiah 20: 10-13; Romans 5: 12-15; Matthew 10: 26-33

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It's been four hundred years since the first Africans were sold as slaves in the colonies that would become the United States. For four hundred years, the dominant European, mostly Christian, culture has embraced the myth of superiority that justified building a nation on a slave economy.

When it became illegal to own other human beings, communities turned to mass incarceration of African Americans as the only legal way to use slave labor, creating an even crueler system in many places, since the black lives no longer had monetary value to their abusers.

The necessary myth depicted black men as lazy, brutal, comical, unintelligent, lacking in the same human feelings as the superior whites. Women might be described as part of a white family where they were employed, but only as long as their homes were separated and they knew how to "keep their place." Accepting the myth meant the hardships and injustices inflicted on these men and women and their families—segregation, redlining, inadequate schools, employment discrimination, lynching—simply didn't affect "them" the way it might the white "us." St. Paul tells us, "when death reigns, it reigns over us all, even those who do not sin." No one goes unscathed by our nation's original sin.

The myth killed our ability to see one another as God sees us, precious down to the individual hairs on our heads. It stole goodness from orders of priests and nuns who owned slaves, from Catholic institutions built on their free labor. How can our hearts truly know the God who loves us ever more than the beloved sparrow, when we turn away from the pain of our brothers and sisters in danger?

So dominant did the myth become that it even affected the African American community. The journalist Ida B. Wells didn't become an anti-lynching advocate until her friend was lynched for the crime of owning a successful grocery store that made the white-owned store less profitable.

Frederick Douglas thought lynching victims surely must have done something terrible until the daring investigative reporting of his friend Ida B. Wells revealed the truth. The world looked away until a policeman calmly asphyxiated George Floyd in broad daylight in front of witnesses and cameras. He could only assume it was his right if we had believed enough of the myth to allow it to continue. None of us can look away again.

It's as if today's readings were written for us now, today, this very moment. "Terror on every side! Denounce! Let us denounce him! All those who were my friends are on the watch for any misstep of mine." Jeremiah in his fear and anger self-righteously asks God for vengeance against his enemies. Those who want to maintain the myth would use the honorable role of community protector to divide us. "Haven't the police willingly risked their lives to protect the community? Aren't their lives at risk, too?" Of course, but they are no different from the rest of us. They, too, have believed the myth. This is only about the police because they represent our power, they have our guns. We are not innocent.

The psalmist gives us hope. "For the Lord hears the poor, and his own who are in bonds he spurns not." Matthew gives us hope. "Jesus said to the Twelve: 'Fear no one. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.'" Jesus proclaimed a new story, but still we cling to the comfortable old one. Let's bury the myth by courageously examining our own hearts. Can those of us who are white understand what it means to be black in America? What have we concealed even from ourselves? If you are white, choose to be consciously aware of how the circumstances of your life might be different if you were a person of color. What shaped your deepest responses to race differences? Oppression can only exist when well-intentioned people ignore it. As Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people."

Four hundred years too long—racism needs to end today. "I pray to you, O Lord, for the time of your favor, O God! In your great kindness answer me with your constant help. Answer me, O Lord, for bounteous is your

kindness; in your great mercy turn toward me.” With honesty and courage we can end racism now.