

Recognizing racism through Aboriginal eyes, Canaanite eyes

by **PRISCILLA SOLOMON**

ON MY VISITS HOME, MY DAD WOULD OFTEN SHARE WITH ME his insights, poetry, ideas and experiences. One piece of wisdom he shared with me was this: “Life, in all its complexity, is basically simple.” I think both he and my mom understood that well. It enabled them to age gracefully and to keep their youthful spirit well into their eighties, in fact, until their deaths. Racism, also, in all its complexity is basically simple: one person or group is belittled by another in order to augment the self-perception of the other. However, like life, racism in all its simplicity is complex. It’s sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant. Its motives are covert and its expression is often cloaked in seemingly innocent behaviour, almost always justifiable under some other name.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives two meanings for racism. The first states racism is “a belief that some races are by nature superior to others”. The second is “discrimination based on such belief”. Although clear, these definitions are quite disembodied. I prefer the following definition by Darlene Ritchie, Executive Director of At^lohsa Native Family Healing Services in London, Ontario:

“Racism is a violation of mind, body and spirit; it strikes to the heart of a person. Like all other violations of humans by humans, the perpetrators have many ways to try to keep it hidden. Usually the pain of recall and the associated feeling of powerlessness are enough to keep those who experience racism silent. To speak from your own experience about the racism you have endured, you need to be able to trust the people with whom you are speaking, with whom you are sharing the pain. You also need to know that talking about those experiences will help.”

In the western world today, including Canada, when one speaks of racism one’s thoughts go immediately to the horrors of the Holocaust, apartheid in South Africa, and perhaps to the ethnic wars of Rwanda or the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Many Canadians do not as quickly reflect on the racism that exists here in our own country.

Let me share with you two personal experiences. I was travelling with my mother and we stopped at a restaurant I had been in before. My mother had the most beautiful open and caring face I have ever known (my personal opinion, of course!). And she was clearly Ojibway. Anyone who knew Aboriginal people of Canada would recognize us as Aboriginal. We sat at a table and waited. While we waited others came and sat at a table next to us, and another group came to the next table. Finally a waitress came in our direction but she went first to the other two all-white tables. After she had taken their orders she came to us. She had been in the room facing us when we came in, so it was hard to believe she did not see us. By the time she waited on us I was feeling shame. I’m not sure if it was shame for my Nativeness, or shame for exposing my mother to such an abusive experience. Was it racism? I can’t answer that, but I can say it felt like racism.

The second experience was similar. I had been asked to be an Aboriginal resource person for a group of Development and Peace members who wanted to meet and experience Aboriginal people in their own situations and learn from them first-hand what their actual experience was. We were on an Aboriginal reserve and we stopped in a restaurant – all ten of us. We put in our order when the waitress finally came; then we watched several other persons who arrived after us being served before us. Again I was feeling shame and embarrassment because I had been trying to assist the group in developing positive understanding and attitudes toward my people and here they were, waiting while others were served! Was it racism? I can’t answer that, but I can say it felt like racism.

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Although some acts are blatantly racist, reconciliation and transformation can only come about when the perpetrator acknowledges the racist nature of his or her behaviour. The recipient can respond in silence, anger, or even violence, but none of these will change the perpetrator of a racist act. Education about racism and a socio-political climate that does not tolerate it will help. But in the end, only honest self-awareness can change the perpetrator's self-understanding and attitude to the other.

A number of Aboriginal teachings from my parents and elders come to mind as I reflect on racism. They taught me that all things are connected and all things belong in the circle of life. We acknowledge a Creator, a Great Spirit, who brought into being all that is in this circle of life. There is a place for everyone in the circle, even though my parents in their personal experience often found that there was no place for them or many other Aboriginal people. Yet they continued to reach out.

I have also been given the teachings of the four directions which encompass the entire human person and one's life. In our Anishinabe teachings we speak of how important to wholeness and well-being is the balance of body, mind and spirit, frequently signified in the three-strand braid of sweetgrass. A well-balanced braid is strong and whole, as is a well-balanced person who attends to one's body, mind and spirit. In this image, mind encompasses emotions, feelings, motives, thoughts, ideas, and intuitions. That's why Darlene Ritchie, who is Oneida, speaks of racism as "a violation of body, mind and spirit".

When I think of body, mind and spirit in terms of the four directions of the medicine wheel I, like many of my elders, associate body with the east, emotions and affectivity with the south, thoughts and cognition with the west, and spirit and spiritual capacities with the north. In the very centre of the circle is the human capacity to make a decision with all the information provided by each aspect of the self. In reality the human person is one, and such separation is somewhat artificial, but it does help me to explore how I experience and can respond to racism.

Racism, like any other form of "ism", is about a sense of one's superiority over another. This sense of superiority is communicated through family, culture and one's own personal feelings and attitudes. It is far more unconscious than conscious. I think no person is exempt, but not all persons act out of their unconscious attitudes and feelings.

I believe Jesus gave us a simple pattern for

confronting racism in our own hearts in order to respond differently to the other. One situation in which Jesus found himself occurred near the cities of Tyre and Sidon:

A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him. "Son of David" she cried out. "Have mercy on me sir! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition." But Jesus did not say a word to her. His disciples came to him and begged him "Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!" Then Jesus replied, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel." At that, the woman came and fell at his feet. "Help me, sir!" she said. Jesus answered, "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs!" "That's true, sir," she answered, "but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from the master's table." So Jesus answered her: "You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you." And at that very moment her daughter was healed. (Matt 15:21-28)

Jesus was prepared to ignore the Canaanite woman. He was doing so out of his own self-understanding that he was sent for the lost sheep of Israel. He was also acting out of his cultural and religious understanding that the Israelites were the chosen ones of God. Is that not what we do: act out of our own self-understanding and our social, cultural, and political understanding? How else can we act – unless it is to allow the gospel to penetrate our hearts?

The disciples were doing likewise. They did not see any need for Jesus to respond to this woman; in fact, they were embarrassed by her behaviour. From her perspective she was calling out, pleading. From theirs, she was making noise. They were discounting her, treating her as less than themselves and less than those for whom Jesus had come.

What happened?

Having explained to her that he was sent for the lost sheep of Israel, Jesus once again expressed his understanding of who he is and who God's people are. But the woman would not be suppressed. She was willing to allow him to think of himself and his people as superior. Her response, "even the dogs eat the crumbs from the masters table", was not only clever, it was desperate. She wanted her daughter healed, even if they did not have any merit, or equality, in the eyes of God's chosen ones.

But Jesus listened carefully to her response. She invited him to look differently, to step outside his self-understanding and his understanding of who he had been sent to heal. She did not deny his self-understanding, but

sought to be acknowledged. This was a courageous act on the part of the woman who risked being rejected again. Jesus responded to her invitation and reflected on his initial response. He did not simply agree with her remark that even the dogs eat the crumbs under the master's table. If he had said, "Yes, that's true", we might be left thinking he still saw his race as superior. Instead he spoke to her with respect. He saw more deeply into her, listened, and responded both with a recognition of her – commending her for her faith – and granting healing to her daughter.

Jesus models for us the way to deal with racist attitudes within ourselves. Am I saying Jesus was racist? No! But I am saying that Jesus was like us in all things except sin. Jesus, like us, had limited understandings of himself, his call, and his relationship with other humans, including those who were not Israelites. During his life and his ministry he was confronted with challenges and invitations to which he listened attentively and carefully. He allowed himself to be influenced and changed by how others saw him, his mission, and his place in the human family, though he never lost sight of his primary relationship with the One who was the source of his power and compassion. Because of that he could respond with respect, healing and love.

As a Christian, I believe that Jesus was tempted in the desert, but I seldom reflect on other occasions in which he may have been tempted to choose poorly. Like you and me, I am sure he felt physiological or bodily responses like attraction, resistance, fear, anger, revulsion, all of which can contribute to discernment. I believe he paid attention to them and listened to them. He thought within the framework of his religion and culture, and he questioned both. He was prepared to allow his reflections to move him beyond what he thought he knew. And he faced life with an openness of spirit that enabled him to do and say what he had not imagined himself doing or saying. This led him to decisions that were life-giving, healing, respectful, loving and compassionate. He refused to choose less!

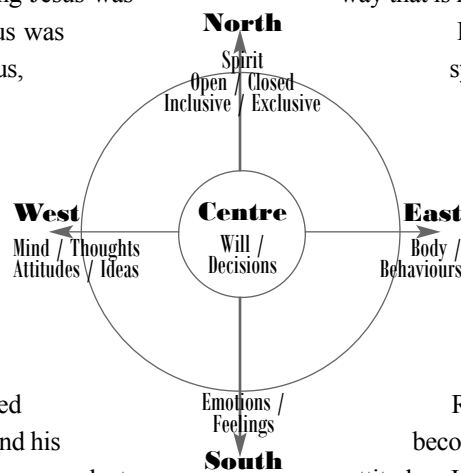
How does this apply to me or you?

Some time ago, I was watching two women on television. To one of them I reacted, and I learned from my reaction. I felt dislike for the pitch and intonation of her

voice and I found myself mimicking her, much as a child would. I realized her voice had triggered in me a racist attitude. I identified her with oppressors of my people, felt anger and resentment, and discredited her. When I decided to listen more carefully, I saw a woman who was genuinely interested in her companion and the conversation, a woman who was gracious and friendly. I could then listen to her with respect. I could no longer identify her with an amorphous group to whom I could attribute guilt or blame. I could no longer feel superior because I had recognized what was in me. By recognizing it, I am able to act in a way that is not racist but compassionate and caring.

I have not extensively addressed systemic racism, a daily experience of Aboriginal people and many immigrants in Canada. Systemic racism will not decrease as long as people are unconscious of their behaviour, and continue their malevolence. Unexamined and unacknowledged systemic racism leads to resistance and counteraction.

Racism will only decrease when we become aware of our thoughts, feelings and attitudes. It is our responsibility to examine and discern our inner responses in the light of Jesus' behaviour, and then decide to recognize the worth of another as equal to our own. The task is ours, but we don't face it alone.



Reflection questions:

1. Ask yourself: When have I noticed racist feelings, attitudes and behaviours in myself? Was I inclined to deny my feelings, ignore them, or examine them?
2. Draw a circle showing the four cardinal directions. In the East, place the words: Body / Behaviours; in the South: Emotions / Feelings; in the West: Mind / Thoughts / Attitudes / Ideas; in the North: Spirit, Open / Closed, Inclusive / Exclusive; in the Centre: Will / Decisions. Monitor yourself when you meet others of another race, whether Aboriginals or immigrants. Identify your reactions as you consider each direction. Ask yourself: What have I learned about myself and my attitudes? What changes do I need to make? When am I acting as a woman/man of faith? When am I acting as Jesus did?
3. Share with someone your / their experience of racism. Reflect on it in light of this Gospel passage.

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