

The image to the left is a snapshot of the zoom video of our Miles for a Mission check presentation to Lendria Glass, Development Manager of Equal Justice Initiative. (Click on the image to view the video. We ask that you not share it on social media per EJI's request.) We were proud to present her with a "check" for \$38,053.00 (the real check is in the mail). The mood was upbeat, and Lendria was wonderful. She was appreciative of the donation. She noted the ongoing work of EJI in the midst of the pandemic. And she gave a sobering assessment of the needs of incarcerated individuals during COVID-19. While one may intellectually know the compromised position of those in prison, hearing Lendria speak about it brought the issue home in an even more profound way.

Like many organizations, EJI initially moved to a virtual office at the beginning of the pandemic. However, they realized that the administrative staff needed to come into the office to field the overwhelming calls from prisoners who could only call out on landlines. The need was--and remains--overwhelming. Prisons are not allowing groups like EJI to enter the prison to see inmates, which ultimately makes it impossible for EJI to follow up on allegations of mistreatment. Meanwhile, violence is on the rise in the prisons. Prisoners are not protected from COVID-19, and there is concern that the state is underreporting cases of COVID-19 within the prison system. Again, these types of issues may cross our mind. Hearing from someone who works with those on the front lines made the issue so much more real.

Which, invariably, is the case. While theoretical understanding of issues clearly possesses import, engaging an issue with someone directly impacted or who works with those who are impacted often changes our calculus of the subject. We can't not be changed. The encounter with another human changes us. We may recognize the truth of the old saying, "There but for the grace of God go I." Yet, to know through the encounter of another what "there" is, gives us an entirely different appreciation for the experience of others. It may even move us from recognizing our fortune to understanding that we have a role in not allowing the status quo to exist. Indeed, Lendria's description of what is taking place in the prisons is the result of layers upon layers of structural racism. The mental gyration is not too difficult to appreciate; that given a myriad of other circumstances, we could also be in a prison. Though, knowing an individual in that situation hopefully moves us beyond the theoretical world that *could* be to seeing the world that is and our part--or at least complicity--in the making of that world.

No, we may not be a part of the criminal justice system. No, we may not actively espouse racist ideology. No, we do not have a desire for people to be punished. Indeed, we may express that we desire unity and opportunity. Yet, the structures are so embedded in the system of our society that we can't not be racist. Thus, we must actively work to be anti-racist.

Which can be difficult. There are so many things for us to work on, *and* we are in the midst of a pandemic! We need to deal with this as well? Well, the simple answer is, “Yes.” During the weekly Episcopal Church in Connecticut zoom call on Wednesday, one clergy person lamented the clear dismissal of any responsibility for systemic racism by many in his parish. They were, he said, uninterested and not convinced. I, for one, do not believe that I am evolved on this issue. There is much more that I need to learn and to work on. However, I have no illusion of the reality of systemic racism and the devastating legacy of white supremacy and anti-black bias in our country. I think that some folks feel that if they acknowledge that this is true, then they have failed. (And, in a real way, we have.) However, acknowledging this reality, recognizing the need to learn and work on our role in the larger system, and the desire to become better because other lives are impacted should be warrant for us to engage in the work.

Again, the reality of structural racism can become a theoretical exercise for some that allows them to escape the reality of the world. However, meeting those whose lives are compromised because of the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, the industrial prison complex, and the larger system of racism changes the conversation. We can't not be changed. Indeed, we must change. The incarnational reality of Christianity possesses insight into this truth. We are not just dealing with esoteric ideas. We are engaged with life, and, because of this, we cannot simply deny the truth of others' lives. We must acknowledge these truths, regardless of how it may make us feel. We do it not only because, were we in the same situation, we hope that others would do it for us. We do it because we confess that each person bears the image of God. We are not just rejecting other people when we deny the structures that bind them and our part in that system. We reject God. And that is the problem.