**The Gospel According to *The Green Book***

A sermon preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, January 13, 2019

Ephesians 6:12-20

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*Green Book* is a movie about racism. And *Green Book* is supposed to be funny. That’s hard. Why? Well, mostly because racism is actually not that funny.

For example, in my family there are African Americans, Black Africans, Afghanis, and Whites. We sit down around the table, sometimes, and compare notes. It isn’t a pretty picture. In fact, sometimes it is a heart-rending picture. Being stopped by the police for driving at night, while black. Being told “I won’t be served by a black doctor.” Not being able to get a rental apartment. Being ignored by teachers. Not being accepted as a really black person because you have white parents. And on and on.

People can and often do overcome these sorts of obstacles. But the grind is oppressive. It’s impossible not to feel resentment. You feel as if you’re starting the race of life with a load of bricks in a backpack. Whenever my preaching touches on racism, I feel inadequate to expressing how it is still real; and abashed that I might be too focused on racism—or not enough—because it is such a big deal for me personally.

In Friday’s *Globe,* an article describes how black teens experience life in Toronto. Mona is 16. She says, “This woman looked over her shoulder, saw me behind her and started running, pushing a baby carriage. I was worried she was going to have an accident and waited for her to run around the corner.” In a play about actors’ personal experiences, a black man applies for an executive job, gets it, but then discovers it has been downgraded to something with less status and pay. The bottom line is that racialized people in our city and country can never be in public, in the workplace, in schools, or in a hospital waiting room without thinking, long and hard, how being black or brown might change the outcome. White people never have to think that way. That is white privilege.

So here comes *Green Book* and it is going to try to make us laugh about such stuff. And almost, unbelievably, on the whole the movie succeeds in doing so. It is funny because it is full of ironic reversals that make us look at life with new eyes. The white guy, Tony, is the servant and the black guy is the boss in Jim Crow America. The white guy is dumb and the black guy is smart. The white guy has a lot to learn about culture and the cultured black guy has a lot to teach. And then, just as you’re laughing about these reversals, you ask yourself why it is so funny that a black man is so smart, so cultured, and so wise.

In the movie, Tony Lip is an Italian-American living in New York in 1962. He’s uneducated. He’s prejudiced enough to throw out two drinking glasses that black repairmen used in his home. He’s a nightclub bouncer. He loses his job and is hired for his pugilistic public relations skills by a highly educated black musician, Dr. Donald Shirley, to be his driver and protector on a Southern concert tour.

They have adventures. Dr. Shirley teaches Tony about diction and good manners. Tony gets into a fight with a policeman who stops them in a rain storm for being black at night. Dr. Shirley writes Tony’s love letters because Tony doesn’t know how. Southerners who have come to hear Dr. Shirley play music don’t let him eat in their whites-only restaurant. Dr. Shirley finds friendship and family in Tony’s home on Christmas Eve.

Along the way, *Green Book* gets two things right. First, personal prejudice against people of other races is both wrong and ugly. We all know this and agree.

But the second thing *Green Book* gets right is a bigger problem, systemic racism. Systemic racism is prejudice aided and abetted by power. In the days of American Jim Crow, when it was legal to act in a racist manner, it was easy to see systemic racism at work. From after emancipation until the early sixties, blacks were legally excluded by the power of the State and institutions from eating in many restaurants or staying in most hotels. They were lynched on suspicion of crimes and the lynchers were never brought to justice. Many communities had sunset laws that forbade blacks from being outside after dark. Blacks were excluded from most schools, universities, neighbourhoods, drinking fountains, high-ranking corporate or military jobs, prevented from voting and on and on, and all of this was powerfully enforced by laws. The *Green Book* of the movie title, in fact, refers to a book that listed the few hotels, restaurants, beauty parlors, and bathrooms around the USA that black people were allowed to patronize during Jim Crow days.

Meanwhile, in Canada, even though there were many fewer Jim Crow type laws, the segregation enforced by towns, hotels, the real estate industry and government institutions like residential schools was much the same.

But here is the thing. What the movie didn’t get—perhaps because of the 1962 time-frame, was the fact that systemic racism is still a persistent problem. Just for example, this past week, the Ontario Human Rights commission released a report that noted how black people are far more likely than white people to be injured or killed by Toronto Police officers. While black people make up only 8.8 percent of Toronto’s population, they are involved in seven out of ten cases of fatal shootings by police officers. The report found that black people, and especially black men, are overrepresented in everything from investigations into the use of force and sexual assault by police, to inappropriate or unjustified searches and charges, and until very recently, carding on the street.

It isn’t just black people or policing problems. We all know that there are many more blacks and First Nation people in our jails than their population numbers justify, that there are no jobs on reservations, and lousy health care, schools, and drinking water. We’ve apologized for many generations of residential schools, but the whole system—systemic racism, remember—the whole system of Aboriginal and Northern affairs, citizenship and laws are in need of massive overhaul that we can’t seem to really get going on as we point our fingers first at the police, then at the human rights commission, then at immigration, then at black families or the social welfare system or schools. But that there is a deeply rooted problem here, a problem much more profound than mere personal prejudice, a problem rooted in the very structure of our society, can’t be denied.

Our scripture reading for today points a finger at the roots of systemic racism. Writing to Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman Empire, but unable to publically name the Roman Empire for fear of reprisal, Paul says, “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh—that would be mere prejudice—but our struggle is against the rulers, against the authorities, and against the cosmic powers of this present darkness.” Paul can’t name the Roman Empire, but his readers know what he’s talking about. He’s talking about prejudice aligned with, and working with, the power structures of his day. As it still does.

So, *Green Book* is supposed to be a funny movie, and it is, at times. It makes us laugh at the idiocy of racism. But then, after seeing the movie, I learned that the son of the star, and consultant to the movie, supported Donald Trump’s false claim that Muslims danced in the streets of New York after the 9/11 bombings. Dr. Shirley’s relatives complained that they were never consulted about the movie. Viggo Mortensen, who plays Tony Lip, used the “N” word during a Q&A after the film’s release. We are, by these slips by mostly well-intentioned people, all implicated and Green Book racks up Globe awards.

Racism is fraught. Those of us who are white, who have good intentions, screw up all the time and mostly get away with it. Those of us who are black or brown not only live with all the additional pressures of racism, but they are under great pressure to downplay the weight of those pressures, to talk about Canada as if it is always so much better when it comes to race and they should be thankful. Police, who in Toronto are led by a Black Chief of Police, respond that there just is more crime in black communities, and they are merely reacting to it. But in the meantime, little has been done, concretely, to address these issues at a political level—though the Liberals have promised a public consultation on racism. In the meantime, we mostly just hope and pray it will get better.

Look, what can I say? You saw in the trailer that Tony Lip asks Dr. Shirley’s accompanists why Shirley would go South to play music for racist audiences. They respond by saying Shirley goes south because, “it takes courage to change people’s hearts.”

Well, if it is mostly First Nation or Black or South Asian people who have to have all the courage, we have failed as a society. It is time for us who are white to also go deep, and show courage in the workplace, on corporate and educational boards, in the voting booth, and with our money. We must continue to battle not only the prejudice that still exists in our hearts, but we must name and reject systemic racism that still runs rampant in our institutions and politics. And we have to do so in ways that are not merely passive, but courageous; in ways that are not merely politically correct, but costly.

In the end, you expected me to say something like that, I suppose.

And, in the end, I expect that all of us will respond, for we must, because here in Canada we are trying to do a new thing with our multiculturalism and our immigration laws and our apologies. I love this country. We’re on the way. But like Dr. Shirley, our next step has to be to go south with him.