

The Pandemic that Isn't Coronavirus

Rise & Shine, May 24th

James 4:1-2

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. ...

Questions:

1. Where have you seen inequality exposed by the pandemic?
 2. Has your view of inequality and systemic racism changed in the wake of current circumstances?
 3. When have you been wrong in your assumptions about people? When have people been wrong in their assumptions about you?
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In the News

Coronavirus Shines a Bright Light on Racism

As coronavirus continues to rampage across the globe, it has become apparent that, while biologically the virus may not discriminate, it is having a much worse effect on people from ethnic minorities. As the researcher Omar Khan has noted, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Covid-19 deaths “track existing social determinants of health” such as overcrowding in homes, insecure work and lack of access to green spaces. In other words, the virus is hitting people harder because “racialized” people – those who are categorized by societies as, say, black or brown – are more vulnerable.

The CDC found that 33% of people who've been hospitalized with COVID-19 in America are African American, yet only 13% of the U.S. population is African American. This disproportionate toll can be partially explained by the fact that there's a higher prevalence of obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes among African Americans compared with whites. It is true that a lot of the health effects we're seeing have to do with preexisting conditions and comorbidities, but that's not just a product of poverty. There have been a lot of studies where, even if you control for income and whether or not people have insurance, people of color received a different quality of health care because of implicit bias. Black women in particular have a high rate of death during

childbirth — across income levels. It's a classic indicator that it's about more than people not taking care of themselves. There are external constrictions on what people of color can do and have in our society.

And as Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health said last week at a White House coronavirus task force briefing, this crisis "is shining a bright light on how unacceptable that is, because yet again, when you have a situation like the coronavirus, [African Americans] are suffering disproportionately."

And this is not the only way that race is playing a role in the crisis. All around the world, minority communities are disproportionately targeted by ramped-up policing that has accompanied the enforcement of lockdown measures. Data from New South Wales in Australia reveals that, although the richer, whiter Sydney beach suburbs have the majority of Covid-19 infections, it is in the neighborhoods with larger numbers of people of migrant origin and indigenous Australians that people have received the most fines for breaching social distancing directives. The US has seen a business-as-usual approach to police brutality targeting black people while, at the same time, groups of overwhelmingly white people in New York's West Village freely breached social distancing.

In some ways, President Trump's declaring of the Coronavirus epidemic as a national emergency has cast in sharp relief the fact that some changes brought on by the declaration have been lobbied for by those representing BAME communities all along. The declaration has allowed doctors to prescribe buprenorphine, a controlled substance used to combat opioid addiction, after a telephone consult, a move experts have been seeking for years. The Department of Health and Human Services waived privacy constraints for telehealth visits, which have long tied up this type of medicine, allowing doctors to use commonly available platforms like FaceTime, Facebook Messenger, Skype, and Zoom to provide medical care. And Congress quickly passed the CARES Act, a \$2 trillion aid package to fight Covid-19 that included sending \$1,200 checks to individuals and families who were most vulnerable to job loss and other financial stressors.

Morgan Medlock, a psychiatrist who treats opioid addiction and works at a minority-serving hospital, writes "I am delighted by these long-sought changes. But I am also frustrated that they have happened so quickly.

Frustrated because the U.S. has been facing an equally large and equally deadly problem — racism — for years and has done little to address it.”

Racial inequality is expressed in all dimensions of life. But given that it takes the form during the coronavirus pandemic of disproportionate deaths, the growing calls to relax social distancing measures further signal societies’ disregard for the lives of racialized people. Georgia could be seen as a classic example of this statewide. The state’s Republican governor has been moving aggressively to reopen the state, but the disease is still very prominent in Atlanta and Albany, places highly populated by blacks. Some point to this as showing a degree of callousness toward the population most affected by the illness on the part of Georgia and some other state governors pushing reopening.

There are several factors, including some genetic ones, that may make African Americans more vulnerable to COVID-19. Obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes brought on by societal and genetic influences in minorities holds much of the blame for their vulnerability to the disease. However, chronic stress linked to personal experiences of racism and poverty may be an overlooked factor. There are several studies that link discrimination and stress to higher levels of inflammation among black adults. And, chronic stress can make one more vulnerable to infection because it can lower your body's ability to fight off an infection. In fact, research has shown that people who report higher levels of stress are more likely to catch a cold, when exposed to a virus, compared with people who are not stressed.

According to a new survey from Pew Research Center, health concerns about COVID-19 are much higher among Hispanics and blacks in the U.S. While 18% of white adults say they're "very concerned" that they will get COVID-19 and require hospitalization, 43% of Hispanic respondents and 31% of black adults say they're "very concerned" about that happening.

And other aspects of structural racism could contribute to the elevated risk for black Americans. "Every major crisis or catastrophe hits the most vulnerable communities the hardest," say Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League. And he points to several factors that help to explain the racial divide. "Black workers are more likely to hold the kinds of jobs that cannot be done from home," Morial says. So, they may be more likely to be exposed to the virus, if they are working in places where it's difficult to maintain social

distancing. In addition, he points to longstanding inequities in access to quality care.

Medlock concludes, "we must shift policy to address the circumstances of those affected by the crisis. For Covid-19, that means finding unique ways to care for patients. To address racism, we must do that and go even further. We must not only come up with new ways to reach patients who have been disadvantaged but must also address the dire circumstances that racism has created."

Ruth 2:5-8

Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "To whom does this young woman belong?" The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, 'Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment." Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women."

Acts 17:26 (The Message)

Starting from scratch, [God] made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God, and not just grope around in the dark but actually find him

Prayer for the Human Family (BCP p. 815)

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.