

In God's Image: Bearing Fruit of the Spirit
February 16, 2020 Epiphany 6

Genesis 1: 26-28

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Galatians 5: 1, 13-28

Austin Channing Brown, author of "[I'm Still Here](#): Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness" writes:

"It is the truth that will set us free.

Sadly, too many of us in the church don't live like we believe this. We live as if we are afraid acknowledging the past will tighten the chains of injustice rather than break them. We live as if the ghosts of the past will snatch us if we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. So instead we walk around the valley, talk around the valley. We speak of the valley with cute euphemisms:

"We just have so many divisions in this country."

"If we could just get better at diversity, we'd be so much better off."

"We are experiencing some cultural change."

Our only chance at dismantling racial injustice is being more curious about its origins than we are worried about our comfort. It's not comfortable conversation for any of us. It is risky and messy. It is haunting work to recall the sins of our past. But is this not the work we have been called to anyway? Is this not the work of the Holy Spirit to illuminate truth and inspire transformation?"

An important aspect of Black History month is to illumine truth and inspire transformation, which is also the work of the Holy Spirit. Black History month is not only about honouring and learning the history of black people in our community and country, it is also about understanding the history of racism, its roots and its realities in our present time and context. It is too much to cover in a sermon, and all ministers in the United Church are required to take a full day of racial justice training. Lay people are welcome to take it as well and we could create opportunities to do so here. If you have any questions about it, you can talk to Brian Mitchell-Walker who is one of the facilitators for the training. As people of faith, confronting these issues is about understanding that we are all created in God's image, and as such we are all affected when others are honoured as well as when others suffer.

Our reading from the creation story of Genesis, names how God created humans in God's image. It is not that some of us are created in God's image, every human being is in God's image. God is a part of each person, equally and wholly. There is no one who is superior or inferior in God's creation. While we are not the same, God is in and a part of each of us in the same way. So, as we celebrate creation, we honour and celebrate all humanity in all its diversity and difference. It is important for us learn about each others' differences in order to honour and celebrate them. This includes learning about others' history. Sometimes it is painful or hard to hear. Other times it is beautiful and interesting. Sometimes it is both. As part of Black History Month, I invite into this story of the LaFayette family, who came to Saskatchewan at the turn of the century.

Edward William LaFayette was born in Norfolk Virginia in 1847 and is believed to be the great grandson of the famous slave spy, James Armistead, who took the last name of LaFayette from General LaFayette when he was given his freedom. He worked with General Lafayette during the American revolution. Edward is found in the 1870 census in Iowa and moved to Oskaloosa, Iowa by 1880. He had a son, Lewis who was born on October 10, 1872 in Liberty, Iowa. Lewis came to Canada, following the 'promise of land and greater freedom for his children', with his Wife Lillie, their son, Ernest and his brother Golden. In 1908 he began homesteading in the Fiske area and moved the family to the farming operation he established near Fiske in 1911. Lewis and his brothers, Golden and Jesse organized a harvesting crew of twenty-two men who travelled throughout the district helping others get the crops in the bins. Lewis also served on the Telephone board at Fiske and was a member of the Saskatchewan Co-op Elevators, which later became the Saskatchewan Wheat pool. The school district of Oskaloosa in Saskatchewan was named in 1916 by Lewis in honour of his father's hometown of Oskaloosa Iowa. Lewis and Lillie had ten children who grew up on the farm and three of the grandsons remain farming. As a man of faith, Lewis was considered a person of quiet dignity and high principles. He had two sayings he lived by: "if you can't say anything good about someone, don't say anything at all" and "you can get along with anybody if you don't have much to do with them." Lewis died in 1945 and Lillie in 1932. They are buried in the Fiske cemetery along with his father and 10 other family members.

This story is not very different from many stories we know of our family history. I do wonder what it was like for them as a black family in the early 1900's. It

reminds me of an experience we had at a previous congregation when we were going through the process to become an Affirming Ministry . Brian was part of the committee and recalls when they asked a very active and long term member of the congregation who was black about their experience of welcome in the congregation. She initially talked about how wonderful the congregation was and how welcome she felt, but as she talked, she added that she always sat on the end of a row in case no one wanted to sit beside her. She identified that she would never go to a dinner or other congregational activities unless she was invited because then she knew she would have someone to sit beside. For many who are racialized this kind of thinking is almost unconscious because their reality is so engrained in their experience. We often don't know people's realities until we ask and are open to really listening.

Robin DiAngelo, author of [White Fragility](#) talks about this in a video called "Why 'I'm not a racist' is only half the story". She begins talking about how racism is systemic and systems of oppression are highly adaptive. During the civil rights movement, it adapted to reduce a racist to a simple formula as one who is an individual not a system, who consciously doesn't like someone based on race, and intentionally seeks to be mean to the other person. So, given this definition, for those of us who are white, when we are called racist, we hear that we are being called a bad person, which is really hard to hear, especially when much of our racism is unconscious. This results in us needing to defend our moral character. She continues to talk about her own experience and the experience of people who are racialized and why they don't talk about their experience with white people, the latter part I share with you (at 3:48):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1SIOWmONRI>

So it is important for us to be open to asking the questions and having the uncomfortable conversations to understand the deeper issues of racism and its impact on all of us. I encourage you to watch the full six-and-a-half-minute video.

The LaFayette family found freedom and were free to live and love in their lives. In the Galatians passage Paul talks about freedom and wanting the early church to be free from the law, not enslaved by it. In their new-found faith, they are freed by Christ from being enslaved to the law. As they live in Christ, and live faithfully the law is fulfilled. They are free to be in relationship with a God who loves and to live out that love. Paul talks about that living as one that is engaged in goodness and compassion which leads to the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the

Spirit are different from the gifts of the Spirit which differ from person to person, the fruit of the Spirit are common to all. Together they make a Christ-like identity and character in people of faith. Knowing that we are loved, blessed and forgiven by God, we are moved by the Spirit to live out these characteristics in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Paul is saying if we live by these qualities, we fulfill the law.

This week we have heard much about following the rule of law, as we experience solidarity protests across the nation in support of the Wet'suwet'en nation defending their land. There is much conversation, question, and opinion about what needs to be or could be done. There are deep issues and we can examine, what is underlying it all – how much is racism, how much is economic issues, how much is land issues, how much is power or abuse of power, or powerlessness. It is complicated. I hope as we move through this as a country that we do not get stuck in following the letter of the law in this case, as that I think is what Paul is warning against in Galatians. I wonder what it would look like in this present struggle if we lived by the fruit of the Spirit to address the situation. As you hear about this situation in the news, I invite you to bring to mind the fruit of the Spirit as you listen: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. How might this reframe the situation if we all lived out these characteristics?

This fruit is generated by love and incorporated into our lives when we seek to live in Christ. It is what being created in the image of God looks like. It is about solidarity with our fellow human beings, in love and freedom. Austin Channing Brown in *I'm Still Here*, shares what this freedom is for her:

“Fortunately, Jesus doesn't need all white people to get onboard before justice and reconciliation can be achieved. For me, this is freedom. Freedom to tell the truth. Freedom to create. Freedom to teach and write without burdening myself with the expectation that I can change anyone. It has also shifted my focus. Rather than making white people's reactions the linchpin that holds racial justice together, I am free to link arms with those who are already being transformed. Because at no point in America's history did all white people come together to correct racial injustice. At no point did all white people decide chattel slavery should end. At no point did all white people decide we should listen to the freedom fighters, end segregation, and enact the right of Black Americans to vote. At no point

have all white people gotten together and agreed to the equitable treatment of Black people. And yet, there has been change, over time, over generations, over history.”

May we be part of that change, being open to learning about racism, it's history and being open to the uncomfortable conversations so we can move forward. May we truly live and work in ways that embrace the reality that we are all made in God's image, in such amazing and wonderful variety. May the fruit of the Spirit be revealed in and through us as we seek to be faithful in our day to day lives.