

“Held Hostage”
Galatians 3: 23 – 28, Luke 10: 36 – 37
West Swamp Mennonite Church # 29
August 6, 2017

In 1975, when I was a senior in high school, there was a race riot at my cousins’ school in Winchester, VA. It was a scary time for students and one of my cousins got pushed out of a window by black students. I don’t remember the details but the school was closed for several days and the state police were called in to oversee things when it reopened.

What I do remember is the many years of prejudice that followed in my cousin’s family. They spoke openly about black people in very negative tones, made jokes about them, and avoided relationships with blacks at all costs. This one negative experience with the African American student community shaped their whole view of a people.

My mother’s experience was just the opposite. When desegregation of schools began and black students and teachers began making their way into white schools, my mother was the only teacher’s aide who would agree to work alongside black teachers. All through the sixties and into the seventies, she built relationships with these teachers. She always said they were much more soft-spoken and physically loving of the children than white teachers.

She remained friends with these teachers into retirement and some to their grave. When I take mother out into the community, many black

people come up to talk to her and my brothers and I have many black friends because of this. Her positive experience has helped shape my family's view of the African American community.

Drew Hart, in his book, "Trouble I've Seen: changing the way the Church views racism" says it is important for us to take a personal inventory about how our views of different people groups has been shaped. Our society, led by mostly white people, sends all kinds of messages about other people groups and it is important that we know how our ideas and feelings are shaped. He also says it is important for the church to look to Jesus for how we relate to all people groups, especially the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable because Jesus put these people at the heart of his ministry.

Hart says, Jesus came into the world and launched "a grassroots and subversive kingdom ministry that disrupted the social order and posed a direct threat to the social, political, religious, and economic establishment." On other words, Jesus himself became poor and took on the role of a slave. Hart says, "In his life and ministry, Jesus undermined the dominant powers, yet without ever swinging a sword."

And because Jesus did it this way, Hart says we and the entire church community are called to what he calls a "counterintuitive solidarity" with the people on the bottom; the most vulnerable, those on the margins, minority groups, and those who have been violated. He says, these are the

ones we should look to - to lead and guide us. Hart encourages us to align ourselves with those suffering in the world rather than finding ourselves held hostage by the lure of power, wealth and success in the dominant powers.

The apostle Paul reminds us, “Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God – what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.” This is the kind of pattern and lifestyle shift we are talking about and nobody said this was going to be easy. Hart would say it is especially hard for those of us Christians, black and white alike, who are seeped especially deep in a mostly white, wealthy, and hierarchical, dominant culture.

Hart, himself, is African American. He grew up in multicultural Norristown, attended Messiah, a predominantly white college, worked in youth ministry for ten years in Harrisburg, and is now back teaching at Messiah. The story of his life journey as a young black man is chocked full of concrete examples of the level of anti-black sentiment in the Church.

It is also full of his desire to lead the Church toward the solidarity and renewal Jesus longs for all his followers. In the end, Hart gives us hope by offering a number of helpful practices or spiritual disciplines that can help us out of oppressive patterns, more toward solidarity with the marginalized and finally, closer to the shalom of Christ. I'll name just five of them here:

First, Hart says we need to be willing to share life together with those different from us. We need to be able to gather around tables to sit, read and interpret scripture together, and share meals together. These are places where hospitality and intimacy have a chance of bringing all our differences together.

Secondly, Hart says we must look around our own community and join with others in activities that break down barriers and further racial justice. We must join with vulnerable and oppressed communities, letting their struggle become ours.

Third, Hart says we need to be willing to see the world from down below. We must be willing to read books by authors who have struggled from below or gather with diverse people to tell and share our stories. We must be willing to make ourselves vulnerable so we can learn to see from another's perspective.

Fourth, Hart says our churches must reflect our care and commitment to hear the diverse voices of all among us, especially the poor and marginalized. We must privilege those who bring different voices and backgrounds and experiences to our leadership at all levels of church leadership even if those values are different from our own. We must learn to patiently dialogue with those who are different than we are.

Finally, Hart brings us back to where we started – self examination – and says we have a lot of it to do. He says we cannot ignore looking at

how we were taught, consciously or unconsciously, to relate to others and at the divisions that exist among us. He cautions us to save our sharpest criticism for ourselves and to guard against any self-righteous attitudes. He implores us all to ask God and the Spirit to reveal those areas in our lives that need God's transforming work and to meet us in those places so that we all might become one.

As Paul says to the church in Galatia, in Christ there are no differences between any of the members of God's body. All are made one in Christ; the One who overturns all the powers that divide and sets free all that holds us hostage in this world.