

Devotion – February 20, 2023

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Being a Woke Lutheran

February is Black History Month. Many of us are eager to mark the occasion by reading stories we were never taught and listening to voices we never heard, broadening our understanding of our fellow man and enriching ourselves in the process. Others wish to keep these stories from us and keep these voices silent, decrying them as divisive and “woke”, diminishing those not like us in so doing. If we are all truly children of the same God we should welcome, not fear, the different stories of all our brothers and sisters.

I want to be “woke” – not as the term has been misappropriated for political purposes but as it was originally used.

“Wokeness” had a special meaning in the African American community. In 1923, black nationalist and political activist Marcus Garvey wrote ‘Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up Africa!’ as a call to Blacks to be more socially and politically conscious. Then and now his writings had great influence in the Black community and encouraged the use of available lawful means to enforce the rights they were often denied. We as Lutherans should aspire to the same and work towards a more equal and just world.

The term was also widely used as a warning – for Blacks to beware constantly of the dangers that existed in the Jim Crow south – beatings and lynchings to name a few.

Blues musician Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, told listeners to “best stay woke” in his famous song about the Scottsboro Boys, an incident in which nine black teenagers from Scottsboro, Arkansas were accused of raping two white women. They were convicted in a sham trial even though their accusers testified under oath that no rape had occurred. Their cases led to a call for reforms in the criminal justice system, reforms that have yet to be fully realized.

What does “woke” mean to me, a white Lutheran who never personally experienced racial injustice or had to “stay woke” to stay alive? I take it to mean that I need to learn what I wasn’t taught and hear what I wasn’t told in school and be an advocate for those whose voices have for too long been silenced. And, to never forget the lessons learned.

This seems less of a radical position than a reflection of our faith. Remembering is at the core of who we are. Each Sunday we remember the night in which our Lord was betrayed as we share the bread and wine of Holy Communion. During the season of Christmas and Epiphany we remember the birth and early life of Jesus. Lent invites us to recall Jesus’ last supper, arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. The seasons of Easter and Pentecost are filled with stories remembering Jesus’ life and ministry. Our cycle of remembering continues throughout the year.

Just as these memories inspire and call us to action, let the narratives and voices of all in God's family do the same.

I Dream a World

I dream a world where
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind-
Of such I dream, my world!

Langston Hughes