

“Messy Midwifery on the Way toward Justice”

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10, Romans 12:1-8

Andrew Foster Connors

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Everybody needs a good hero. People who rise to the historical moment. People who say and do the right things when the pressure is on and the right things aren't easy. People to look up to. So it's disappointing to discover that few change-agents in history were consistently right in their values or ideology. Ibram Kendi is ruthlessly honest in conveying this truth in his history of racist ideas in America, *Stamped from the Beginning*. From preachers to politicians, abolitionists to activists, scientists to civil rights leaders so many seem to have advanced racist ideas alongside freedom's progress. It's actually more than disappointing; it undermines a central idea about faith that I received as a child; the idea that if you give yourself entirely to Christ, trust yourself to the teachings of the faith, it will somehow turn you into a hero. The truth is more complicated than that. We sometimes rise to our moments with Christlike love for the stranger and justice for the oppressed, while other times, we miss the mark.

Kendi, I think, agrees. “As I carefully studied America’s racial past,” he writes, “. . . I did not see a *singular* historical force taking steps forward and backward on race. I saw *two* distinct historical forces. I saw a *dual and dueling* history of racial progress and the simultaneous progression of racism. I saw the antiracist force of equality and the racist force of inequality marching forward, progressing in rhetoric, in tactics, in politics.”

¹ Often these dueling forces can be seen within the lives of specific individuals. So the great abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who I once reduced in my historical understanding to a pure hero - he did oppose slavery from his youth - he continued to advance the racist idea that Black people were inferior because of their African heritage that needed to be overcome by whiteness.

Our lives are interwoven with seeds of light to shine the love of Christ and with the weeds of injustice, sin, and pain that we cause for ourselves and others. Paul seemed to be aware of this when he wrote to the Roman church over the central question of inclusion that would go on to challenge the church for its first 2 centuries - the question of Gentile inclusion. How is it that the God of Israel has become the God of all people and that the blessings that were once reserved only for Israel have now been extended to others. It's hard for us to relate to today, centuries after the official split of the church from the synagogue, with 1800 years of reading what used to be

¹ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, (New York: Nation Books), 2016, p. x.

someone else's Bible, someone else's God firmly claimed as our own. But this letter is Paul thinking through this question in those early, odd years. For 3 chapters prior to this one he argues that Jews who don't believe in Jesus as Messiah are still the Chosen people. The original promise made by God is still good. But God has allowed Israel to be disobedient, he says, in order to bring Gentiles into the family of God. Their disobedience, he argues, is God's odd act of mercy to bring Gentiles into the fold. God's favor has fallen on the Gentiles. Because of this odd and incredible kind of reversal of fortune, Gentiles have no basis for any kind of arrogance. If we find ourselves favored, on the right path, we have God to thank, not our own egos. It's a warning I wish the church would have heeded at so many points in history especially in matters of who belongs, who is loved by God, who is saved. There can be no room for arrogance, Paul contends, when all people - Jew or Gentile - have at one time or another - been disobedient. There can be no arrogance when we all have received grace from God.

On this week when we celebrate 100 years of women demanding and then fighting and winning the right to vote, I've been thinking a lot about that grace, about how much I need it, about how much we need it together. Because the dueling forces that Kendi described in the history of racism and antiracism seem comparable to the development of sexism and gender equality. The first Black woman on a major party ticket is certainly a sign of the forces of equality marching forward, even as the double standards that are applied to Kamala Harris and to Hillary Clinton before her are signs of the progression of sexist ideas that advance inequality, to say nothing of the gender pay gap or the incidence of sexual violence against women from Hollywood suites to war-torn hamlets.

My instinct, as in so many times in the past, is to look for heroes. Everybody needs a good hero to lead the way. Heroes like Shiphrah and Puah who rose to the occasion and saved those Hebrew babies. It's the heroes in the text that always inspired me in my youth. The midwives who saved the babies. Moses who led the people out. Daniel in the lions den. Paul braving prison. Deborah leading the battles from the Bible at a time when I didn't see any female soldiers in the Army ads. And, of course, the lead superhero of them all, Jesus the Christ who our tradition looks to for the ultimate model of heroism. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)

But history's heroes are rarely so perfect or pure. And history's villain's are rarely so purely and perfectly unrighteous. And I wonder if our reductionistic way of telling it that way, not only manufactures heroes who have been sanitized of their humanity, but leaves us less hopeful as a result. Less hopeful about our own agency as mixed as we are in our own abilities to always do what is right, and less hopeful about our future. Cynical because the supply of pure heroes is slim to none..

Historic clashes between justice and injustice in our country are often muddled attempts at a more perfect union by less than perfect people. I hadn't imagined the suffrage movement that way until I dug in on it. Celebrating the growing numbers of women in white in those state of the Union speeches, I had imagined that the struggle for the vote was an easy case of women wresting their rightful, equal power directly from the clutches of villainous men. I had imagined the clearly righteous women on one side of the fight, organizing their rightful power to demand what they deserve from men on the other side of that same fight. But the deeper I read about the struggle for the right to vote the more I learned a more complicated history.

I was surprised to learn that some of the loudest voices against a women's right to vote came from other women. They were not arguing that women were not equal, but that women had a different role from men in society. Here's a pamphlet from the National Association Opposed to Women's Suffrage that originated with women in the Northeast, the area of the country where organized opposition to suffrage was particularly strong. Imagine yourself as a suffragist and the complexity of taking *them on*, and not just the patently sexist opposition that I had imagined in the simplistic good vs. evil ways that we tend to oversimplify history.²

On the righteous side of the fight, some incredible heroes that we honor today led the fight, Susan B. Anthony, perhaps the most well known among them. Raised in a Quaker home by her abolitionist parents, she opposed slavery from her earliest ability to do so. She was a lifelong friend of Frederick Douglass. She was the organizer that undergirded the intellectual writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She devoted her life toward racial *and* gender equality. Yet when the 15th Amendment to the Constitution was proposed, extending the vote to Black men, prohibiting disenfranchisement on account of race, Anthony opposed the amendment. Some historians claim that this principled stand for suffrage for both women and Black Americans was the right one, refusing to sacrifice one for the other.³ But critics point out Anthony's own words that Black men had "just emerged from slavery [and were] not only totally illiterate, but also densely ignorant of every public question."⁴ Ironically, it was a similar argument to those leveled against women obtaining the right to vote.

Of course, Susan B. Anthony didn't choose to be put in the position of having to decide if standing for suffrage for everyone on principle was the right strategy, any more than those midwives in Egypt found themselves in the middle of Pharaoh's machinery.

² Anti-Suffrage Pamphlet produced by the National Association Opposed to Women's Suffrage, shared by the National Women's History Museum, <http://www.crusadeforthevote.org/naows-opposition>, website obtained in August, 2020.

³ Kimberly A. Hamlin, "How racism almost killed women's right to vote," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/04/how-racism-almost-killed-womens-right-vote/>

⁴ Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999, 65 referenced in Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped*, p.246.

We know that if the midwives were in charge, there would be no death sentence against any children in Israel. If Anthony and Stanton and Frederick Douglass, and later Mary Church Terrell - one of the first Black women to earn a college degree in the United States, graduating from Oberlin in 1884 - if they had been given the power to choose then people of color and women would have received the vote with one constitutional amendment 50 years before the 19th Amendment and suffrage for women finally arrived.

But none of us is given that kind of power. We find ourselves in ethically complicated situations where one person's strategy for justice looks to another to be a strategy for oppression. There are few pure heroes among us, not the kinds that can rescue us from our own complicated historical moment where we have to make choices about what is good and just and true.

Paul told the church - Jews and Gentiles alike - not to think too highly of themselves, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. I love that encouragement. To people who he just told, "you have been blessed by God," he immediately says, assume a posture of openness, even when you believe you are on the right side of history. Don't let your belief that you are in the right, that we are in the right, close you off to the wisdom that God continues to bring into your life and into our community. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. The constant growing, learning, receiving. Yes you are blessed, Paul tells the church, but don't let the world push you along in its currents. Be transformed each and every day.

Paul went on to say that this kind of transformation happens in community. We're each given different kinds of gifts in different kinds of ways. Sometimes we are the leaders. Other times we are the followers. That's how community works. When it's done well, the community becomes the place that nurtures non-conformity to the world. The community that nurtured someone like Susan B. Anthony to stand on the right side of history from her youth when so much of the world had yet to see it. That is how to stay nonconformist to the dominant values - by living what you know is true and staying open to the gifts that others bring into your own discernment of that truth. Sometimes we get to be the heroes in the story. Other times we get to be the witnesses to the heroics of others who bear God's justice and grace in the world and in so doing change our lives.

Many women and men scoffed when Sojourner Truth attended one of the many women's rights conferences organized in Ohio during the 1850s. When she finally rose to speak amid male ministers who had preached about Eve's sin and the "feebleness of all women," and against cries from some women who shouted, "Don't let her speak," her

address answered both injustices. “Ain’t I a Woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! Ain’t I a Woman? I can outwork, outeat, outlast any man! Ain’t I a woman!”⁵

As a white man, it’s impossible for me to know how I would have reacted that day had I been in that shocked audience. I would like to believe that I would have already been on the right side of history. Statistically my chances are probably slim to none. Our lives are interwoven with seeds of light to shine the love of Christ and with the weeds of injustice, sin, and pain that we cause for ourselves and others. Those dual forces are dueling within us. And anyway, believing one is always in the right is the prerequisite for being on the wrong side of history. No, I’ll settle for the hope that I would have sat in the church that day awed by this six foot woman bearing the light of God’s justice in a congregation filled with people who had assumed they knew more than her. Awed by the light of realization and thankful that, once again, God had sent another person in the right moment in history to save us from ourselves and midwife our way toward the promised land.

⁵ Ibid, 191-193.