

What I Learned About Racism From Atticus Finch

Besides the Bible, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is my favorite book in the world—and the movie version is my favorite film. That's partly because I'm a Southerner who appreciates this painfully probing look at Southern racism. I also love the novel because no one has ever made fictional characters come to life better than author Harper Lee.

Atticus Finch, the small-town Alabama lawyer who defends a black man in a rape trial in the 1930s, is a hero to me because of his courage to fight social injustice. I feel as if I know him, along with Atticus' children, Jem and Scout; their black maid, Calpurnia; their neighbors Miss Maudie and Mrs. Dubose; the mysterious Boo Radley; and Tom Robinson, the man who is falsely accused of rape in a biased culture that refused to believe a black man could ever be innocent.

I thought of Atticus Finch and Tom Robinson many times last week. I wished I could have invited them over to my house for a glass of iced tea. We would have a lot to talk about.

On July 4th we celebrated Independence Day, and then we mourned for the next few days—first because of the questionable killings of two black men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, in Louisiana and Minnesota, and then because of the shooting of five police officers in Dallas during a peaceful protest. Not since the 1960s has America felt such overwhelming racial tension.

As I listened to the chatter on the news and on social media last week, I couldn't help but remember Atticus' advice to his daughter. He told Scout: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Isn't that what we should do today? We cannot hope to rid ourselves of the spirit of racism that haunts our country until we sincerely try to understand each other.

Atticus Finch felt compassion for his black client, Tom Robinson, because he drove to Tom's house in the country and sat on his front porch and got to know his family. He saw the fear on Tom's face and heard the racial slurs he endured from local townsfolk. Atticus saw the world from Tom's perspective. Atticus' children learned the same lesson when they went to church with Calpurnia and saw how black Christians worshiped.

That's the only way we're going to end this ugly racial divide. We have to talk to each other. We have to sit on our porches together. We have to become friends and share each other's burdens. We have to worship together. Laws alone will never tear down the walls of racism. Only compassion can destroy this evil.

I was not born black so I don't understand what my black friends have experienced. I have never been stopped by a police officer and interrogated when I wasn't doing anything wrong. I have never walked into a store and felt people staring at me or treating me with suspicion. I have never had to endure racial slurs. I have never been turned down for a job interview because of my race.

But I have black and Hispanic friends who have experienced racial cruelty. I've listened to their pain. I put myself in their place. I crawled into their skin.

When will we stop being afraid of each other?

Jesus attacked the root of racism when He told the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. He taught us that God's love requires us to stop and show compassion to people who are not from our racial background. His parable shocked his Jewish audience because Jews hated Samaritans and didn't want to go anywhere near them.

Yet in His parable Jesus put a Samaritan in a positive light. He smashed the ugly stereotypes and challenged racial pride. Then, when He ascended into heaven, Jesus told His disciples to take the gospel to Samaria (Acts 1:8)—a reminder that Christians must never let racial divisions stop them from advancing the kingdom of God.

It's true: Encoded in the Great Commission is a direct command to cross racial lines. That means we really are not obeying Christ's most serious mandate if we stay in our segregated safe zones. Christianity is not fully authentic unless it is multiracial.

Atticus Finch was right. The only way to eradicate racism is to fight it with love. Politicians will make speeches and propose laws, and protesters will demand stricter gun control and police reform. But the stronghold of American racism won't crumble until Christians get serious about building real friendships with the people we once hated or feared. {eoa}