



## When the System Does My Hate for Me

Rev. David Williamson

I saw a little cartoon in the Cherokee Scout recently. This is the small newspaper for Cherokee County, NC where I love to spend time “practicing being unnecessary.”

The cartoon was a depiction of Uncle Sam (an older white guy representing the government of the United States) who is writing on a chalkboard these words:

“Hate is wrong. Period.”

I imagine getting both “amens!” and puzzled “no-duh!” looks from my congregation if I preach that message.

At one and the same time I believe they would affirm that individual acts of hatred are wrong and that this is obvious.

I think one of the reasons it is easier for white people to openly condemn racism at the moment is because the crimes against George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery are so obviously the result of individuals who consciously hate black people and intentionally seek to do them harm. This is racism occurring at the personal and interpersonal levels.

This is wrong. Period.

This is obvious. To most.

What is less obvious for me as a white person is when hate manifests itself in institutions and in the culture - what people are calling “systems.”

Racism manifests itself as hatred at institutional and cultural levels, and is just as “wrong. Period.” there as it is at the personal and interpersonal levels.

The more challenging work for me as a white person is to actually recognize (literally see) the way racism functions at institutional and cultural levels.

Dr. Valerie Batts, co-founder of VISIONS, Inc, who pioneered this language of oppression at four levels, says: “There is an element of racism that is like a germ that we catch. AND that we can be carriers of that germ without realizing it - similar to what we are learning these days about how so many people can be asymptomatic carriers of the coronavirus without knowing it.” We can be “super-spreaders” of the coronavirus without knowing it. And, Dr. Batts says, “We can be super-spreaders of the germ of racism without even knowing it.”

In other words, it’s possible for me to be spreading hate unconsciously.

I do not wish to attack, shame or blame myself or other well-meaning white people for this. That usually does not help.

What helps me is learning about the reality of racism that manifests itself at the institutional and cultural levels and then getting the support and strategy I need to make changes at those levels.

[In my Christian tradition, this is the work of “resisting evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves” as stated in our baptism vows. And I do trust that God gives me that power to do this work.]

There is a powerful and haunting story that Kentucky farmer and author Wendell Berry tells in his book, “The Hidden Wound” about recognizing his own family’s spread of institutionalized hatred.

Berry said his great-grandfather owned a few slaves, “but he treated them well.” So, when one of his slaves “became too defiant and rebellious to do anything with,” his great grandfather was faced with a choice. He could use violence personally toward his slave as a way of trying to beat him back into submission (interpersonal level hatred), or he could invoke the institutional violence of slavery by selling the slave to someone more able or willing than himself to enact the necessary cruelty.

Berry writes that his great grandfather was a rather mild and gentle man by nature, and so he was unwilling to commit personal violence against his slave. Instead he accepted the institutional violence as a sort of refuge. He sold his “rebellious slave” to another man who would beat him.

This is one example of “when the system does our hate for us.”

Of course, today the system of slavery is outlawed. And as a result of the courageous work of those during the civil rights era, the Jim Crow segregation laws are also outlawed.

But has the germ of racism been outlawed? Dr. Batts says, “You can’t outlaw a germ!”

There is on-going work to do to recognize the way that systems are very much still doing our hatred (our racism) for us. And as human beings who bear the image of God, we have a moral responsibility to see them and act in ways that lead to healing.

So let me share one example of recognizing one of my own “not so obvious to me” acts of hatred. This is a way, I realize now, I have let the system do my hatred (racism) for me.

I grew up in the south. My family traces our roots through South Carolina, Georgia and North Florida. (Thank you mom for your amazing genealogical work over many years!)

I have many ancestors who fought for the Confederate States of America, and while not all of them owned slaves personally, they all fought (and died) for a cause that is institutionally racist.

In his Cornerstone Speech of 1861, Alexander Stevens (Vice President of the Confederate States of America) says quite plainly: “Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea [of equality of races]; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior [white] race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”

I personally could not disagree with that more. And, I was not taught that this was at the core of what the Confederate flag represents.

I guess when I was hanging the Confederate flag in my room as an elementary boy, I was celebrating the way Bo and Luke Duke from the Dukes of Hazzard TV show were doing donuts and high-flying jumps across rivers in their Dodge Charger. I put a Confederate flag on my bike, named it the General Lee, and imagined I was doing those donuts and jumps.

I guess when I visited all the Confederate historic sites on family vacations growing up, and when I look at the monuments with the names of the men who fought for the Confederacy, I was visiting family - the family that made my life possible. The family who taught me to say "Yes Ma'am" and "Yes Sir." To hold the door for people. To go to church on Sunday. To work hard. To eat my vegetables. And so on...

What I didn't realize until now is that my heritage bears a deep and hidden wound - a legacy of dehumanizing people with black and brown skin.

I do not want to continue this legacy. I'm not interested in disowning my family or denying the hidden wound. I am interested in a future for my children, your children and their children in which everyone's humanity is appreciated and celebrated.

The Confederate flag is no longer a symbol that I will display in my home, on my bike, on my car. I now see clearly that this flag carries a covert and overt message to my sisters and brothers with black and brown skin. The message is - you don't matter as much as I matter.

I do not believe that personally, and if I do not believe that personally, then I will also not stand by silent and uninvolved while institutional monuments to my family members who fought for this cause "do my hatred, my racism, for me" in the public square.

It is stunning to me now that I, as white people who bears the image of God together with my black and brown brothers and sisters, would wait one more second before removing them to museums or cemeteries where they belong. It is stunning to me now that city leaders would continue to require black citizens tax dollars to support the presence and maintenance of Confederate monuments that glorify the dehumanization of those same citizens.

The way I see it now, using my power to overlook and ignore these monuments in our public square is essentially the same thing that Wendell Berry's well-meaning, mild and gentle great grandfather did when he was unwilling to be violent to his slave personally. He abandoned him to a system that would do his hating, violence and racism for him.

To ignore these monuments and let them stand in our public square in the name of "remembering our history" is a choice to let the system do my racism for me.

I can not erase the legacy of this hidden wound. All I can do is be more truthful about it and trust that there is a God of grace whose good pleasure it is to bring healing to both the oppressor and the oppressed - a God who indeed believes that hate is wrong at every level. Period.