

**Dispatch from the Pandemic #5:  
God's Side  
by Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer**

JUNE 4, 2020 — “I once ... was blind but now I see.”

I think of this line from the beautiful hymn, “Amazing Grace,” written by John Newton. An 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet, Newton was active in the slave trade of the time. He even captained his own ship for several voyages. He had a conversion experience while caught in a storm at sea. However, it was years before he fully embraced that experience. He eventually renounced slavery and became an Anglican clergyman.

I think of this hymn as more of us white Americans begin to wake up from a 400-year sleep. The light from that deep time of unconsciousness is so bright that it is taking the eyes of many of us a while to adjust.

And as we begin to see, and feel the pain, of our brothers and sisters of color, we struggle to know how to react. We want to act—appropriately, with compassion. And sometimes we do. And some of those times, yes, I know, we are clumsy

I belong to a neighborhood watch group and joined my local online Next Door site to share information, find resources and ask questions of those who live in my area. To be honest, I don't pay much attention to this site because I have enough information flying at me without inviting more. But occasionally, I will catch a request for information, and will private message a response to the person seeking help if I have something to offer. I never post anything on the discussion threads.

I broke that rule the other day.

A woman—a white woman, it is important to note—posted a request for the names of local black-owned businesses. She wanted to patronize them as a show of support. Well, you would have thought that she was planning to kill kittens from the response she drew. Granted, not all who responded took exception to her request, but those who did fell along two lines. One, we need to support local businesses regardless of the skin color of the owner. Two, looking to support black-owned business now when she hadn't previously was *virtue signaling*.

*Virtue signaling?* Who coins these phrases?

Even if the woman who posted an interest in supporting businesses owned by people of color was doing so to display her concern as a self-righteous badge, or acting out of guilt, the end result of her action would help a minority-owned business.

The posts scrolled on and on. Most were taking swipes at another's post. Occasionally, some posted a useful resource. One woman suggested that the woman who wanted to support black-owned businesses check with the Urban League. This is where I made one of my two posts. I

thanked the woman for the information. Then I went back to the original post and thanked that woman for the idea to seek out black-owned businesses to support.

I wanted nothing to do with the remaining posts. That was particularly the case when the person who recommended a local barbeque establishment owned by a black man was accused of stereotyping.

How have we come to this place where someone expressing a desire to extend a hand of support, perform an act of kindness, becomes a target for criticism? We all have to start somewhere in doing the right thing.

Why is it wrong for someone who perhaps previously hadn't been so thoughtful in her purchasing is now trying to use her dollars for good? Why is it not acceptable to act according to what we now see but may have been previously blind to? Isn't that what growth is all about, particularly spiritual growth?

You see this same kind of back and forth sniping on national websites. One well-established and widely followed lifestyle blog writer was criticized when she outlined what she would be doing to lead the way for racial justice within her own business.

I appreciate that sometimes these gestures of support for those who have been marginalized are hollow, just as a photo op is when it does not accurately reflect the truth of the matter. But sometimes the gestures are not so empty. When ordinary citizens "wake up" to a situation that they find untenable, can we not give them grace, respect their decision, rather than criticizing them for not waking up ten years ago—thereby questioning their sincerity? Even if their motivation is not pure—and who of us has totally pure motivations about anything?—they still are changing their behavior. Isn't that the idea behind any movement for social reform?

Certainly we white people who are trying to be allies, trying to get it right, are going to make mistakes, just as any child does learning a new way. Too often, those of us who are white think we know the solution. I suggest instead of proclaiming our answers we seek help, ask for direction, take our cues from our brothers and sisters of color. And we need to humbly ask for grace as we stumble in trying to do what is right. We cannot walk in another person's shoes, but we can ask those who have walked in racism for four hundred years to teach us what life is like for them. We can ask them if we may walk with them so we too may truly see.

We are in the season of Pentecost, named so from the pouring out of the Holy Spirit onto the apostles while they were celebrating the Jewish harvest festival Shavuot. The Holy Spirit of our Christian tradition has been called the Great Comforter. Let us emulate that by extending a kindness to anyone who is trying to make a difference. Let us also continually treat those others with respect and civility who remain in a place where they cannot see.

Too often in history we have heard people claim that God is on their side—no matter what their side is. In recent months, I have reflected in my own private meditations on the converse of that proclamation. What would it mean, not to have God on my side, but to be on God's side? That's where I want to stand. And so each morning I ask, may my eyes be open. May I see where God

is standing. May I find my way forward—through thickets of misinformation, confusion and fear—to stand there with understanding, generosity and kindness *with God*. I know I often will fail and so humbly must ask those whom I let down for grace and even forgiveness.