

I just finished listening to a podcast by American Public Media called “In the Dark,” about an African American man named Curtis Flowers who has been tried six times for a multiple murder in 1996. The murders took place in a furniture store in Winona, Mississippi, and Curtis Flowers is the only publicly acknowledged suspect. But he insists that he is innocent, and in three trials the Supreme Court has overturned his conviction. In three other trials the jury’s been deadlocked or for some other reason given reason for appeal. American Public Media’s reporters decided to do a deep dive on the case. They actually went to live in Winona for a year. They interviewed everyone who knew Curtis Flowers or had any contact with the case. And what becomes clear, episode after episode, is that poor people of color were manipulated, intimidated, and misled by the white DA into contributing to the case against Curtis Flowers. He was done wrong, his family was done wrong, and it was all possible because of the imbalance of power in that community and the indifference of people with privilege. The laws don’t work if nobody enforces them.

It’s fascinating to listen to the narrator tell the story of their investigation. As I said, they literally moved to Winona, and their embeddedness in the community is what makes their reporting possible. For instance, when the narrator talks about trying to meet and interview the DA, Doug Evans, you learn that not only did he not respond to requests to meet, but he wasn’t at any high school basketball games they attended. He wasn’t at this community event, he wasn’t at that one. But *the reporters* were. One interview takes place at the birthday party of a child whose family is connected to Curtis Flowers. Clearly the ordinary people of Winona welcomed these newcomers and incorporated them into their social lives.

The affect of the people of Winona, with regard to the way white power is wielded, is sort of flat and resigned. They feel helpless; they sometimes know that they've been railroaded, but they don't see what else could have happened. One woman, recalling her teenaged involvement in the civil rights movement, told about her first day at the white high school when integration had come to town. All day was a struggle, but when she went to the door at dismissal time, she saw a crowd of white men waiting outside the high school with bats and clubs. She turned to go back inside, but the principal was standing there to prevent her. The interviewer says, "What did you do?" and the woman says, "I just went and let them beat me."

People of color have known for a long time what it feels like to have laws on the books that are not enforced, and to have legislators in office who don't really care what they have to say. It's more of a novelty for us, I think, and it creates a deep sense of unease to know that war can be waged on Iraq or refugee families can be separated and none of our checks and balances will step up and do their job. But with all the corruption, deception, distraction, and power-grabbing, amazingly, love keeps on doing *its* job.

Verse 12 of today's reading from 1 John points out, "No one has ever seen God." "No one has ever seen God." So what is the evidence for God? It is the way love keeps popping up, embodied love, human being to human being (also animals). God's love engenders love in us, comes to fulfillment as we act upon love. People may cite as evidence miracles, big numbers, mystical experiences—but if they do not produce compassion and acts of caring, they are not the main event, they are not evidence.

I don't know how the reporters at APM first found out about Curtis Flowers, but it was probably curiosity and thirst for a good story that sent them to Winona. They show themselves, in the audio clips of interviews, to be brave, tactful, and honest. But in the responses of the people they interact with, people who've been wronged and beaten down, you hear love. There's simple love from Curtis' Flowers family members, who remember goofing around with him or singing with him in his father's gospel music group. But there's also warmth for these newcomers—invitations to concerts and parties and meals. There is a willingness to engage the reporters beyond just answering their questions—and it's because the people of Winona are still able to act with love, after all that they've been through.

Perhaps I'm particularly susceptible to being struck by their graciousness because of having recently visited the National Parks monument to the Little Rock Nine, the students who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. There you see photos and hear voices from that struggle, and bookending the display, as you enter and as you exit, is this quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Let no man pull you low enough to hate him." Let no man pull you low enough to hate him. As the letter of John would say, if we hate, the world wins. What you hear in "In the Dark" is that hate has not won in Winona. That has to be from God.

Not hating is a struggle, especially when you care passionately about the thing you're being opposed on. But hating just turns *us* into monsters. A few weeks ago I shared the story of two college students, one a white supremacist, who made friends and whose friendship caused the white supremacist to reject his hateful beliefs. This week I read a similar story in *Mother Jones* about a completely different

guy, and about a study of how such people repent. Without going into detail, let me quote just one sentence that struck me: “The uncomfortable truth is that the best way to reform racist thugs may be to offer them precisely what they aren’t willing to offer others, and precisely what many people in this polarized political moment feel they least deserve: empathy.”

<sup>1</sup><https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/07/reform-white-supremacists-shane-johnson-life-after-hate/>

<sup>1</sup> John also tells us: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” Anger and hatred often are rooted in fear—fear that our efforts will be for naught, fear that we ourselves will be diminished or annihilated. The antidote for fear that leads to hatred is the Resurrection, because in the Resurrection the heartbroken disciples realized that even after the worst that could happen, God was bringing out supreme redemption. The Resurrection is our shorthand for the conviction that came to those tired and frightened souls that after the buzzer sounds and all is lost, God has another move. You don’t know what God’s next move is; I don’t know what it is, but God’s redemptive love does not depend on us being on top of the situation. God started all of this, and there is just no stopping the power behind the universe, which is love.

So let the love that God pours into us and all of creation overflow into the world. It does not go to waste. It does not hit a dead end. Even Curtis Flowers, imprisoned now for 20 years, has hope because love has been plugging away

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<sup>1</sup> deradicalization activists argue that much of what the left thinks it knows about shutting down racist extremists is misplaced. When it comes to changing individuals, denunciation may counteract rather than hasten deradicalization.

doggedly and finally found an opening. Love is rushing through the opening made by APM, and the revelations from their reporting make it likely that he will finally get a fair trial and be released. Love does not quit; in the lovely King James Version that is engraved in the sanctuary at Plymouth Church, "Love faileth not." It does not quit, it does not fail; may we take love as our guide and be transformed.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you see our world of brokenness, of sin, of shame, of hate and of pain. You not only see it, you came in Jesus and lived it with us. You came to show us yourself in him, to show us that your compassion and your love know no bounds, not even death. Give us the faith to believe this great news, and then to let love make a claim on us, to live love, to share love, even in the least lovable times and places, and even when those places are in our own lives, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.