

# From 'Overwhelmed' to 'Doing Something'

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
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- Scripture: Matthew 7:1-5 (New International Version) "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. <sup>2</sup>For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. <sup>3</sup>"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? <sup>4</sup>How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? <sup>5</sup>You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

I'm feeling overwhelmed. Maybe you are, too.

For nearly one-hundred days it feels like life has been "All-COVID, all the time." It seems that two-thirds of the news reports have been about the advance of the disease across the globe and across the country.

The global pandemic has touched virtually every aspect of daily life for you and me. It will continue to do so for weeks and months to come. Preventive measures have become a way of life for us. Meanwhile, dedicated, brilliant people labor ceaselessly to care for the sick and to develop treatments and vaccines. Yes, if we're feeling a little overwhelmed these days, I'd say it's justified.

And then two weeks ago the nation learned the name of a man we'd never heard of before: George Floyd. A person of color, an American of African descent, Mr. Floyd died in the course of an action by some law enforcement officers. Gruesomely disturbing video captured the event.

I have great respect and appreciation for those who serve in the profession of law enforcement. I certainly don't have knowledge about the kind of training it takes to function effectively and safely as a police officer. The video of the tragic death of Mr. Floyd, however, was overwhelming. It was overwhelming because it showed disregard for his safety while in custody. And it was overwhelming because it was yet another example of our nation's history of neglect or mistreatment of individuals because they are persons of color.

George Floyd in Minneapolis. Breonna Taylor in Louisville. Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia. Trayvon Martin in Florida. Tamir Rice in Ohio. Michael Brown, Jr. in Missouri. Sadly, the list goes on and on.

A few years ago my wife and I traveled to Montgomery, Alabama to see the National Memorial for Peace and Justice that had just opened. I encourage you to visit it. It is a solemn experience, but you'll be glad you saw it. This haunting, open-air collection of stark iron pillars presents the names of more than 4400 African American victims of lynching across twenty states... "men, women, and children [who] were hanged, burned alive, shot, drowned, and beaten to death by white mobs between 1877

and 1950.”<sup>1</sup> The memorial records fifteen incidents of lynching in Ohio, including one in Cuyahoga County.

The scourge of racism is a political issue but it isn't a partisan issue. This is a social issue but it isn't merely an economic class issue. And this is a religious issue, but it's not a sectarian issue. Let's consider how Jesus engaged with other people. Jesus looked beyond distinctions of ethnicity and class to appreciate the person, to appreciate his or her unique situation. For instance,

- Jesus, a Jew, counseled a Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:1-30).
- Jesus dined with a despised tax collector (Lk. 19:1-10).
- Jesus commended the faith of an impoverished widow (Lk. 21:1-4).
- Jesus challenged the faith of a man of great wealth (Mk. 10:17-22).
- Jesus healed the blindness of an unemployed man (Mk. 10:46-52).
- Jesus ministered to a boy with mental illness (Mk. 9:14-29).
- Jesus responded to a religious leader's questions and doubts (Jn. 3:1-21).
- Jesus stepped in to protect a woman facing mob violence (Jn. 8:1-11).

When we look to Jesus as our guide we see one who did not let distinctions among peoples define how he related to them. He didn't show preference toward one and disdain toward another.

His instructions to his disciples have come down through the ages to us. He said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."<sup>2</sup>

Where do we go from this moment when we are overwhelmed by the tragedy and overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem? Let me suggest three things.

First, we lament the tragic loss of life: the life of Mr. Floyd and Ms. Taylor and the tens and hundreds and thousands of others who were victims of violence borne of racial prejudice. As St. Paul urged in Romans Chapter 12, just as we rejoice with those who rejoice, let us weep with those who weep, as we seek to live in harmony with one another.<sup>3</sup>

Second, we look at ourselves. As Jesus urged, before we think of pointing an accusing finger at someone else, each of us should first look in the mirror. Remember the vivid image he painted? Jesus said,

<sup>3</sup> "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

It may not be easy or pleasant to ask ourselves how our own words, thoughts, actions might reveal unconscious or deliberate attitudes of prejudice. That's a tough mirror to look into. But as one of my former seminary professors wrote recently, before we can

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ejl.org/projects/community-remembrance-project/> accessed 6/3/2020

<sup>2</sup> John 13:34-35 New Revised Standard Version

<sup>3</sup> See Romans 12:15-16 New Revised Standard Version

seek to change ourselves and our society we first must acknowledge“...the reality of pain and injustice that for too long has remained unattended to and thus unresolved.”<sup>4</sup>

So first we lament the human cost of racism, then second we examine our own attitudes. And third we resolve to do something. *Something*. Perhaps you saw this social media post: a demonstrator in Bay Village this week spoke volumes as he calmly, silently walked along the tree-lined streets carrying a sign with a simple message. It read: “Silence = Acceptance.”

If we are silent – if we do nothing while living in the midst of a culture of racism – it sends a message to all people that we think the *status quo* is acceptable. But discrimination is not acceptable. We can’t be silent about it. So we resolve to do something.

There’s an old Christian hymn – I don’t hear it so much anymore – but the popular hymn of an earlier generation urged,  
*Stand up, stand up for Jesus, the trumpet call obey;*  
*Forth to the mighty conflict in this his glorious day:*  
*[Believers, come,] now serve him against unnumbered foes;*  
*Let courage rise with danger, and strength to strength oppose.*<sup>5</sup>

So rather than remaining silent, let us “stand up” and commit to speaking and acting. In our words and deeds let us show the acceptance of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, unconditional love of Jesus. Rather than remaining silent, let each of us do *something*.

- Some people will choose to demonstrate in order to get their message across to their neighbors and to the powers that be. Our nation was built on that right. And realize this: the few in those gatherings who choose to commit acts of vandalism are serving selfish motives, not the desire for justice. They are muffling the message. And so choosing to do something, some will demonstrate peacefully but vocally.
- Some will read a book or take a class, vowing to learn more about the history and the issues of racism as a basis for addressing it in their daily life.
- Some will seek out opportunities for dialogue – to talk with and especially to listen to people of color, people whose experience of life in America carries more risk simply because of their skin color.
- Some will find ways to be involved with organizations seeking to eliminate race-based inequities in the justice system, inequities in education, in government, in banking, in health care, in housing, in the entertainment industry.

So, what can I do? What can you do? What can we do? “...Publicly confronting the truth about our history is the first step towards recovery and reconciliation.”<sup>6</sup> Let’s strive to fulfill the charge Jesus gave us when he said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

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<sup>4</sup> “Statement of Lament, Repentance, Action, and Solidarity” from email by David Esterline to the community of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, June 1, 2020

<sup>5</sup> “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus” Words George Duffield, 1858, music George J. Webb, 1837. The Hymnbook. Philadelphia: United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., p. 296

<sup>6</sup> <https://ejl.org/projects/community-remembrance-project/> accessed 6/3/2020