

The Freedom of a Christian case study

How can (and should) the struggle for racial justice inform the ELCA's reading of Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian* today? The Rev. Kwame Pitts

Luther writes in his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*:

“Thus the soul, in firmly believing the promises of God, holds [God] to be true and righteous; and it can attribute to God no higher glory than the credit of being so. The highest worship of God is to ascribe to [God] truth, righteousness, and whatever qualities we must ascribe to one in whom we believe. In doing this the soul shows itself prepared to do [God's] whole will; in doing this it hallows [God's] name, and gives itself up to be dealt with as it may please God.”

Are we being truthful and just to the words of Martin Luther; that is, have we, as identified Christians, upon hearing these words, moved them from the abstract to practical reality, placing them in motion toward the work and the purpose that we are called to? In other words, do we believe in the promises that the Creator has rooted into our very being? What about the call to discipleship, which for our 21st-century understanding is akin to building community? If God is God, then when God says to us, through prophets and teachers, that we are to kick open wide the doors of the church and create sacred, holy spaces for those who have been ousted, persecuted and ridiculed by the Empire—yes, the Empire still exists today. It is the Empire that sets up false altars of greed, of wealth, of white nationalism and white supremacy, of violence and oppression; that has been indoctrinating white American Christians with a propaganda stating that anything that is not European-descent, white American is lesser than.

Cornel West has stated that every major institution in American society—and that includes religious institutions, whether they are houses of worship or nonprofit organizations—have worked toward the eradication of people of African descent from polite society based on the tenets of white supremacist ideology. The question is, who is identified as our god in this American society? God's will is for a beloved community, as stated in Acts 4:32-35: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

We agree that we must study and emulate the disciples, because they tried, in their humanness, to follow and emulate Jesus Christ. Yet, we cannot be so flippant with our responses when racism and racial justice are brought to our attention as our pastoral and theological leaders are peeling back those intersectionality layers. Systemic racism, economic disparity, miseducation and limitation of health and mental health resources, redlining, internalized oppression and empirical oppression are the factors that breed divisiveness, subjugation and turmoil, not only in our wider breadth of society but also seeping into our

church communities, where they become a part of our doctrine and the norm structure. We have accepted the explanation from the Empire that upholding good moral order means diminishing bodies that were not acceptable by the Empire. We have replaced our faith in God with one from the Empire because the Empire produces results. White America has access to privilege and class status; regardless of one's economic standing, they will always have an advantage over communities of culture/language.

This leads me to another issue that Luther raises: What greater rebellion, impiety or insult to God can there be than not to believe God's promises? What else is this, than either to make God a liar or to doubt God's truth—that is, to attribute truth to ourselves, but to God falsehood and levity? In doing this, is not a man denying God and setting himself up as an idol in his own heart?

According to the late Dr. James Echols, Lutherans have supported the status quo, invoking Romans 13:1-2: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." Continuing with the next verse, I choose the Voice Bible translation, which is clearly regarding what Dr. Echols offers: "You see, if you do the right thing, you have nothing to be worried about from the rulers; but if you do what you know is wrong, the rulers will make sure you pay a price" (3). White Lutherans have taken the stance of quietism-conservation, while those who are of the African diaspora have taken the stance of activism-societal transformation, invoking Acts 5, that God stands on the side of the oppressed and that their voices will always be heard, regardless of the barriers that the Empire has instituted through policies, doctrines and legislation.

So what does this mean when we return to the original question of racial justice and Luther's treatise? Womanist theologian and ethicist Dr. Marcia Y. Riggs addresses it in this fashion: Peoples of African descent and the diaspora must respond through faith because of the Creator's justice. We are called as God's people to respond as moral agents to institutionalized moral evil because the universal context of God's justice so commands us. Through the lens of Black liberation ethics and the socioreligious ethical sense of intragroup social responsibility, we must sound the alarm to awake! Arise! Act!

Is that not where we find ourselves today, addressing the racial injustice and the white supremacy that led to the brutal murders of not only Emmett Till but the Emanuel Nine, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and so many others? Is it not the call of the whitest denomination in these United States that our white siblings in Christ, understanding and clinging to this conception that we are saved by grace through faith and believing in the Creator God's promises, should, without hesitation, raise the alarm to awake! Arise! And act?