

Please pray with me.

Dear God, that the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight. Oh Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.

This past May, I lost my 99 year old grandfather, Reverend Marcus Garvey Wood. He transitioned after laboring in ministry as a Baptist pastor for many years in Baltimore and he was one of my earliest and most formative teachers of justice.

Thankfully he didn't have the coronavirus. He had just reached the end of his journey. The last time I saw him in person was in January. I was in town for a conference and had spoken on a panel regarding to the work of eradicating racism.

At the close of my presentation, I talked about my grandfather's formerly enslaved grandmother, Susan. Susan was still alive when he was a child. She always talked to him about how much she loved her husband, Moses and about how much she loved God. She and Moses believed in Jesus and my grandfather learned powerful lessons about faith and the love of Christ, while sitting at her knee. He shared these lessons in the book he wrote about his faith and ministry journey entitled, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*.

I have learned so much about the faith of mine, enslaved ancestors through him. So I told the group at the conference, but as I engage in anti-racism work and get weary while moving through racism every day, I call on my ancestors strength and power and faith and love, that they passed down to the generations in our family.

It's all a reminder that we have the capacity to endure unspeakable challenges through our divinity. The fact that my enslaved grandparents could maintain the strength and commitment to love God and each other, keeps me going.

So I shared this with my grandfather on my visit with him and his eyes lit up as he looked at me and said, "Oh yeah. That's right. Because there's so much, we don't know. There's so much that we don't know."

This struck me. How does a man who has lived almost a hundred years, who began preaching the gospel as a teenager, traveled all around the world and was a seminary classmate of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., believe at the end of his life, that there was still so much that he doesn't know? Something broke open in me that day. His words have never left me. They resonate with me even more strongly now that he is with the ancestors.

In the midst of his COVID-19 pandemic and the unrelenting racism, the pandemic we've been fighting since my ancestors arrived from the West coast of Africa, I'm reminded that there is so much that we don't know. What my grandfather and my enslaved ancestors are telling me in this contemporary moment is that there is more to uncover about their capacity to resist and to transcend the world practices of dehumanizing hatred and evil, while remaining rooted and grounded in love.

This was a way of so many of the enslaved. In his book, *Jesus and The Disinherited*, 20th century theologian Howard Thurman shares the affirming lessons he received from his formerly enslaved grandmother. She relayed the message that the slave minister preached to her and others on the plantation. The reminder that they were not slaves. They were children of God. A message Thurman said established for them, the ground of personal dignity and personal worth.

This message, that we are children of God, reminds us that we are children of a great love because as we were told in 1 John, God is love. This message of the capacity of my ancestors to resist hate through love was not new. I've written about it. I try to practice it as consistently as possible.

But last June's, about a month after my grandfather transitioned, a new layer of understanding was revealed. I had the privilege of hearing Professor Stephanie Paulsell give a talk about the theologian monk, Thomas Merton and his writing, *Solitude Is Not Separation*.

As I listened to her talk about Merton and his reflections on how distance enables us to see the humanity and dignity in others, the Holy Spirit overwhelmed me with an insight about the impact of COVID and our forced social distancing. Like many people, I knew that the global Black Lives Matter protests and calls for racial justice that had merged with such intensity following the death of George Floyd, were different than the reactions that follow the police killings of so many other unarmed black people in this country. More white people were taking to the streets and calling for racial justice. Corporations were embracing Black Lives Matter and making statements about anti-racism. I knew that COVID was a factor.

As Professor Paulsell shared Merton's insights on solitude and distance, the Holy Spirit spoke to me. This is what Americans needed to be able to see; the humanity of black people. This is what Americans needed; to be able to see the humanity of black people.

While we're physically together, some of us are practicing spiritual distancing, either consciously or subconsciously, particularly from those characterized as others. Racism animates the spiritual distancing and then all kinds of things get in the way. That spiritual distancing can translate into distance from themselves and from God and from love.

Distance from God can distort one's perception of the other and make one susceptible to the believing the lie that black people are less than human. Perhaps the forced COVID induced social distancing and the solitude it's generating was doing with Merton believed solitude was for.

He contends the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is a conviction that it will help you to love, not only God, but also other men. My realization that perhaps some white people needed this distance from black people in order to see our humanity literally brought me to tears.

What my grandparents way of being illuminates for me is the power of living with intention to cultivate a quality of connection to God, where there is no separation. Where the toxins from the world do not create distortions and distance.

In today's scripture reading from the book of Romans, Paul reminds us that there is no force strong enough to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. He asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No. In all these things," Paul writes, "We are more than conquerors, through him who loved us. There is no power," Paul exclaims, "Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation that will be able to separate us from the love of God, that is in the Christ Jesus, our Lord."

Struggle and suffering do not separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Struggle and suffering, on and off the plantation, did not separate my enslaved grandmother from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

In his memoir, *Walking With The Wind*, the late Civil Rights warrior, John Lewis, who also studied Thomas Merton, describes how the teachings he learned about non-violence as a young man, brought his understanding of the Bible, Christ redeeming love and the role of suffering, into sharper focus.

He says, "Suffering can be nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart and accepting an open heart, a heart that holds no malice toward the inflictors of his or her suffering." He says, "It has everything to do with the way of non-violence. We're talking about love here," he says. "Not romantic love. Not the love of one individual for another. Not

loving something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all encompassing love. It is a love that accepts and embraces the hateful and the hurtful."

The suffering that Lewis endured fighting for racial justice all of his life did not create distance between him and God. It did not keep him from living into the love of Christ that is always present. Love, whatever source, one attributed to, transforms your way of being and your way of doing justice in the world.

As a student at Harvard Divinity School a number of years ago during the early stages of the Black Lives Matter movement, following the killing of Michael Brown and many of us were engaged in protests and die-ins with students across Harvard and all throughout the Cambridge Boston area, a popular rallying cry was hands up, don't shoot. Hands up, don't shoot. But some of us from the Div School began articulating a different cry. Hands up, hearts open. Hands up, hearts open, because we had rooted our anti-racism work in love.

Remaining grounded in love and resisting separation from God and others requires a daily commitment to seek God first, as scripture reminds us. It requires following the example of Jesus and taking time to be alone each day. My personal practices of meditation and prayer, scripture study or reflection and other ways that I spend time alone with God, helped me to firmly resist the tendency towards separation from God and others, even when I am angry and frustrated in this world where racism and anti-blackness are unrelenting. These practices helped me to become more deeply embedded in the mind of Christ, in order to cultivate Christ consciousness and embody Christ love.

My grandfather modeled this way of being an intentional connection to a transcendent God, which helped to ensure that his vision of justice did not become distorted. He was able to see humanity in all others, even his oppressors. Now at this critical time, I know even more about the importance of never letting anything separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Embedded within my pursuit of racial justice and healing is my intentional time of separation, so that I can be alone with God and ensure that nothing interferes with my ability to experience a full love of God in Christ, that is always present and always available. Remaining tethered to Christ will help to ensure that I never fail to see the humanity in anyone, even those who may be my enemies. It will help to ensure that I pursue justice through loves enduring strength and not my own. This will keep me from developing a distorted view of justice and believing that anyone, or group, is unworthy of love or mercy or grace and it will fortify my posture of openness and humility, ensuring I always remember, as my grandfather reminded me, that there is so much that I don't know.

Amen.