



ST ALBANS

### **Racism with a Smile**

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Ottawa is such a great town. Beautiful, safe, diverse. Lots of nice neighbourhoods, good restaurants, outdoor recreation areas. People are sooooo nice. Some say that it's the city that fun forgot, but we know better than that, don't we? It's a wonderful place to live.

But is it really? Is it a great place to live for everyone? PAUSE. This past week the clergy of the Diocese of Ottawa attended mandatory Anti-Racism training. The presenter took us through a slide show. There were terms such as unconscious bias and white fragility. At the end of the session, the floor was opened up for questions and comments.

One of my colleagues, a priest of the Diocese, is a new Canadian. He shared a number of stories with the group. One after another, the stories displayed instances of blatant racism. What was most shocking was that the perpetrators were, in every case, his parishioners. His own parishioners! In all the cases he described, the parishioners had not seen any problem in saying or doing the thing that was actually highly offensive. They didn't mean to be racist. Is Ottawa a nice place to live for everyone? No. No it's not. PAUSE.

"John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."" Similar to my colleague's parishioners, the disciples are doing things that are just plain wrong, but they have no idea that they're wrong.

Now this passage gets really intense really fast. Jesus seemingly goes nuclear on them. "Whoever is not against us is for us... If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones ... it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea..." and then the



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whole bit about cutting out body parts, and then finishing with the worm in the unquenched fire...

Why the intense anger here? Why not a more pastoral, gentle response? Because the problem of exclusion and putting barriers in front of others is so insidious, so prevalent, so built in. Jesus needs to do something drastic to really get their attention. In this case he's not preaching to the choir.

The Gospels paint us a picture of a Jesus who is trying to do one thing: he's trying to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. To do so, he teaches, he preaches, he heals, he casts out demons, he loves, he argues, he performs miracles, he eats with those he's not supposed to. He's trying to make a world of love, fairness, peace, plenty. A world of love, fairness, peace and plenty for everyone. This is profoundly countercultural. It's about turning the world upside down. This is why he's so intensely angry and passionate about getting his message across to the disciples. He has a mission to fulfil, one that digs into the very core of our beings to change these insidious, hidden, systemic patterns of injustice and unfairness.

And this is exactly what is still needed today. The problem of exclusion, of racism, of white supremacy, of white fragility, is so insidious, so prevalent, so built in, that we need something drastic to seemingly get our attention.

The training my colleagues and I had this past week focussed on just this. On how "nice people" can exhibit and perpetuate racist behaviours. It's too easy to say: "well I'm not racist" because I don't overtly hate people who don't share my skin colour. In putting myself in the "not racist" category, I let myself off the hook. I let myself off the hook in examining how, as a white person, my upbringing, my background, my society has made me inherently racist. This is about way more than just being a "nice person". This is about casual microaggressions made to individuals in conversation all the way up to systemic injustice perpetuated on people of colour. And this happens in all aspects of society: economics, health care, education, you name it. There's no way around it.



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Part of the training showed a short video from Canadian sprinter Donovan Bailey. In the video he talks about his experience, and how, in Canada, we can easily become complacent because we think we have it better than our neighbours to the South. But he says that it's sometimes harder to deal with the situation here, because he's experienced what he calls, "racism with a smile".

This is similar to the disciples who are trying to exclude those who are healing in Jesus' name, Today's problem of exclusion, of racism, of white supremacy, of white fragility, is so insidious, so prevalent, so built in, that we need something drastic to get our attention.

What could be more of a wakeup call than the discovery (or more accurately, the rediscovery) of the bodies of hundreds if not thousands of residential school children who died while in the care of the government and the church?

It's overwhelming to think about all the wrongs that have been done by white people. It can be so overwhelming that we can get frozen in place by guilt or anger or fear. We don't know what we can do or even where to start. One way to start is by observing the the National Day of Remembrance to remember Indigenous children and families affected by the residential school system. It's happening this Thursday, September 30. We'll be gathering on Parliament Hill and then walking to Confederation Park. If being in a crowd at this point is too much for you, watch on TV or listen to the radio. The goal is to listen, to support, to witness, to walk with. To be open to the change that's needed in moving forward. This is the building of the Kingdom. We are the disciples. We have a part to play. Can we hear Jesus' anger, his passion, in wanting us to make things right? To snap out of our same old patterns and make things new? Can we hear the Spirit calling us to reconciliation? Amen.

Question for Open Space: What do you think about Donovan Bailey's term: "racism with a smile"? What does it about the state of our selves, our communities, our country?