

I learned far more about Marfan Syndrome than I ever wanted to know. I discovered that it is a genetic disorder, which destroys connective tissue. Because connective tissue holds together the entire body, it devastates the heart, the bones, and blood vessels. People can live with Marfan Syndrome, but it causes serious heart problems, which can be deadly. At the time I learned about Marfan Syndrome, it was a possible diagnosis for my oldest son, Frankie. I was terrified.

People with Marfan Syndrome tend to be tall and thin, with long arms, legs, fingers, and toes. And for those of you who have seen Frankie, you know that he is very tall and very thin. So, once he started passing out, just falling to the ground unconscious, our doctor suspected Marfan Syndrome. I didn't know what to think, but I can tell you it was a terrible sight, to see my teenaged son fall unconscious to the floor. He did it at home, he did it at Immanuel, he did it at his school. And we needed to know why. Thus, the possible diagnosis.

And so, the doctor sent us to specialists. Lots of specialists. A geneticist, an orthopedist, a cardiologist. There were X-rays, EKGs, an order for genetic testing. I tried to stay calm, to breathe and pray and believe. But I was so afraid. So afraid Frankie was seriously, seriously ill.

By the time we met with the cardiologist, I was afraid my heart was failing. But she sat us down, smiled at me, and then turned to Frankie. "How often do you drink water?" she asked. He cocked his head to the side in deep thought. "Not really very much," he replied. She pressed on, "Do you drink water in the morning before school?" The answer was no. "Do you drink water while you are at school?" The answer was no. "Do you drink water during lunch?" The answer was no. "Do you drink water when you get home from school?" the answer was no. "Do you drink water with dinner?" Finally, he answered yes.

The cardiologist nodded. "Well, that makes sense. He only drinks one glass of water a day. That is what is wrong with Frankie's body." Turns out it wasn't Marfan Syndrome. He didn't need an orthopedist or a geneticist or a cardiologist. He just needed to drink water.

After spending hundreds of dollars on medical tests, countless hours at appointments, unending nights of worry, we discovered the source of the illness. The symptoms were severe – Frankie passing out on a regular basis. But we needed to find out what was underneath his symptoms. The source of the illness was a lack of basic hydration.

We can see symptoms of disease and disorder, but in order to really find healing, we need to get to the source. This is true in our body, but it is also true in our country and in our world. Jesus instructed his disciples to go out and heal, and in his instructions, he demanded that they "drive out evil spirits." The disciples were sent out to uproot the source of social illness, to treat the causes, rather than the symptoms. We'll get to that a little bit later, but first I want to talk about our symptoms, to ask, "Where are we today?"

On Wednesday, many of us felt the giddy hope of a new beginning. We had a right to celebrate the joy of the inauguration, the joy of a woman of color becoming our Vice President, the joy of reentering the Paris Climate Accord, the joy of rescinding the Muslim ban, the joy of an eviction moratorium, the joy of historic federal appointments for women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals. Many, many beautiful things happened this week, and we should be celebrating. We should allow ourselves this joy, this hope.

And yet, we cannot forget that the source of our illness has not gone away. We all felt the extreme hatred and horrific violence leading up to Wednesday. Threats on the lives of public officials, a Confederate flag in the Capitol, a noose on the lawn, white supremacist with zips ties and guns. The symptoms are severe. The illness is extreme. Hatred, violence, the loss of life. We cannot forget that the disease of racism still festers in our nation. We must recognize what is underneath all the violence and hatred, and we must address the source of our illness. To eradicate white supremacy, it will take an incredible amount of work, every single day. Frankie could not just drink one glass of water, and stop passing out. He needs to hydrate day after day after day. We need to do the work of fighting racism day after day after day after day. The joy of Wednesday cannot, must not, stop us from addressing the source of our disease.

For the disease was not just at the Capitol, not just in far way places. In is right here, in Hartford. Keren Prescott, a woman of color and racial justice activist, was at our capitol a couple of weeks ago, demanding that racism be declared a public health issue. When Karen and her friend began chanting, “Black Lives Matter,” a white woman nearby started to yell at them, “All Lives Matter.” The white woman then approached Keren, to continue to harass her about what she labeled “black on black crime.” Keren asked the woman to move away, as she was not wearing a mask. Instead of walking away, the white woman pushed herself between Keren and her friend, and spit on Keren. Keren was especially afraid, as she and her daughter both have asthma. She has been so careful, and even so, this white woman spit on her, endangering her and her daughter. This just happened, here in Hartford, a few weeks ago.

When a child is born in the Frog Hallow area of Hartford, that child’s life expectancy is 13 years shorter than the life expectancy of a child born in West Hartford. Taylor Santana, who is enrolled in AP and honors classes in West Hartford, declares, “I look for students of color to provide myself with security. However, the vast majority of student in AP classes are white. Often, I am the only person of color in the room. The fact is, Black students don’t receive the same education as white students.” She is talking about schools right here, in our towns and cities.

Taylor continues, “Seventy-nine percent of black students graduate from high school. 50% enroll in college, and of that, only 42% graduate. Black people cannot succeed when they are not provided with an equal education. The percent of black people in poverty is more than twice that of white people. How can a black child be expected to succeed academically when worried about essentials, such as food and shelter?” This is a child, a high school student, a young woman of color, asking us these questions. She is asking us to do better, to address the source of our social disease, the white supremacy that literally kills black children, and dramatically shortens their life expectancy.

Disciples are called to heal – and in order to heal, we need to eradicate the source of the illness. So, let’s go back to our scripture today, to Jesus’s instructions to his disciples, and see what we might be called to do.

First of all, Jesus sends them out two by two. We do not do this alone. We do it together, both for support and for accountability. The disciples were human beings, just like us. To address impure

spirits, to drive out demons, to offer healing, to proclaim God's justice. That is scary stuff. But it is vital work. We need each other, and we need to hold each other accountable.

Secondly, Jesus asks them to proclaim the good news, just as an emperor would proclaim a new order. In this context, the word "proclaim" has the force of creating a new social order, just as when a King declares a new law. This is bold and world changing. The disciples are declaring the good news of love and justice, and it is a brand new, world changing proclamation. We, too, are to be bold and insistent in declaring God's love and justice. We, too, are to be bold and insistent in eradicating the disease of white supremacy.

Third, Jesus asks them to drive out the unclean spirits that are the source of the illness. He wants them to heal every disease and sickness, but he starts with the impure spirits. He knows that the demons that dwell within are real and they are powerful. Jesus instructs his disciples to drive out those demons, so that healing can actually happen. We need to address the causes of the disease in our world, to drive out the demons of racism and white supremacy.

Fourth, Jesus tells them to shake the dust off their feet, when people reject them. In New Testament times, this would be pretty much the same as offering them one's middle finger. It is not a polite gesture to shake the dust off your feet, as you leave someone behind. But Jesus was not asking his disciples to be polite, or nice, or likable. He says, "If they will not listen, just leave them behind." We should not waste our time with those who refuse God's message of justice and peace. Jesus does not call us to be nice. Jesus calls us to eradicate demons.

Finally, Jesus tells them it will be hard. They are not to bring gold or copper. No extra bag, no extra shirt, no extra food. He tells them that they are sheep among wolves, that they will be flogged and arrested, that they must be as shrewd as snakes. And then he tells them not to worry. That is no easy task. You are going to be beaten and arrested, but don't worry about what to say or how to say it. Because the spirit of God will speak through you. It is going to be extremely difficult. But God will give you what you need to do the work.

The disciples do not just proclaim the kingdom of God. They make it real by healing the sick, by driving out demons, by eradicating the cause of disease. God's justice and God's healing are not just proclaimed. They are made real through the actions of Christ's disciples.

Today is Partnership Sunday, where we celebrate our relationship with churches in Germany, England, and the Czech Republic. The close bonds between our congregations started at the end of World War II, when hatred between Germany and England was intense, when the violence of war was still so fresh and overwhelming. But people of faith decided to fight the disease of war and hatred, to build relationships of love and peace. Seventy-five years after the end of World War II, those relationships still exist, and have expanded to more churches. Our Partnership with congregations in Dessau, Speyer, Purley, and Ostrava demonstrate that it is possible to drive out demons of hatred, and bring forth the healing power of God's love.

But, there is a lot of work to do. Because the evil spirits of white supremacy and racism are very much alive in our society and in our world. Cultural and institutional racism are strong and powerful. Think for a moment – what color is angel's food cake? It is white. What color is devil's food cake? It is black. What is the color of purity? What is the color of sin? We have associated dark skin with sin and evil, and white skin with goodness and purity.

I want to show you a few images quickly. These are ads for soap. (Show first slide). In 1905, Cook's Soap advertised by showing that it was powerful enough to wipe off black skin. But in 2010, Dove soap advertised that the before photo was a black woman, and the after photo was a white woman. Which is better? Clearly, those ads say that to be clean, you must be white. And here it is again. (Second slide) In 1940, Pears soap advertised a soap so strong it would turn black skin white. And in 2017, Dove soap did the same thing. Does this really matter? Of course it does. My black son, Johnny, was only three years old when he asked me if I could wash the brown off his body, so that he could be white like me. Cultural racism is real and it is deep and it must be eradicated. It is a demon we must drive out. We must tell the truth about its presence.

Cultural racism accompanies structural racism so powerfully that it impacts every area of life. Studies showing that people with names that sound white are far more likely to get a job interview. In fact, the National Bureau of Economic Research found that white sounding names were fifty percent more likely to get a call back than applicants with African American sounding names. When comparing it with years of experience, it found that having a white sounding name yields as many more callbacks as an additional eight years of experience.

The work of discipleship is difficult, because it involves undoing 400 years of racism and white supremacy. In order to create the world as God intended, a world of justice and equity and peace, we have to drive out the demons that afflict our country, we have to deal with the source of our disease. It takes work, commitment, discipline. But that is how we follow Jesus's call.

So, let's go back, quickly, to what Jesus asks. First, we go out in pairs. We do not do this alone. We join with others, organizing for justice through GHIAA and our denomination. Secondly, we proclaim a new order. We are not afraid to speak the truth, boldly, to friends and family and neighbors. Third, we drive out the unclean spirits that are the source of the illness. We speak about cultural and institutional racism, and we fight it with consistency and diligence. Fourth, we shake the dust off our feet. When there are those who stand in the way of justice, we do not try to be nice. Instead, we speak the truth and reject a false unity that undermines true peace. Finally, Jesus tells us it will be extremely difficult, but that we can have faith. We do the work, despite the challenges, trusting that the Spirit of God can, and will, work through us.

The thing is, we have reason to believe this. We can celebrate, and should celebrate, the voice of Amanda Gorman proclaiming, "We will rise." We can celebrate, and should celebrate, stronger protection for immigrants, the freezing of student loan payments, the halting of the border wall, sweeping executive orders of justice for the LGBTQ community and protections for people of color. We can celebrate, and should celebrate, a Vice President who is a woman of color, the monumental firsts of this past week. We have reason to believe that the Spirit of God can, and will, work through us. For it is the Spirit of God that brought these changes. It is the Spirit of God working through ordinary human beings, and this offers us real and genuine hope.

But, as Amanda Gorman reminded us, we have work still to do. Hear her words again, "Somehow we've weathered and witnessed, a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished, It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit, it's the past we step into, and how we repair it." We need to work for repair, for healing in our country. But in this work, we can

believe: God will offer us the healing hydration that we need. God will work with us to dismantle white supremacy. God will help us drive out demons and cure disease. And when we get to the cause of our social disease, and uproot the power of racism, justice will pour down like water, healing our bodies and healing our world. May it be so.