



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Bending The Arc Toward Justice

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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In a sermon in 1853, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, an abolitionist preacher said this; "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice." These words inspired Martin Luther King's paraphrase of the good preacher and brought this hopeful observation to our modern minds. "The arc of history is long but it bends toward justice."

As abolitionist and civil rights prophets, neither of these men was content to sit and wait for the arc to bend on its own. They were convinced that people could have something to do with its trajectory. I think that they got that idea from Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Our short reading today from 1 Corinthians uses the metaphor of a foot race – one in which we are supposed to strive to reach a goal and win a prize. I don't believe that the prize Paul was talking about was a condo in heaven, but rather the world that can be, if we all live as new creations "in Christ." I don't particularly like using the idea of a race, because a redeemed world isn't about one person winning; it's about everyone winning.

This little reading is sandwiched in between two stories of lepers seeking healing. The first thing that jumped out for me was the great difference between these two men's circumstance. Naaman had a disease, which was no doubt the cause of considerable suffering. But he was a powerful, public figure, a general in the army. When he was cured by bathing in the Jordan River seven times, the only thing that changed in his life was his skin condition and he learned that Israel had a smokin' prophet and a powerful God. The leper in the Gospel story however, had a very different experience. He certainly wanted Jesus to heal his condition, but what he asked for – to be made clean – was a change in his social condition. His disease made him a social outcast in Israel. His status as "unclean" was what truly ailed him. It wasn't necessarily the contagion but the ritual stigma, very much like the plight of AIDS patients not that long ago. Do you remember how news-worthy it was when Princess Diana sat with an AIDS patient and held his hand? By touching him, she challenged a pervasive fear. Like the lepers of Jesus' day, people with AIDS were isolated and bereft of human contact. The People's Princess showed compassion and courage and helped to lift the tragic isolation in which so many had died. In touching the leper who came to him, Jesus overcame the disease and the stigma and the man was restored to life in the community. He was returned to equal status under the law because Jesus was unafraid and saw him as one deserving, not only healing, but respect, love and honor.

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It's important to notice that the Gospel leper's social condition was not the same as Naaman's and to understand that social stigma is a cultural construct. Every culture creates its own norms and its own outcasts which are usually identified by the fearful parts of human nature. Time and time again, the Apostle Paul pointed out that human nature is made new when one becomes a Christian. We are to leave behind fearful ways of seeing each other and in doing so influence the arc of the moral universe toward justice for those who have not had it.

Peter and I went to see the movie *Red Tails* while we were in CA. Just for the record, it's a dreadful movie, hampered by an uninspired screenplay and wooden performances and that really made me mad because the story of Tuskegee Airmen is such a marvelous and noble story. The movie begins with a quote from some US military study that concluded, "Blacks are mentally inferior and by nature subservient, and thus are unfit for combat." The experiment to train black aviators to be fighter pilots was terrifying to many. There was a lot invested in their failure. They were given old equipment, little support and not assigned to the work for which they had been trained. But when they finally got their chance, the black pilots in their red tailed planes became the best bomber escorts ever – they never lost a plane. Their excellence overcame culturally embedded ignorance and prejudice. But it would still be another 25 years before hard fought legislation would recognize Black American's rights and equality. We as a country are not yet free of racial prejudice; we have not learned to heed the angel's instruction to "fear not" nor have we understood that to follow Jesus is to overcome that part of our human nature that starts with fear of those we consider to be threatening or different or unclean by some standard.

Any time that social conventions are challenged, it is hard, there no use pretending otherwise. Civil rights, women's rights, and now gay rights. None of it has been easy because change generally activates the fear response in people. We still have one foot in the cave with our ancestors, ready lash out when something feels unusual or scary. The Episcopal Church is a microcosm of the larger society and we have had lots of pains as things have changed. Historically, we were a male-only hierarchy; we were the church of the slave owners, and we expected people to stay in their closets. We used the language of the King James Bible. Everything was clear, everything was in its right place, things that we didn't want to see, we didn't have to look at and then things began to change. The lepers just wouldn't stay in their colonies any more, and lots of old assumptions have been challenged. Why shouldn't women be able to own property and control their own finances and the size of their families? Why shouldn't the Negroes be able to be fighter pilots and to vote? Why shouldn't Negroes and women be lawyers and doctors and priests? It takes a long time for stereotypes to be undone but that arc of the moral universe keeps nudging us to that end.

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What usually undoes ignorance and resistance is experience. The Cosby Show and the Huxtable family taught America that Black families were just like every other family. I had a friend who was a retired auto executive who became a Middle School teacher in Indiana. He was an accomplished pianist. He was also black. One day in the late 80s, Barry was playing something classical when a delivery man rang the door bell. Barry let him in with his packages and the guy kept looking at my friend and at their lovely home and saw the shiny black grand piano sitting there, now silent and before he could catch himself, he said "this is just like the Cosby Show!" And then we let Oprah into our living rooms for decades, we read the books she recommends, when she loses weight, we try her diet. And then we put a black man in the White House. The next generation will not know that it wasn't always like this. They will not know that Black people were considered lepers, too dirty to drink out of the same fountain or to use the same bathroom. They will think that we had lost our minds and won't that be wonderful!

And then JC Penney hired Ellen DeGeneres to be the face of their oh-so all-American company. And when the firestorm came, they stood by their choice, lifting up the qualities that they and so many people see in her. The CEO of JC Penney said that they chose her because "she is honest, she's funny and she has integrity and people really trust her." The fact that she is married to another woman did not enter into their selection process. He said that he was surprised that there was a reaction because he assumed that America had moved beyond such thinking. He must not get out much! But I love that he thought that. Maybe the arc just bent a little more and the end of the race is a little closer.

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