

2022 02 13 – Created Black

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 (The Inclusive Bible)

Today we are celebrating Black History Month and so I would like to begin my reflection with the words of a black man. Rev. Demanya Kofi Akoussah is the minister of Saint-Marc United Church, a Francophone congregation in Ottawa, Ontario. You will find his picture, and a link to his words, in today's bulletin.

Before coming to Canada to serve in The United Church, Rev. Akoussah was the director of Human Resources of his denomination. These are his words:

I remember one time when I took the train with some fellow Black students to go to class at the University of Geneva [in Switzerland]. Everyone had found a seat except for one brother from Gambia. Fortunately, a seat beside a young White woman was unoccupied. But when our colleague sat down beside her, she scowled and said, "If it's going to be like that, I would rather stand!" My colleague wanted to get up and leave the seat free, but I said to him, "No, don't even think of it. Stay right where you are! If she wants to stand, that's her business!" Then the young woman did indeed stand up and remained standing until she reached her destination.

How is it possible to hate a human being in that way? I thought perhaps if I were to go somewhere else, I would find more tolerance. To my great surprise, however, I experienced the same thing in Canada. I had once boarded a bus in Ottawa where no seats were available. I remember being very tired and having trouble standing up. But then an empty seat became

available beside a White woman. As soon as she saw me head toward the seat, the expression on her face changed - exactly as had happened in Geneva. In just the time it took me to sit down, you would have thought that she had been stung by a bee. She quickly stood up and held on to a support until she reached her destination.

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The two white women, one in Europe, the other in North America, have the exact same racist reaction when a black man sits beside them on a bus. Are we to conclude that these women are bad people? Do they represent a small minority in the white population? Sadly no. These women, like all the rest of us who have been raised in Europe or North America, have grown up in a racist society. We have been nurtured in a culture that has taught us that black people are to be feared, that they are less intelligent, less capable, more violent and that they will hurt us. All of these deeply imbedded stereotypes are, of course, incorrect.

Rev. Akoussah also wrote:

In the African community where I grew up, even today, hospitality and compassion for the stranger are part of the most basic and automatic rules for social behaviour. Yet my travels around the world have led me to understand the sad reality that under other skies—including among the White race in both secular and ecclesial [or church] contexts—these values are inverted. The seed of hatred sown in hearts and minds against those who are Black have sprouted deep roots that are difficult to eradicate, and they have regrettably led to systemic hate practised against

Black people, albeit unconsciously.

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He's right... our hate, our fear, is so deeply imbedded that we don't even realize when we are acting on it. The first step to eliminating racism is becoming conscious of our own distorted world views.

In today's reading from the Book of Genesis we heard a small excerpt of the saga of Joseph and his brothers. When Joseph was young, his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. Amazingly, Joseph does very well for himself. When famine hits Egypt and the surrounding area, Joseph is given the task of distributing the enormous amounts of food that have been stored away for this purpose. His brothers eventually arrive to get food for their families and, when Joseph sees them, he decides it is time to let them know that their long-lost brother is alive.

We might ask ourselves, "How was it that Joseph's brothers did not recognize their younger sibling?" He was a member of their family! They all shared the same father. But Joseph no longer dressed like they did. He was, no doubt, in the uniform of an Egyptian governor, not a nomadic shepherd. He was probably speaking a different language or, at least, had a different accent. Living in the city, inside most of the day, Joseph's skin colour may even have lightened. It wasn't until Joseph's brothers moved closer and actually looked at him, that they recognized him as a member of their family.

Like Joseph's brothers we also let skin colour, clothing, language and other differences in culture blind us to the reality that we are all part of one family, God's family. Earlier in the service we sang a hymn written by Daniel Charles Damon and this was the second verse:

We are your image, formed in community;

sisters and brothers of Adam and Eve.

You gave us colour, custom and history;

Teach us to honour what others receive.

(MV #44 Shadow and Substance)

Often, during Black History Month, we raise up the stories of African-American activists like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman and so many more. I have, in previous years, shared the history of racism in Canada and told stories from Saskatchewan, Ontario and Nova Scotia. But this year a member of our congregation sent me a link to an article in the "Yes" magazine. The article is called *6 Tips for White People Who Want to Celebrate Black History*. Sounds appropriate, doesn't it! The author wrote:

Black history is more than just the named activists, agitators, and change makers—it encompasses the full scope of Black humanity, and our celebration of Black history needs to be inclusive of the full range of Black humanity. Celebrate not just the overcoming of adversity, but celebrate our joys, our passion, and our magic.

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/democracy/2018/02/08/6-tips-for-white-people-who-want-to-celebrate-black-history>

The article goes on to suggest ways that we can experience the joys, the passion and the magic of the black members of our human family. If we want to get past the systemic racism in which we were raised, and not only see, but actually celebrate, our black brothers and sisters then we need to spend time:

1. Watching movies where black people tell their own stories.
2. Reading books authored by black writers.
3. Listening to music written by black composers
4. Going to or even holding seminars about racism and black history and
5. Talking to our friends and families about we have learned.

And now, I'm going to give the last words to Rev. Akoussah. Like, Joseph, he does not hold a grudge against those who would place him on the margins of society and ignore his rightful place within the human family. He writes:

What more can I say? I am Black and proud of it! While I do not beg for brotherly love, I practise it towards all. If someone offers it to me, I give thanks. If someone detests me because of the colour of my skin, I really don't care. Rather, I pray for that person to be cured of their ignorance, and I move forward freely with those who accept me. All I know is that God the Creator has no colour and has never been seen by anyone. God is LOVE. Anyone who loves is of God! So let us imitate Christ who, in his love, remains impartial.

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May it be so. Amen.