

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

Gospel Reading: Genesis 32:22-31

Sunday, August 2, 2020



I can't recall how I responded to the last census. I'm the sort who normally would land within snail mail statistics: among the 74% of 120 million households in this country who received their 2010 census forms by mail and replied by U.S. post. We can complete the 2020 census through even more channels: by mail, by phone, and yes, this year for the first time ever, even online. Now, I may be a dinosaur with foggy mental recall. But I'm not about to throw away this shot.

Between physical and electronic mail, not to mention text messages, there wasn't much of a chance to miss this census. Being counted in America isn't a privilege I take for granted. I also might have been "gentled" into compliance by those not so subtle reminders that census participation is required by federal law. I visited my2020census.gov eons ago. Which, this year, means WAY back in May. Reading, responding, submitting... the exercise didn't even take the ten full minutes I expected. It's only me in my household, after all. Could one person (just one?) be so statistically significant?

In the introduction to her memoir, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family*, the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray – the first African American female to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church – mentions the U.S. census popping up in her research, as she dug into her own bi-racial roots. Descended of free people of color in North Carolina, on her grandmother's side, and interracial connections within a prominent, white slave-owning family on her grandfather's, Murray was hard pressed to unearth much specificity about her African ancestry.

Generations whose forebears survived enslavement in this country often find their family lineage spotty in the historical record. Public files seldom reflected enslaved persons' names. Not unless a slave holder cited them in a deed, a will, a court proceeding, or a bill of sale. Murray describes how U.S. Census Bureau practices, prior to 1870, involved three separate census rolls: one for the white population, one for free people of color, and another, for the slave population. That slave census registered only owners' names, while enslaved persons themselves were designated simply by age, sex, and a letter, representing Black or Mulatto. Enumerating enslaved individuals was essential to calculating the number of Congressional representatives from each slave state. In that 1870 census, every enslaved individual counted as three-fifths of a person.

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allsaintsatlanta.org

Accounting for race and ethnicity admittedly has changed since then. But the ways Black lives matter, beyond the abstract, have been slower to resemble anything like equal parity, no matter what historical census data suggest. Today, it's more crucial than ever to be counted in civic society, especially for people of color in America. That's true whether we're voting in August or November, or simply furnishing responses to the U. S. Census Bureau.

State representatives in Congress, votes in the Electoral College, even redistricting within the State of Georgia—all these are directly tied to census demographics. Federal funding — for everything from health clinics and fire departments, to schools, roads, and highways — flows from census figures. Businesses likewise discern savvy investment in local communities based on census results, which, as we know, drives up neighborhood development and job growth. Institutions and individuals alike harness these powerful details to help us learn from our past and preserve history as we move forward.

We don't find a census in today's story from the Old Testament. But, we *do* get a family tally: Jacob, his two wives, two maids, and eleven children. These particular persons within the patriarchal household are just one part of a complex story. Earlier in this same chapter of Genesis, chapter 32, Jacob has been taking stock, not only counting the family servants, but enumerating his herds and flocks and all his household goods, in preparation for moving. They've been in one place for 14 years and they're about to steal away in the night to side-step tense relations with local relatives.

And the company soon will stare down another adversarial family member. Jacob, you'll remember, bilked his brother Esau of his birthright, years before. To smooth things over, Jacob sends restitution in advance, hoping to placate his brother with a present: oxen, donkeys, sheep, goats, and yes, even slaves. At this moment, when we meet Jacob by the riverside, neither he, nor all the family he sent on ahead, know whether these attempted amends will ease the enmity between Jacob and his twice-swindled-twin. You better bet Jacob's prayin' the intended peace offering softens Esau's heart!

On the brink of this tenuous reunion with his brother, Jacob finds himself churning with fears, turning ancient memories over in his mind and over again. He's in for a wrestling match that turns his world upside down. When God flips Jacob, knocking his hip out of joint, you know the patriarch feels anything but blessed! There's cognitive dissonance you can cut with a knife: muscles straining to master over this mysterious stranger, Jacob expending every last ounce of strength to come out on top! This holy lesson in humility will be one that upends Jacob's murky history.

* * *

Cognitive dissonance—a psychological term that entered the American scene in the 1950s. Leon Festinger coined the phrase, attempting to capture discomfort that people feel when two ideas they espouse, or a belief and a behavior, clearly contradict each other. Festinger examined how folks make sense of these murky contradictions, aiming, as we all do, to lead lives of meaning, stability, and consistency.

Festinger's protege, Elliot Aronson, refined Festinger's theory further. Aronson researched what happens when human beings find themselves "out of joint" but stick *with* that dissonance. It's often, it turns out, exactly what we need to catalyze growth and salutary change.

Looking at our contradictions, though, can be intimidating. But it only takes a small ounce of curiosity to notice God showing up in the midst of all that, transforming our hopes, fears, and aspirations. Preoccupied Jacob wasn't looking for his divine appointment any more than most folks are today, in this historical moment. Most people? We're simply trying to survive or, maybe if we're lucky, to thrive. Even so, God turns up, in that mix, right there, amid our dissonance.

In the last decade, and perhaps even more in recent months, cognitive dissonance in this country has been heating up. Whether we personally have found it disturbing enough to stay engaged or have pulled the plug from time to time, when discomfort feels a bit too much to bear, God is there, the Ever-Ready Wrestler, waiting.

Now, I've dragged my feet to the proverbial mat, but I finally am beginning to wrestle with Ibram Kendi's book entitled, *How to Be an Antiracist*. It took more than a few TEDx talks and podcasts and young adults eager to discuss, but I'm there, in the mix, with Kendi, who turns out to be a generous author and teacher, able to help me connect my own lived experience here in the South with his personal stories, woven throughout the book.

Like the best history professor you've ever heard lecture, Kendi parses the past and present with fierce candor and humanizing clarity. He witnesses to hard-won wisdom gleaned through the dissonance endured by generations—from W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness to the “dueling consciousness” Kendi notes in the history of racist ideas in America.

Grappling with Kendi's potent work, one intensive chapter per day, has felt grueling, and like a divine appointment. I'm learning to embrace humility as a healer of pain. We American Christians, it turns out, aren't so unlike Jacob, after all, wrestling with God on the banks of the Jabbok. We need our customary defenses dismantled, so that we can see how out of joint our world has been because of racism's reach. As with Jacob, the process can begin for us any time we're ready to stick with our discomfort and open our hearts to fresh insights and tough truths. Analogies help me stick with it, hanging in there with Kendi's ideas, so that his wisdom can take root in my imagination. And I've found that term he uses—it's not a term of terror, “antiracism” — it's a lot more like a societal antioxidant, flooding a toxic system with healing potential.

Just like antioxidants neutralize the cancer threat posed by free radicals within our own physical bodies, antiracist actions and attitudes help us respond to the harm inflicted on human beings, so that we can start transforming our common life.

Digesting cognitive dissonance, sticking with our discomfort, as Pauli Murray and Ibram Kendi have done, helps us begin to notice and make sense of and share our experiences with the world, through the personal, familial, and communal stories long told about race in America. These are some stories that sometimes prove painful and uncomfortable. Yet, unpacking those layers that we find there, we can start to discover courage and resilience to learn to lean on God as we do this difficult work.

Limping can be a sacred setback, as Jacob story teaches us, for it slows us down and dares us to see the world differently. Owning our wounds, we can join God in dismantling oppressive systems and unjust societal structures. We can even start to attempt an earnest effort at making faithful amends. This holy work will take all our determination and strength we don't even know that we have yet. Signs of readiness are springing up, even now.

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Whatever our family ancestry, whichever box we checked on that 2020 census, God's healing embrace is teaching us how utterly essential each and every one of us is when it comes to healing our civic and communal soul. The answer that matters most, in the end, is how we use this history-making shot. Will we be counted among those essential people through whom God forges an equitable and just future?

I pray it may it be so.

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