

Temptation and Truths in Antiracist Work

By: Kate Hoerchler

February 24, 2021. Each week during Lent, a member of the congregation will be offering a testimonial. This week, Kate Hoerchler talks about resisting the temptation to be complacent in the midst of systemic racism.

Reading: [Matthew 4:1-11](#)

*** Transcript ***

I really felt like there was a lot in those short eleven verses to really examine, but since we're focused on truth during this Lent season I thought I'd offer some reflections on temptation and commitment to truth.

"Truthiness" is a word I think about often. Some of you may remember that back from the *Colbert Report*, but basically he would talk about it as meaning "believing something is true based on your perception or intuition, rather than known facts and logic."

How tempting or easy or comfortable it might be to lean on our own perceptions rather than the truth. Sometimes I feel like I know why things are the way they are, until I learn more — revealing my blind spots, or through talking to others with different perceptions. This has played out pretty vividly for me as I've been digging into racist constructs, white privilege, and exceptionalism over the past couple of years.

Things I thought I knew from history were really not as they seemed, due to whitewashing and ingrained stereotypes, such as why is the town that I grew up in full of mostly white people? I used to hold racist stereotypes accountable, like maybe Black people didn't have enough money. Maybe they didn't care enough about education to work to live in a community with "good schools." Or maybe they couldn't leave their crime-ridden neighborhood due to family obligations. It took me way too long to realize this awful truthiness that I perceived was based on upholding white exceptionalism and systemic racism. I did not know, was not taught about racist real estate policies that kept Black people out of white neighborhoods, or that the town I grew up in was likely a "sundown town," which is where Black people were allowed to come in during the day to work but had to leave before the sun went down, to escape harassment and abuse.

It can be tempting, now even, to ignore all of this, to hold on to my old perceptions. It also reminds me of a nice park in Creve Coeur that Phil and I took our kids to this past fall. We are participating in the SEEK STL Adventure, which is organized by We Stories, a local group that promotes white families to talk with their children about race and racism, to encourage racial justice and change in the region. The SEEK STL Adventure takes participants around St. Louis to explore racially significant places and history. Anyway, some of you may know this park or remember it being in the news back in 2019, when it was renamed to Dr. H. Phillip Venable Memorial Park.

It could be tempting to forget or not know the history of this park, as it was by many residents for about 60 years. The land was owned by a Black physician, Dr. Venable, and his wife Katy. They'd even built half of their house before the city refused to issue them plumbing permits. There were 11 other Black doctors that were also planning to build in that neighborhood back in the 1950s, until the city council and white residents protested and the city of Creve Coeur took the land over through eminent domain,

so they could build a park rather than have Black neighbors. They were worried about bringing their home prices down due to redlining practices, and surely many other racist notions of what it would be like to have Black neighbors.

It can be tempting to think Black people mostly lived in the city, are poor, uneducated, unable to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. But then, standing in that peaceful park, under old trees that would have been standing when Dr. Venable owned the land, offers a glimpse into just one story of the systemic racism that's so fully ingrained into our community and our country. The SEEK STL Adventure asks you to consider what this neighborhood might have looked like had Black families been allowed to thrive and raise their families there — then to take a step out further to think about how our entire region would look had blatantly racist policy not been in place.

It can be tempting to hear this story and think, "Well how could I have known this?" Or, "I can't do anything about it anyway." But I can do more. I can keep learning, keep seeking real truths outside of perceptions that I don't realize I have yet.

It can be tempting to think, "But it's a pandemic, I don't see people. Maybe once the pandemic's over I could do more." But I can do more now. I can keep reading, independently and with the church race group. I can keep attending the Black Lives Matter vigils on Friday at church to show solidarity and support for racial justice in our community. I can keep working in my daughter's school equity group, trying to bring anti-racism education into our schools.

It can be tempting to sit comfortably in my white privilege, not questioning my perceptions of the world around me. But I can't unknow the truths I've learned. And I know there is much more for me to learn. I also know I won't get everything right on this antiracist journey. But I can work to resist the temptation of complacency, taking lessons from Jesus resisting temptation, as in the gospel that we heard tonight.

*** Keywords ***

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