

“Open Window”

by Lisa Wallace

August 9, 2020 - Matthew 22:36-40 and Philippians 2:3,4

I would like to share with you today a story that seems appropriate for such a time as this.

A college music ministry team arranged one summer to go on a mission trip. They were really excited about this mission trip, as it would take them to the gorgeous island of Hawaii. There was, of course, lots of preparation needed to make the trip a success, and one important aspect would be transportation. It was vital that they have a van to get around the island, as they would be transporting the team and their sound equipment. So they breathed a collective sigh of relief when a van was, after many attempts, at last provided by a member of a sponsoring church. Piling in the van for the first time, the ministry team was excited as they set off for their first concert.

But excitement quickly turned to disappointment, as they found that the unmistakable stench of exhaust fumes filled the van. It made travel downright miserable, even with the windows down. They hoped that it would get better, but the fumes were worse by the day. Feeling they would be unable to go on much longer, they reluctantly decided to go back to consult with the owner of the van, hoping that he wouldn't be too bothered or think that they were ungrateful, and that he could identify and correct the problem.

Now the van was constructed with the engine underneath the console, right between the driver seat and the passenger seat. So the owner lifted up the covering, and there was the obvious problem. The engine exhaust was not feeding out of the car as it was supposed to. Instead, it was feeding directly into the inside of the car, which explained their problem from the get go.. One of the ministry team members, declared firmly. “That’s not right,” he said. “That must be fixed!”

The owner sympathetically shook his head, “no, it shouldn't be like that,” he echoed. Relief filled the faces of the ministry team. At last, they were thinking, the problem was clear, what needed doing was clear, and they would get relief. Imagine their surprise, when, as soon as he said it, he picked up the covering and put it back in place, leaving all as it had been.

The ministry team looked at him, amazed and perplexed. They were speechless. With that the owner smiled somewhat sheepishly, shrugging his shoulders as if there was nothing more to do, then turned and walked away. They watched him go as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Without the means to fix the problem, and no help to be had. With no other solution in sight, they got back on the road, trying to continue the ministry tour.

The whole experience was clouded, literally, with toxic smoke. One person left to go home. The others endured, and did what they could amidst general discontent. They felt they did the best they could under the circumstances. But what a relief it was when the tour ended.

This is a true story that happened 40 years ago. And yet it seems to resonate as much now as it did then.

In recent days, Wapping Community Church has stood with other churches, individuals and groups through vigils and luminaria, prayers and conversations around the troubling issue of racial injustice and violence against black Americans in our country. The toxic smoke of prejudice and hate has infected our systems, making life in this country a living hell for many of our brothers and sisters.

Time and time again through history, the stench of what ails us has caused us to stop and look under the hood of our car. We have seen that things are not as they should be. We have admitted as much, and yet, somehow, the cover gets put back on the engine, things are left as is, problems persist.

This time, with the execution of George Floyd, the voices that have been silenced or muzzled won't be silenced anymore. We, as Wapping Community Church, United Church of Christ, should have hope. For, amidst all the violence, suffering, anger and utter desperation, a window of opportunity has opened up. Light is coming through that window, and fresh air is pouring in.

We are a church and are affiliated with a denomination that values racial justice. We talk about it, we think about it, we learn about it, we sing about it and pray for it. And while the light shines through a window of opportunity, we have a platform and a responsibility to stand up for it, to stand alongside our brothers and sisters in solidarity.

This is an important time to be alive, and be together in this effort. I have heard many of you ask, "but what can we do to make a difference?" There is a certain buzz of frustration in that question, born of the fact that we feel we are doing our best, and yet those who are brutalized, minimized and kept down, time and time again, see an engine exposed, with toxic fumes aimed at their faces.

Many of us do not witness racial injustice, unaware that it permeates much of our society except what we may see in the media. Many of us feel certain we are not the problem. We are not prejudiced. And many of us are in touch with very few African Americans. And if we are, the subject usually doesn't come up.

In spite of all this, our church remains a beacon of hope, where all people, no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey, are welcome here. This is a thoughtful, intentional expression of inclusion and respect. We are on the right track with it. Our heartfelt desire is that every person would be genuinely, deeply needed, wanted and celebrated. We are listening for the voice of every person, and when those voices rise up, together they make a sweet, full, lively and compelling song that cannot be quelled.

Our church is a strong beacon of hope in the storm of our times, because we are a church that bases our faith on greatest commandment from Scripture...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and mind, and soul, and your neighbor as yourself."

The implications of embracing the great commandment, is that we are and will be part of the solution to the shame of racial injustice. If we are committed to this great commandment, we will live out in our daily lives, in all the places we go, the vision that every human being is a person - not to be tolerated, or ignored, or treated as an object to get what we want, but that every human being is a person, made in the image of God, to be cherished.

This would be a fine tuning of a vision that would please God greatly. If we agree today to see every person as we would a beloved mother, or a respected father, or the best sister or brother in the whole wide world, we will take the next right step forward. How would we be involved with a beloved mother - how would we take care of her, what place would she have in our lives? What kind of relationship would we have with a respected father, from whom we seek advice and perspective, to whom we are vulnerable enough to reveal our inner selves, a father whom we utterly enjoy and celebrate?

We will make a profound difference when we step up the unfolding of how we cherish others. By nurturing them deliberately and emphatically in lifegiving and life-changing ways. Encourage others. Discover and draw out their talents. Regularly seek, listen and act upon their ideas, play to their strengths. Be an advocate, mentor and friend. Find ways to help others achieve their dreams. Stand with them in sorrow. Celebrate big with them in their joy.

We will be curious, and interested, seeking to walk a mile in another person's shoes so we understand what they feel and what has happened to them. No matter who we are or where we are in life, this is part of the reason each of us is here. This is part of what we can be and do together.

Having and living out this vision of cherishing and nurturing others is anything but trivial. Just think, if everybody did this, as their priority! Lives would change. Systems, policies, laws, these should support cherishing and nurturing others. But systems, policies and laws are not enough.

History has borne this out. Unless hearts and minds of individuals are changed, people of color will be in danger. All lives matter. Black Lives Matter. And we need Christ, to save us all and change us, so that we can provide a life experience for one another that cherishes and nurtures. This would truly be life re-imagined.

The good news is that the engine has been uncovered. And as the engine has been uncovered, and what is wrong is obvious - hate and discrimination is destroying our black brothers and sisters. It is destroying all of us, and the world as God intended it to be. But rejoice. We have God, we have been given each other, the inspiration of nature, minds to think and hearts to love. We have examples throughout history of how to put love center stage.

As Barack Obama states, Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.

In short, we actually have everything we need, now, to fix what is wrong. We can join with the voices that say, wait. Stop. Don't put the cover back on over brokenness. This time, fix what is wrong. Then the car will be secure. The trip will be pleasant. And every person's journey, filled with light, love and an abundance of fresh air. Only then, will we be able to say, individually and collective in one accord. I can breathe. We, can breathe.

AMEN.