

11 Pentecost 2020

Oh, how good and pleasant it is, \*  
when brethren live together in unity!

One place that I would very much like to visit someday is the Anglican cathedral in Coventry, England: a late-Gothic masterpiece finished in the early 1400s. From what I hear, it is one of the most impressive church buildings you could ever visit — although it has no roof, and only three of its four walls are still standing.

On November 14, 1940, 515 heavy bombers of the German Luftwaffe attacked the city of Coventry with high explosive and incendiary bombs. The saturation bombing created a firestorm that burned out the center of the city, **including the cathedral**. More than 4,300 homes were destroyed that night, and about two-thirds of the buildings in the city were damaged. The devastation was so widespread that the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels began using the word “coventry” as a verb: to coventry a city was to destroy it utterly from the air.

After the war, a new cathedral was built, of strikingly modern architecture. It was dedicated in 1962. It was not built on the site of the old cathedral, but rather right next to it. The remaining stone walls — the Gothic stone filigree

empty of the stained glass that melted during the firestorm — were allowed to remain.

Outdoors — for there is no roof, still, over that section of the building — there is an altar, located in what used to be a transept of the old church. Atop the altar is a charred wooden cross. It's a replica of a cross a construction worker built out of two blackened roof-beams he found in the rubble after the bombing. Engraved on the wall behind that altar are two words, in elegant gold lettering: "Father forgive." That has to be soul-stirring.

The church authorities could have reconstructed the old cathedral, in all its Gothic glory. It would have taken a long time, but it could have been done.

There are still expert stone carvers in the world who practice that medieval trade. Or, they could have bulldozed the sad ruin and constructed something new in its place.

What they decided to do, instead, was genius. They preserved the roofless ruin as a witness to peace, even as they constructed a new cathedral of radical 20th-century design.

The message was clear. We will not forget, but we will not let the painful memory hold us back.

Anyone who's been to that place will tell you that the combination of the two — the new cathedral rising out of the ruins of the old — is unforgettable.

There are stunning works of modern art inside the new cathedral, but it's the mute witness of the old — the charred wooden cross and the words "Father forgive" — that convey the true power of the place.

In a very real sense, it's the scars that speak.

When I read about this, it reminded me of the Edmund-Pettis bridge where three times protest marchers tried to cross on their walk from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.

The bridge is named after a former Confederate brigadier general, U.S. senator, and leader of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan. There has been a strong push over recent years to rename the bridge after Congressman John Lewis. I was somewhat surprised that some of the local black leaders and activists have actually been opposed to this, because they feel that leaving the name unchanged, serves as a constant reminder of what happened so many years ago. Another scar, so to speak, in the fight for justice.

In our reading from Genesis this morning, there is little doubt of the scars that Joseph must have had from his ordeals; from being thrown in a pit by his own brothers, being sold as a slave to the Ishmaelites and taken to Egypt; then as a

servant to Potiphar who he served faithfully until he was unjustly prisoned after being falsely accused of rape by Potiphar's wife. Despite these mental and Physical scars, Joseph maintained his faith in God and we hear over and over again that God blessed Joseph. And despite these scars inflicted by his family, we read this morning how much he truly loved his brothers. How many of us would have reacted the way that Joseph did? Or does part of us side with the kid who was bullied in high school, stuffed in lockers or beat up on the playground and then cheer when he or she becomes wildly successful later in life? Can we blame them for feeling somewhat justified by lording their success over those who gave him or her the scars? Did Joseph secretly feel the same way? In the previous chapters, when his 10 brothers initially come to Egypt to buy grain, Joseph immediately recognizes them, but says nothing. In fact, he accuses them of being spies and throws them in prison. Then a few days later, he keeps Simeon in prison and send the rest back to get Benjamin and bring him to Egypt. His brothers were well aware of what this would do to their father Jacob. Once Joseph got to see Benjamin, he still did not reveal who he was. Instead, when the 11 brothers took grain back to their father, Joseph had put a silver chalice in Benjamin's bag. Before they had gone very far, Joseph sent his guards to arrest them. Finding the silver chalice in Benjamin's sack, Joseph said he would allow the other ten to go home but

Benjamin had to stay behind for stealing the chalice. Knowing that any harm to Benjamin would be the death of their father Jacob, they begged that Joseph not do this. After Judah offers to take Benjamin's place as ransom, Joseph finally reveals who he is. However you might interpret Joseph's actions and treatment of his brothers, you have to admit that he put them through the wringer. They were scared to death of what this powerful leader of Egypt might do to them, to Benjamin, and having to go back and face their father. I think that this would make as great a movie as "Revenge of the Nerds".

Well, these types of scenarios also play out today. Some of us have been attending the program called "Sacred Ground" which is taking place on the four Thursday evenings in August. We are just getting a taste of the longer version which consists of 10 sessions. This past Thursday we heard a story about a New York Times reporter who was writing an article for the Times and went to interview an important person for her story. The reporter was Black. When the person she was to interview showed up, she stood up to approach. He told her that he did not have time to see her as he was expecting a very important person from the Times to interview him. She explained that she was the reporter. He didn't believe her. She assured him that she was and that she was here to interview him for her story. He asked for identification,

and she showed him, but he still didn't believe her. Finally, he told her to leave so she did. After writing the article, she sent him a copy with a note telling him that it was too bad he was not included in the story.

I suppose that she could have just let it go, but since he was obviously suffering from a bit of racial prejudice, there was some justice in letting him know what he had missed out on.

There is really no good excuse for those that intentionally scar other people. Many times, this is done out of carelessness and sometimes out of ignorance.

Scars leave a mark whether it be on a body or to one's heart. Either way, there is usually a memory attached and when it happens often enough, the scar can be pretty deep and the memories cumulative. It is not surprising when PTSD sets in and the feelings associated with the trauma are pushed as deep as possible.

This happens with classes of people also. Repeated trauma over many years. Every one of us can tell a story of someone traumatized by a church or people within the church. This is normally fairly obvious as folks leave and never come back. A careless comment made to a friend can cause a hurt that simmers for a long time. Then there are times that we can only shake our heads with disbelief.

I read last week that a Virginia mayor is under pressure to resign after a post he made on his Facebook page, saying that Joe Biden had “just announced Aunt Jemima” as his running mate. **Believe it or not**, some people found this insensitive. In his defense, if that is even possible, he posted this before Joe Biden had announced Kamala Harris as his running mate. Evidently, this was just a generalized comment as it was well known that a woman of color would probably be chosen. The mayor’s intention was very clear and he didn’t care who he hurt.

We read 4 different articles for last weeks session of Sacred Ground. One of those articles was entitled: “KEY DISTINCTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING RACE, RACIALIZATION, & RACISM by Katrina Browne and James DeWolf Perry.

They discuss different realities of understanding racism and ways that they can cause trauma. A few of the areas they include are:

***INTENTIONAL RACISM*** which is outright bigotry and prejudice. There is no gray area here and most folks are very upfront about it. The KKK would be in this group.

Next is **IMPLICIT RACIAL BIAS**: Many in this category are not trying to be racist but depending on where they grew up or the schools that they may have attended or even the people they worked with, can by conditioning, hold

unconscious biases and stereotypes. The article states that “It is hard to completely get rid of

unconscious or implicit bias, but one can catch oneself and interrupt it, or devise institutional protocols to guard against it”.

**MICROAGGRESSIONS** is an interesting area and was new to me. It includes things that we do either intentionally or unintendedly that gives a derogatory or negative insult toward someone of color or serves to invalidate the person.

I will never forget a day in high school when I was talking to a fellow choir member and I used the term “Oh Boy” which I often did when I was upset or surprised by something. His immediate reaction was, “Who are you calling boy”. I was quite taken aback and a little scared by his reaction.

I tried to say that I didn’t mean anything by it but I now know that intent did not matter. That was a racially charged statement even if I didn’t mean it as such and in his way, he called me on it.

Fr Ron Byrd gave an example where he says that he cannot count the times that someone has come up to him and told him that him how well-spoken he is. He said that since he is an Episcopal priest and has 4 degrees, he should be. Whether they mean any harm or not be their comments, intent is not the



issue. If one walks into a room and the only open seat is next to a person of color and the person elects to stand, a message is sent.

**INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL RACISM:** occurs when the deck is stacked so to speak against people of color due institutional policies and practices, sometimes because no one thought things through very well before the policies were implemented.

The last one that I want to mention is WHITE PRIVILEGE and I have talked about this before. I cannot tell you how much anger and denial **that this one** brings out. But the bottom line is that white people have unearned privileges on top of those that they have earned just because we are white. I would encourage you to read more about this if you do not believe it exists. I will say that I can't tell you how many neighborhoods I used to walk through at 4:30 in the morning when I lived in Lansing and no one bothered me and the police never stopped me. I feel pretty confident that if a black man was walking around neighborhoods at 4:30 in the morning, things would not have been the same. There are many other examples that I can give.

If you get the chance to read this article, I recommend it. You can find it on the Diocesan website under Sacred Ground.

Joseph had emotional, physical, and mental scars given to him by others, most were intentional and some by people he loved. We simply cannot do this, especially intentionally. But we have to educate ourselves and really listen to what others are trying to tell us. As Christians we must do our very best to love as Jesus loves, and although it is not popular, to place their needs above our own. I wish it was easier but we can take solace in that we are never alone. If we lead with love, we will never go wrong.

AMEN