

our children in such an environment. They seem to have done reasonably well; both now live quite comfortably in very diverse communities, and both are passionate about racial justice. Both have more, many more, friends of other races that I have ever had.

### The roots of sin

And maybe America's original sin begins to get bleached out, like some genetic defect, as the generations pass. When my grandmother died, my father took my grandfather out to the cemetery to choose a plot. My grandfather walked around, looking at headstones. My father asked him what he was doing, and he replied that he just wanted to be sure there were no "foreigners" buried nearby. When my father told me this story, I was appalled at what my

grandfather had said — but encouraged that my father, no raging liberal, found it ridiculous. I hope I am still less racist than my father, and I'm pretty sure my children are less racist than I.

But for all that, sin doesn't really get bleached out just by passage of time or passage of generations. It is too deeply rooted. Like a noxious weed, it can be cut off but it keeps coming back, and even if you try to pull it out by the roots, chances are that there are some dormant seeds there that keep wanting to grow. The only thing you can do is recognize this in yourself, continually spray the herbicide of repentance and confession, and be vigilant about whacking off anything that sprouts up.

Oh, and have conversations. Honest ones. Lots of them.

— by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

## A conversation with my son

by Mark Brown



I recently had an interesting conversation with my youngest son, a 5th grader. He's got an interesting existence in this time.

My wife and I joke around that he's the token white boy in the local street gang. He has four friends from the neighborhood, all African-American. They bike around the neighborhood and outside of it, going from the basketball hoop the one kid has in his driveway, to our backyard which has a massive 45 degree hill in the back (which makes it perfect to logroll down and try to hit whiffle balls up into the trees at the top of it), to the local park. It is a boyhood almost as free as my own growing up on the Mississippi, and intentionally so. Twelve-year-old boys need to roam free.

Our joke about the street gang plays on the frisson between as-innocent-as-they-can-be-in-our-age 12-year-old boys doing very boy things, and the fear narrative of roaming black males. It is personally interesting to compare his natural neighborhood community to the lily-white organized sports community. Likewise it is amusing when the kid shows up with new shoes, his friends taking pity on this child whose parents are so white they think that one pair of sneakers is enough to "up his sneaker game."

### What do you say?

On this particular day, I made the mistake of having the NPR station on in the car. My son, who normally just tunes out everything adult as boring, commented, "All my friends think all the cops are out to shoot them. I try and tell them that isn't true. We bike everywhere and nobody has shot us yet." Ah, the last bit of childhood's innocence, enough to tear your heart out.

But what do you say as a parent in that situation? Do you pour in concrete the fear narrative? Do you do the opposite and support the child's perception? What do you do if he goes and says "my dad says ..." and then his friends report that to their parents? Will anything you say allow the simple neighborhood friendships to continue? How will what you say influence his perception of the police and allow him to follow the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment to "not despise ... other authorities, but honor them"?

The worldly left would have me correct my 12-year-old's budding white privilege. Who is he to tell black bodies who isn't out to get them? The worldly right would have me tell my child that it is merely poor choices that lead to poor outcomes. America is the land of opportunity for everyone if you just grab it. Each one embeds in its story that

my tribe is without sin, that we have done all we can and so we are righteous in our actions. The world's stories are terrible. And churches hooked on both of them have betrayed the truth for lies. The church gives us a much better, if temporarily sadder, story. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The world's stories are always too simple, and yet not simple enough. Too simple in that they think they can point out exactly who is right and who is wrong. Not simple enough in that they think there is any merit or worthiness in us.

### A difficult conversation

As it was, I pulled the car over. Even someone as deaf as I could hear an appointed time. I opened with a question: "Do you know what started all this that is going on?" He vaguely answered yes, but I made it clear: "A cop knelt on a black man's neck in the middle of the street until he died. That should not have happened. There is no reason for it. The man dishonored his office. And it has happened enough times that it is not complete paranoia that your friends question the office itself. Are they right? No. Not all cops are out to shoot them. That is fear talking, and fear stoked with anger is

riding high right now.

"So your perception is not wrong, but there are better times to express it. There are times when people have ears, and times when they don't. At the same time, if you ever get halted by a policeman riding your bike, you do whatever he says and answer 'yes sir' or 'no sir.' You respect the office, even if there are men who dishonor it — if for no other reason but fear of its authority, for that policeman has been vested with rightful authority. That is why he has a badge and a gun." I didn't add that the one white boy in the gang doing that might save some of his friends.

But I did turn to the theological. "It's a fallen world; do you understand what that means?" "That police kill people and my friends are afraid?" Good answer. "Do you know why you do not need to fear?" He gave the Sunday School answer: "Jesus." I left it there. Yes, that is the answer. And may you come to understand the fullness of why Jesus is the only hope we have.

*Mark Brown is pastor of St. Mark Lutheran Church (LCMS) in West Henrietta, NY.*

## Homes of worship

by Raymond J. Brown



The current suspension of most public worship owing to COVID-19 concerns reminds me of my junior officer duties as a Lay Leader in three commissioned ships. Maybe some of my hard-learned lessons from those days of yore would be helpful.

Hardship is the great auditor of Christian faith. And hard times are upon believers now, as the gatherings commanded by Scripture have been temporarily forsworn for reasons both medical and legal. The Holy Writ warns: "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, *not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together*, as is the manner of some (Heb. 10.25). Well, Christians may not be wholly forsaking communal worship, but most of us have little choice but to return to the house church model — which was the norm until the Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. made Christianity respectable. House churches are

still the norm in China.

### House church at sea

To host a small group in worship is no small undertaking. I well recall having been the Lay Leader afloat. The smaller ships of the Navy and Coast Guard seldom have a chaplain available, so Lay Leaders take the duty. Usually the only requirement is willingness, though there is some guidance about being a church member in good standing, having some Biblical knowledge and an acceptable moral character. My theological acumen was queried only once, and then in the kindest possible way, because my own tradition was at quite a variance from the chaplain's (or so he had thought). But I would caution now that all should seek pastoral guidance. Colporteurs and conventicles have, at best, a mixed record of ensuring "all things done decently and in good order" (1 Cor. 14.40).