

5th Sunday in Lent 2021

'Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you'.

The National Association of REALTORS® defines stigmatized property as: "a property that has been psychologically impacted by an event which occurred, or was suspected to have occurred, on the property, such event being one that has no physical impact of any kind."

I realize that when you buy a house, you never really know what may have happened inside the house itself. However, I never knew that 'stigmatized property' was an actual thing. Take for example an ad that I found on Realtor.com: Property Overview. - 371 Ne Granduer Ave, Port Saint Lucie, FL 34983 is a single-family home built in 2017. It has approximately 1,322 square feet, 3 beds and 2 baths with a lot size of 0.23 acres. Nearby schools include Northport K-8 School, Southern Oaks Middle School and Fort Pierce Central High School.

This property was last sold for \$175,000 in 2017 and currently has an estimated value of \$213,300. Sounds like a great home at a reasonable price, especially in Florida. You may be asking yourself, "What could possibly happen in a 4-year-old house?" Well, this did:

Tyler Hadley was an out-of-control teenage boy who started using drugs and eventually became violent from drug usage. He got fed up with his parents' attempts to discipline him and murdered them both with a hammer. He locked the bodies in his parents' bedroom and then, that very night, threw a party at the home. He invited about 200 of his teenage friends.

Prior to this, he told many of his friends of his desire to murder his parents. At the party, he bragged about achieving it. At first, they did not believe him until they broke open the master bedroom door to find the bodies. Then, they called the police.

How might it feel to find out you were now sleeping in that master bedroom?

Ok, enough about stigmatized properties. What about people who are stigmatized?

According to a 2013 article in Psychology Today: "Mental health stigma can be divided into two distinct types: **social stigma** is characterized by prejudicial attitudes and

discriminating behaviour directed towards individuals with mental health problems as a result of the psychiatric label they have been given. In contrast, **perceived stigma or self-stigma** is the internalizing by the mental health sufferer of their perceptions of discrimination (Link, Cullen, Struening & Shrout, 1989), and perceived stigma can significantly affect feelings of shame and lead to poorer treatment outcomes (Perlick, Rosenheck, Clarkin, Sirey et al., 2001)."

Being stigmatized by a mental health diagnosis, either by society or by oneself, is not new. I am sure, that at one point or another, we have been guilty of this.

Prejudice and discrimination towards those with a mental health diagnosis is common and has been around for centuries. Addiction, depression, anxiety, and PTSD have common origins of prejudice in society. The lack of available treatment has added to the problem. Even though better understood today, the mental health stigma remains.

Racism in our country goes back over 400 years. The past few years have only increased this stigmatization by society. Not just for our black brothers and sisters but also for Indigenous peoples. Although not new, we have been recently reminded of inherent prejudice involving our Asian siblings with the massage parlour murders that happened this past week. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, issued a statement about the killings.

"Wherever and whenever hatred or bigotry rises up and is directed at any child of God, we who follow Jesus of Nazareth and therefore stand for love, must act," he said. "We must stand up, speak up and show up. Today we do so with and for our Asian American and Pacific Islander brothers, sisters and siblings."

New York Bishop Suffragan Allen K. Shin, in a March 18 statement, sent to his diocese; "The pandemic has exposed the white supremacy and racism that have "infected the soul of America for centuries. It has played out in the racial inequalities with a devastating effect in the lives of the people of color, in the marginalized and underprivileged communities in terms of the COVID infections and deaths, of the economic hardship and even of the vaccine rollouts."

The stigma of Prejudice basically means a preconceived belief about someone or something before we even know them.

Types of prejudice include people of a Racial/Ethnic Minority; Immigrants and Refugees, Age; Gender; Sexual orientation, Classism, and Disabilities.

Every single one of these are present in society today. And many of us have been guilty of harbouring some extent of prejudice at one time or another.

For us as Christians, the hope is that we will recognize it within ourselves **and change**. The bottom line is that prejudice is a sin. I cannot say that strongly enough, **Prejudice is a sin**. Stigmatizing people is treating them unjustly and with less dignity than they deserve as a child of God. It violates our Baptismal Covenant to 'strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being'.

We believe that sin causes God pain and sorrow. Once sin has been identified, it should cause us pain and elicit sorrow also.

Psalm 51 is commonly read on the first day of Lent and makes sense that it is.

We hear it again today as we get ready to enter Holy week. Sin disrupts our relationship with God and each other.

This psalm is a reading of the private agony of a person in deep distress. A lament, or penitential psalm, these verses are the prayer of someone *profoundly* aware of the enormity of his sin. Traditionally, we believe this to be written by King David. He prays purposefully. He wants God to have mercy on him, to blot out, to wash, to cleanse, to purge, to create in him a clean heart, to deliver him, to restore him, to open his lips that he might praise God. Negatively, he asks God not to cast him away or to take his spirit from him. He admits that his sin was against God. These are the words of a man who knows what he had, what he lost, whom he offended, and **what now must be done**. The inscription, written after the composition of the psalm, links this text to David's affair with Bathsheba, an act fiercely condemned by the prophet Nathan. Seems likely, but David does not really tell us the source of his sin. But we have David's acknowledgment that he has sinned and that he has hurt God. He knows that he deserves God's judgment but asks to be cleansed and restored. However, if we stop at verse 12, we lose David's commitment to change and his acts of reparation.

David's plan for repentance begins with vs 13: Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,

O God of my salvation,

and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

15 O Lord, open my lips,

and my mouth will declare your praise.”

I must say that, praying this psalm is very personal and moving for me.

Pleading with God to not cast me away from her presence, and to not have his holy spirit taken away from me, is an urgent plea for unmerited grace. Knowing that I will sin **again** and pray this psalm **again** is a painful reality. But sin is a reality that we all face.

In an interview that appeared in *The Door* (May-June 2000, 11), Philip Yancey said, “The only essential difference that I can tell between Christians and non-Christians is not necessarily morality, it’s that Christians have acknowledged that we’re sinners and we can’t make it on our own. We’re failures and will continue to fail. And the church in the year 3000 will be just as full of problems as the church in the year 2000, as it was in the year 1000. No other institutions that I know of recognize that. Governments don’t, a lot of other religions don’t. But that’s the baseline of Christianity. If we deny that, and try to put on a good face, then we fall into the trap of the original Pharisees of just trying to make ourselves look good and even make God look good. But God didn’t seem all that concerned with it. He became sin for us, as Paul said.” (end quote).

We are sinners. That is a fact. We approach God humbly asking forgiveness and we repent. **God forgives**. In David’s case, there are bad consequences of his sin that are not removed, but the minute David confesses his sin, Nathan announces God’s forgiveness. David is not even asked to do any acts of penance. He confesses his sin to God, and he is forgiven immediately.

Because of the time in which the Psalm was written, we see David making reparations with God but not with others that he hurt. Repairing the relationship with Uriah was not possible. He had been killed by David’s order. However, there were reparations needed with Bathsheba and even the prophet Nathan that as far as we know did not happen.

God may not require reparations to forgive us, but they are important for those that we

hurt. We hear this term most recently in terms of slavery and colonization. According to Wikipedia, "Reparations for slavery is the application of the concept of reparations to victims of slavery and/or their descendants. There are concepts for reparations in legal philosophy and reparations in transitional justice. Throughout history reparations for slavery have been both given by legal ruling in court and/or given voluntarily by individuals and institutions. Reparations can take numerous forms, including individual monetary payments, settlements, scholarships, waiving of fees, and systemic initiatives to offset injustices, land-based compensation related to independence, apologies and acknowledgements of the injustices, token measures, such as naming a building after someone, or the removal of monuments and renaming of streets that honour slave owners and defenders of slavery". (End quote)

When we consider the sin of prejudice and stigmatization, forgiveness and reparations will take active planning and effort. Waiting and hoping that "it will go away" has not, will not, and **should** not work. It is a matter of justice. Bill HR 40 was first introduced to Congress in 1989. Historically it has been referred to as the "Reparations Study Bill." HR 40 states that'

"Its purpose is to establish a commission to examine the institution of slavery, subsequently de jure and de facto racial and economic discrimination against African-Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African-Americans, to make recommendations to the Congress on appropriate remedies, and for other purposes".

For over 30 years, Congress has been unable to pass this bill to **just study the issue**.

To think that all Christians believe prejudice or stigmatization to be a sin would be foolishness on my part. To think that all Christians believe that reparations are due to anyone is ludicrous. All I can do is to tell you what I believe and will profess. Yet in Luke Ch 19 we read about reparations; "8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Zacchaeus' proposed reparations reveal that his repentance and faith are genuine.

We, as Christians, realize that the season of Lent leads us to Holy Week and the Resurrection. It is a time of deep reflection, personal growth, and repairing our relationship with God. When we acknowledge our sinfulness, and seek forgiveness, we

are forgiven. We believe that. True repentance means turning back to God and that involves work on our part. David makes that clear.

I would like to end with a reflection by The Rt. Rev. Michael Hunn, the Bishop of the Diocese of the Rio Grande.

“For those who have been practicing the Christian faith for years or decades, the Lenten seasons can kind of blend together. Perhaps for years at a time, Lent has meant the same spiritual discipline like giving up chocolate or red wine or coffee. Or maybe after having “given things up” for a few years, we switched to “taking on new disciplines” for a while and tried new prayer practices, book groups, or even spiritual direction. (If you haven’t tried those, I can highly recommend them all!)

One risk of Lent for those who practice it over a lifetime is that it can become just a personal spiritual exercise that we experience for 40 days and then go back to normal until next year.

Whether this approaching Holy Week is a time for you to come out of your Lenten fasting or whether it is a time when your focus is on how to emerge from the Covid wilderness, let the 58th chapter of Isaiah be a powerful reminder.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that the religious devotion and spiritual practice that God desires for us is not merely for our self-improvement. Neither is it to work off some debt in our relationship with God. The fasting and self-denial which God desires must be connected with the needs of our neighbors.

Fasting isn’t merely about giving up a meal – it is about changing the way the world works, so that all may eat, and so that all people have what is necessary to love life and to live abundantly. Fasting is about becoming aware of the privilege in our lives. It is about consciously setting that privilege aside or making room for the needs of others instead of focusing on ourselves.

Isaiah reminds us that we, who call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, are called to engage the unjust systems of this world and to bring about the sort of loving neighborliness that Jesus died and rose again to bring into this world.

This Easter, let us not just celebrate the end of the fasting. Let us commit to work for those in need, the vulnerable, the hungry, those who have lost their jobs because of COVID-19, the children who have fallen behind in their schoolwork.

Out of love for our neighbor, and in acknowledgment of God's love for us, let us celebrate by knitting together that beloved community in which every life is treasured, and every mouth is fed; a world where justice rolls down like a raging river and every heart is loved. And let that be what it means for us to be church." End quote.

Michael B. Hunn is the Bishop of the Diocese of the Rio Grande. A writer, preacher and public speaker, filmmaker, and host of the podcast The Simply Christian Life, his work is on Facebook, YouTube and at dioceserg.org. He lives with his family in a permaculture orchard outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Amen!