

*Let Us Struggle and Fight for Equality and Justice,
That's What People in Our Nation Have Always Done*

Matthew 13: 24-30
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Rev. Tom VandeStadt

In his book, *Bind Us Apart*, historian Nicholas Guyatt describes how conflicts over race have plagued our nation from its inception. Even before the founders signed the Declaration of Independence, white people were arguing with one another over how to treat black people and Native Americans.

These arguments only intensified in the late 1700s and early 1800s as our nation expanded into lands that Native Americans inhabited and as the number of black slaves increased. At issue was whether a natural racial hierarchy existed, one in which white people were innately superior, and black people and Native Americans innately inferior.

Some white people, influenced by the European Enlightenment's emphasis on scientific inquiry, reason, and liberty for all, believed black people and Native Americans were not innately inferior to white people. Scientific studies had determined that all people, regardless of skin color or land of origin, were innately equal. And because they were equal, reason and liberty dictated that white people should not enslave black people. Rather, slavery should be abolished.

However, many white people who held these enlightenment views did not support integrating freed black slaves into white society. The small group of white abolitionists in the southern slave-holding states opposed integration, as did the larger group of white abolitionists in the northern states. If slavery were abolished, most white abolitionists in Pennsylvania, New York and New England did not want free black people migrating north to their states. They wanted black people to be free, but separate.

Why did most white abolitionists in the late 1700s and early 1800s oppose integration? Because many white abolitionists believed black people suffered from a condition called "degradation." "Degradation" was a quasi-scientific term white people used to describe the degrading impact slavery had on black people. Black people were not innately inferior, but slavery had degraded them.

What were the effects of "degradation?" A lack of morals, virtue, industriousness, skills, culture, and education. Enlightened white people living in white society believed they embodied these qualities, and that black people had the potential to embody these qualities, but slavery had robbed them of that potential. Slavery had "degraded" them.

And so these white abolitionists didn't believe it was wise, practical or even fair to expect black people to live side-by-side with white people. Free them, yes. But keep them separate from white people, because they're not capable of living in white society. Maybe someday, when they overcome the effects of "degradation," but not now.

This view of black people created a serious conundrum for many white abolitionists—what should happen to black slaves should they ever become free? Where should they go?

Different white abolitionists proposed different solutions. Some advocated sending freed slaves back to Africa. Some advocated sending them further into the frontier, where they could

start their own black colonies. Some advocated a gradual abolition of slavery with a long transition period in which enlightened slaver owners could educate, train and prepare their slaves to live in white society. Some advocated creating separate communities and schools for former slaves within the states in which they were freed, separate communities and schools where they could access the education, training and preparation they needed to overcome their degradation.

Again, all of these solutions assumed that black people were equal to white people, but should be kept separate from white people. Maybe forever, maybe for several decades or generations. What's fascinating is that this separate but equal stance that many white people held in the late 1700s and early 1800s was considered the conventional "liberal" view at the time. Separate but equal seemed rational and humane. Backed by science. Consistent with the Declaration of Independence and the biblical mandate for justice. Many liberal Congregational pastors advocated this liberal separate but equal view from the pulpit.

Now there was a small group of radicals who believed slavery should be abolished immediately, and that white people and black people could live together side-by-side if white people overcame their prejudice against black people. But in the late 1700s and early 1800s, that was a radical view, one held by a very small minority.

If the conventional white liberal view was separate but equal, the main conventional opposing view was separate and unequal. Many white people, in the south and the north, believed black people were innately unequal to white people. These white people believed that a racial hierarchy did exist, one that placed white people at the top and black people below them. Some white people thereby concluded that they had the right, if not the obligation, to control black people and even enslave them.

At the very same time that white people were arguing over how to treat black people, they were also arguing over how to treat Native Americans, or Indians as they called them, especially as white people encroached upon Indian territory in Ohio, Indiana, Tennessee, Georgia and Florida.

I won't go into the details regarding white attitudes towards Indians, but they followed similar contours as white attitudes toward black people. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, white people were generally divided between those who held various separate but equal views toward Indians, and those who believed Indians were savages who should be driven off lands destined for superior white people.

Nicholas Guyatt's book reaffirms not only how divisive race has been in our nation, it reaffirms for just *how long* race has been divisive. Even before we became an independent nation, race was deeply divisive. Throughout our entire history, race has been deeply divisive.

White racism. White people insisting they have the right to determine the worth of people who have darker skin. White people dominating people with darker skin. America's original sin, some people call it. The seeds brought over from Europe and sewn on this soil from the very beginning.

Of course, other sins have long plagued our nation as well. Ethnic prejudice, discrimination and domination. Religious prejudice, discrimination and domination. Gender prejudice, discrimination and domination. Class prejudice, discrimination and domination. Sexual orientation prejudice, discrimination and domination. Citizens of the United States are, and have always been, a people who struggle and fight over these issues. The on-going struggles and fights over these issues are a defining characteristic of our nation.

Personally, I think it is healthy to acknowledge that we're a nation that struggles and fights over these issues. I have to confess, it bothers me when some racist incident occurs, or an

act of prejudice against a transgendered person, or the President targets certain people for prejudice and discrimination with Executive Orders, and in response people say, that's not the America I know, or that's not the Texas in which I live. The real America stands for justice and equality for all. The real Texas, the Texas I know, welcomes refugees.

I understand the sentiment. It makes for good political posturing. It's aspirational. But the fact is the America in which we really live, the Texas in which we really live, is a place where we continue to fight and struggle over race, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and sexual orientation.

The America in which we live does not in reality, in actual practice, stand for justice and equality for all people. Some Americans do, and they struggle and fight for it. Some Americans don't, and they struggle and fight against it. That is a defining characteristic of the real America and the real Texas in which we live.

Over time, we can discern greater degrees of equality and justice for more people. We can even see an evolution in how people conceive of equality and justice—recall the views held by white “liberals” at the end of the 1700s, they'd be considered overtly racist today, while the views held by the radicals back then would be considered mainstream liberal today. These advances in equality and justice have occurred only because some people have struggled for equality and justice against those who oppose equality and justice, and have done so since our nation's very inception.

To use the imagery in today's parable, the United States of America is not a field where nothing but wheat grows, a place where goodness, equality and justice reign supreme for all people. Nor is the United States of America a field where nothing but weeds grow, a place of unremitting prejudice, inequality and injustice. Our nation has always been a field where wheat and weeds grow together. A place where people have always, and to this day continue, to contend with one another over equality and justice.

Likewise, no single person is a field where nothing but wheat grows, in whom unadulterated love, righteousness, kindness and compassion reign supreme. And no single person is a field where nothing but weeds grow, in whom unadulterated fear, prejudice, ignorance and hatred reign supreme. Each person is a field in which wheat and weeds grow side-by-side and contend with one another. Where the angels of our better nature contend with the angels of our lesser nature.

And so, as we contend with our fellow citizens over various equality and justice issues, let us not fall into the trap of identifying ourselves as the wheat and our adversaries as the weeds. We're all human, each one of us a field of wheat and weeds. Each one of us shining a bit of glory, each one of us with some sin to confess.

Yes, let us struggle and fight for equality and justice, because that's what people in our nation have always done. But let us strive to struggle and fight in a manner befitting disciples of Jesus Christ. Not with blind and angry self-righteousness, but with the humility of knowing that our current knowledge of equality and justice is always partial, and our lives consist of both wheat and weeds. With the knowledge that these struggles and fights have been going on for a very long time and will continue long into the future, but the stand we take today does make a difference in people's lives today and it will effect what happens in the future. So let us take our stand today for equality and justice.