

371.2: May 31; Us vs. Them (Come Follow Me Book of Mormon Week 20)

Mosiah 29-Alma 4

Why I talk about life so much in the podcast: Meaning and application are both found and forged in the spaces between the scriptures and our souls.

If scriptures don't change our lives, there is no point to the scriptures

If the gospel doesn't change our lives, there is no point to the gospel

This podcast is about the intersection of the scriptures and our lives. This is what all Sunday Schools should be like, I think.

A primary purpose of the gospel is to increase our stamina in the face of discomfort.

This is a big reason I am doing this podcast. This is why our motto is "Challenge and be challenged by the scriptures". The gospel makes us grow, and growth is uncomfortable.

This is why humans are "enemies of God". God invites us to grow and human nature seduces us to cheat, and most of us work to get away with as much as we can. We are as good as we are incentivized and empowered to be.

Outline

Covid Check in

Lesson: Us vs. Them

- Nephite tribalism and prejudice (Not talking about the 19th century issues, but what a close reading reveals)
- What we can learn from a closer look at the Nephites
- Applying the scriptures to ourselves
- How we deal with racism/tribalism/bias individually
- How we deal with racism/tribalism/bias in our communities
- Conclusion

I think the cause of most evil is that we get so easily overwhelmed.

Covid: If we were impeccable about wearing masks, we could pretty much go back to normal, a better normal:

https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2020/5/27/21272184/covid-19-mask-wearing-pandemic-liberty-reopening-choice-epidemiologist?fbclid=IwAR1kMdqPIllg5_IM9TKvpAe8sR9cK79kdiiPBN2DccTeglhLoxw5owbPorA

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I work in infectious disease epidemiology. I'm mostly a number-cruncher, far removed from the trauma being experienced by families and health care providers in hospitals around the world, but I still have an odd kind of front-row seat to COVID-19. Watching this scenario unfold has been surreal. It's a tragedy epidemiologists knew was likely in our lifetimes, and for which the world was ill-prepared. The personal strain, public division and politicization has made it all the more difficult to fight and even to understand. Early denials and mistakes in combating COVID-19 outbreaks around the world made the problem worse. That is a fair point of discussion, but it is in many ways immaterial to the methods we need to fight the battle today.

Frankly, I'm exhausted. My guess is you are too. It's tempting to want to let the beautiful weather lift the pandemic away like a bad dream. It can seem overblown and far away, especially if you haven't seen suffering patients for yourself. I've certainly thought and felt that at different times. The burden and the burnout are real. The economic and emotional tragedy are real, and we all desperately want to be at liberty to move and interact freely.

But that's the problem with a pandemic. We can't will it out of our individual lives — not directly, at least. We can't pull ourselves up and out of the crisis by our bootstraps because we aren't fighting something that works against just the individual. We are battling a force of nature that attacks by spreading through communities. We might as well try to individually force back an earthquake or a hurricane. All we can do is learn about the virus and do our best to overcome it in a united way. It takes a community to spread the virus, and so it takes a community to stop it. Even a vaccine will be a community-level tool.

I remain very hopeful about our ability to overcome COVID-19. I see the path back to our freedom to gather and move without fear becoming clearer.

A few months ago, we didn't have the information, materials or resources to fight on even footing. That is changing. Now we know about how the virus is spread through respiratory droplets. I read this week about simulations suggesting the spread of the virus in classrooms could be kept near zero

when at least 90% of students wear cloth masks and sit apart. In New Zealand, they designated personal “bubbles” of individuals who could interact freely with each other to counteract loneliness and the burden on people who could not care for themselves. As the disease was eliminated, those “bubbles” are expanding to include more people. We still have a lot to learn, but our efficacy in the battle is steadily growing.

The tricky part is that we can’t eliminate COVID-19 by focusing only on our individual liberty — we have to exercise a kind of generous, communal commitment to liberty as a principle. We have to believe in protecting the liberty of another as much as protecting the liberty of ourselves, and that belief has to drive us to make some necessary personal sacrifices.

As I move through my community, I see many people wearing masks and many people not. There is an element of discomfort to wearing a mask, and there can be a feeling of loss of personal control, or even of identity. It is a small change, but comes at a cost because we are not culturally accustomed to it. The question is, are we willing to pay that cost in order to protect the freedom of one another? If I use my freedom to wear a mask, it does little to protect me from COVID-19. It only protects the people around me. The freedom of vulnerable people to be healthy and move about in society depends on their community generously choosing to self-sacrifice. Scientists and government do not dictate that fact — the virus does.

The idea of generously using our liberty runs against the current tired political talking points, which keep us fighting in trenches against each other instead of together against COVID-19. I would love nothing more than to walk through a store and see someone sporting a mask that says “Don’t Tread on Me,” and walk past someone else wearing a mask that says “#TheResistance.” Life and liberty of our neighbor can be put ahead of the other lenses through which we see the world.

If we want liberty from the pandemic for ourselves, we can only truly get it by making sacrifices to liberate others. We have the tools and knowledge to do so in our communities, regardless of whether there is political will to match. I

choose to wear a mask to protect and return your freedoms; please choose to protect and return mine.

Lesson: Us vs. Them

Nephite tribalism and prejudice (Not talking about the 19th century issues, but what a close reading reveals)

One of the most impressive things about the Book of Mormon is its complexity, the fact we can read more closely and question the surface narrative. Note how Mormon and the other narrators often assure us about how righteous the leaders are and how great the government is, then they tell us about defections and rebellions! When Mosiah's sons turn down the kingship there are certainly other candidates for the monarchy, which is likely what led to the "king men", the central conflict for most of the Book of Mormon.

Interesting that Mosiah shifts a theocratic monarchy to a democratic-ish theocracy (Chief priest being chief judge)

It makes sense of the text that Mosiah's "no king" rhetoric functioned to shut down other claims for kingship (likely from the Mulekites?)

29:42 Ironical and not surprising that after Mosiah pushes so hard not to have a king, his close friend becomes functional king (chief judge + high priest). In chapter 2 we learn he is also the general!! Ironically this shift centered MORE power in one individual, not less. Note how much power remains within the Nephi line (I personally find this close reading approach more accurate, rewarding, and powerfully applicable to our own lives)

Alma 1:1 This is full of king language even though Mosiah just disavowed kingship

Something I just realized: Right after Alma is named as high priest and chief judge, we read about a religious threat and then a political threat.

Nehor: we can differentiate his philosophy from his actions, which do indeed look selfish and violent. As I commented in my reading notes, Nehor's philosophy seems to be some sort of Christian Universalism. Worth looking at what he was executed for. Heresy? Seems more that than the murder (duel?) with Gideon. Based on the description of the followers behavior, it seems they followed some form of hedonism, that we need to make the most of this life. Again, we have evidence of strict laws

1:24-31: "Steadfast faith" of the Church members (Spoiler: This is going to reverse in just a few chapters)

24 For the hearts of many were hardened, and their names were blotted out, that they were remembered no more among the people of God. And also many withdrew themselves from among them.

25 Now this was a great trial to those that did stand fast in the faith; nevertheless, they were steadfast and immovable in keeping the commandments of God, and they bore with patience the persecution which was heaped upon them.

26 And when the priests left their labor to impart the word of God unto the people, the people also left their labors to hear the word of God. And when the priest had imparted unto them the word of God they all returned again diligently unto their labors; and the priest, not esteeming himself above his hearers, for the preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner; and thus they were all equal, and they did all labor, every man according to his strength.

27 And they did impart of their substance, every man according to that which he had, to the poor, and the needy, and the sick, and the afflicted; and they did not wear costly apparel, yet they were neat and comely.

28 And thus they did establish the affairs of the church; and thus they began to have continual peace again, notwithstanding all their persecutions.

29 And now, because of the steadiness of the church they began to be exceedingly rich, having abundance of all things whatsoever they stood in need—an abundance of flocks and herds, and fatlings of every kind, and also abundance of grain, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious things, and abundance of silk and fine-twined linen, and all manner of good homely cloth.

30 And thus, in their prosperous circumstances, they did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, or that were sick, or that had not been nourished; and they did not set their hearts upon riches; therefore they were liberal to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect to persons as to those who stood in need.

31 And thus they did prosper and become far more wealthy than those who did not belong to their church.

Chapter 2

Was Amlici really “after the order of Nehor” or is Mormon just putting everyone who disagrees in the “bad guy” camp?

I still think that Amlici being a Mulekite makes the most sense.

This is fascinating. Note that those in power are concerned that the system they set up (“voice of the people”) might not go the way they want!

Voting doesn’t work so Amlici resorts to violence, then things escalate (A core of Jesus’ teachings was not to engage in cycles of violence, not to escalate)

Note that the Nephites say that the Amlicites + Lamanites threatened to wipe them out (2:25) but then the Nephites *actually do* wipe them out, and then leave their bodies “heaped up on the earth” which seems to function as a warning? Intense cultural stuff here.

Alma 3

The beginning of this chapter suggests that both sides were waging a war of annihilation
3:8-10: Indication of Nephite endogamy, and possibly a class system

Alma 4

Another theme: We wake up most fully when we have no other choice. The people repent, seek God, and build up the Church because so many people were killed in war that it threatened the functioning of society.

While I ran with my son today I was talking about the irony that we are most motivated to *survive* but not thrive.

4:6-12: The reading comes full circle, from those outside the church being prideful and challenging the church, to the members of the church becoming prideful and challenging those outside the church

6 And it came to pass in the eighth year of the reign of the judges, that the people of the church began to wax proud, because of their exceeding riches, and their fine silks, and their fine-twined linen, and because of their many flocks and herds, and their gold and their silver, and all manner of precious things, which they had obtained by their industry; and in all these things were they lifted up in the pride of their eyes, for they began to wear very costly apparel.

7 Now this was the cause of much affliction to Alma, yea, and to many of the people whom Alma had consecrated to be teachers, and priests, and elders over the church; yea, many of them were sorely grieved for the wickedness which they saw had begun to be among their people.

8 For they saw and beheld with great sorrow that the people of the church began to be lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and to set their hearts upon riches and upon the vain things of the world, that they began to be scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure.

9 And thus, in this eighth year of the reign of the judges, there began to be great contentions among the people of the church; yea, there were envyings, and strife, and malice, and persecutions, and pride, even to exceed the pride of those who did not belong to the church of God.

10 And thus ended the eighth year of the reign of the judges; and the wickedness of the church was a great stumbling-block to those who did not belong to the church; and thus the church began to fail in its progress.

11 And it came to pass in the commencement of the ninth year, Alma saw the wickedness of the church, and he saw also that the example of the church began to lead those who were unbelievers on from one piece of iniquity to another, thus bringing on the destruction of the people.

12 Yea, he saw great inequality among the people, some lifting themselves up with their pride, despising others, turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry, and those who were athirst, and those who were sick and afflicted.

What we can learn from a closer look at the Nephites

- Stay humble!
 - Question and doubt yourself (Doubting your doubts is nice, but we also need to doubt our certainties)
 - Listen to others, especially those with different backgrounds and experiences
 - Respect the fact that people are the authority on themselves (this one used to be hard on me). Yes, close outsiders have helpful insights, but we need to take seriously that we are the only ones who know what it is like to be us. “Help me understand what this is like for you” is one of the most important questions I ever ask.
- Help as you can

Applying the scriptures to ourselves

Ok, now this is where our discussion gets uncomfortable, because it NEEDS to get uncomfortable. Let’s talk about George Floyd’s death. Let’s talk about Breonna Taylor. Let’s talk about Ahmaud Arbery. Let’s educate ourselves on the thousands upon thousands of marginalized and murdered. We don’t have time to talk about how humans have oppressed, marginalized, enslaved, and exterminated each other for pretty much our entire history. Race is not a biological reality, but it is a heavy and horrifying social reality. I wondered by some Indians are so much darker than others, and then I learned about the Aryan invasion of the Indus Valley civilization.

“Racism isn’t getting worse; it’s getting filmed” Will Smith

I have privilege as a white person because I can do all of these things without thinking twice:

(It's disturbing that I could type in Name + shooting and be right in almost all instances)

I can go birding (#ChristianCooper)

Woman called police on him

I can go jogging (#AmaudArbery)

Shot and killed by a father and son

I can relax in the comfort of my own home (#BothemJean and #AtatianaJefferson)

Officer believed she was going into her own home, went into Jean's home and shot and killed him

Neighbor called police saying Jefferson's door was open, then entered and shot and killed her

I can ask for help after being in a car crash (#JonathanFerrell and #RenishaMcBride)

Ferrell crashed his car, knocked on the door, neighbor called police, police shot and killed him

McBride knocked on a door asking for help, the homeowner shot her. She was 19.

I can have a cellphone (#StephonClark)

23 years old in the backyard of his grandmother's house, shot and killed by officers

I can leave a party to get to safety (#JordanEdwards)

15 year old boy in a car, officer shot him in the head while the car was driving away

I can play loud music (#JordanDavis)

Man shot 17 year old Davis after argument about loud music

I can sell CDs (#AltonSterling)

Two officers shot Sterling after a call relating to CDs. Sterling had a gun but did not draw it.

I can sleep (#AiyanaJones)

Officer killed a seven year old girl during a raid

I can walk from the corner store (#MikeBrown)

Officer shot 18 year old Mike Brown while investigating reports of a theft of a box of cigars

I can play cops and robbers (#TamirRice)

Officer shot 12 year old Rice, who was holding a toy gun

I can go to church (#Charleston9)

White supremacist killed nine men and women during their Bible Study

I can walk home with Skittles (#TrayvonMartin)

Member of the “neighborhood watch” killed 17 year old Martin who was visiting relatives

I can hold a hair brush while leaving my own bachelor party (#SeanBell)

Killed night before his wedding, over 50 rounds fired into his car

I can party on New Years (#OscarGrant)

Officers killed Grant after a fight that had already been broken up on public transit

I can get a normal traffic ticket (#SandraBland)

Bland was arrested after a routine traffic stop for “assaulting a police officer”, later killed herself in jail

I can lawfully carry a weapon (#PhilandoCastile)

Officer shot Castile five times while Castile clearly said he was NOT reaching for the weapon he declared that he had on him

I can break down on a public road with car problems (#CoreyJones)

Plainclothes officer shot Jones while Jones was waiting by his car that had broken down

I can shop at Walmart (#JohnCrawford)

Officer shot and killed Crawford who had a bb gun

I can have a disabled vehicle (#TerrenceCrutcher)

Officer shot and killed Crutcher after a call about an “abandoned vehicle”

I can read a book in my own car (#KeithScott)

Officer shot Scott while looking for someone else. Scott was walking backwards with his hands down and his wife begged officers not to shoot

I can be a 10yr old walking with our grandfather (#CliffordGlover)

Undercover officer shot 10 year old boy believing they were involved in a robbery. Glover and his grandfather ran away because they were scared (and didn’t even know they were police)

I can decorate for a party (#ClaudeReese)

Officer shot 14 year old Reese as he was “investigating a possible robbery”

I can ask a cop a question (#RandyEvans)

Officer shot 15 year old Evans point blank in the head after responding to reports about “youth with a gun”. The officer’s partner challenged him, officer was later ruled to be insane but was released within a year.

I can cash a check in peace (#YvonneSmallwood)

Officer shot Smallwood while she was cashing a check

I can take out my wallet (#AmadouDiallo)

Plainclothes officers shot at Diallo 42 times as he reached for his wallet

I can run (#WalterScott)

Officer pulled Scott over about a brake light, then shot him as he was running away

I can breathe (#EricGarner)

Officer put a chokehold on Garner on suspicion of selling single cigarettes

I can live #FreddieGray)

Gray ran away from officers, and they used enough force when they caught him that he died from complications

I can sleep in my own bed #BreonnaTaylor)

Police broke into Taylor's home, looking for someone else, and shot her eight times in her bed

I CAN BE ARRESTED WITHOUT THE FEAR OF BEING MURDERED #GeorgeFloyd)

The police officer who was kneeling on Floyd's neck was challenged by bystanders and has been charged twelve times with police brutality and has killed at least six other people.

What do we do about all this? How do we talk about it? I hope this will give us the opportunity and invitation to continue the conversation in a more productive way.

(Started White Fragility yesterday, by Robin DiAngelo (She's white, which does matter, and she has made a career of training other white people about whiteness and racism)

Racism:

"We have to stop thinking about racism simply as someone who says the N-word," she says.

"This book is centred in the white western colonial context, and in that context white people hold institutional power." This means understanding that racism is a system rather than just a slur; it is prejudice plus power. And in Britain and the US at least, it is designed to benefit and privilege whiteness by every economic and social measure. Everyone has racial bias but, as DiAngelo is determined to establish, "when you back a group's collective bias with lingering authority and institutional control, it is transformed".

That is why she is scathing of those who claim "reverse racism" exists; after all, people of colour can show prejudice against white people. It is equally condemnable, but this form of discrimination does not come with systemic privilege and so is not racism as per the modern definition.

In more technical language: whiteness scholars define racism as encompassing economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power among white people and people of color

(Hilliard, 1992). This unequal distribution benefits whites and disadvantages people of color overall and at the group level (although individual whites may be “against” racism, they still benefit from a system that privileges their group).

Privilege: Based on the assumptions and expectations society makes about you. Are you assumed to be part of the problem or part of the solution? (Getting out of my car because window doesn’t work; “not everyone is as nice as you” corrected it in my head)

How we deal with racism/tribalism/bias individually

- Name it
- Listen
- Educate yourself
- Keep all this in mind as you move through life

Name it:

I have privilege as a white person because I feel this heaviness and grief mostly when another black brother or sister is murdered, after which that grief fades into the background. This grief is not my constant companion. This grief is not a relentless, moment by moment fear for my own safety and the safety of my children.

(My friend Lisa pointed out it’s the difference between living with occasional grief and living with constant terror)

I love that my sister posted this: by Courtney Ariel, a black singer/storyteller

https://sojo.net/articles/our-white-friends-desiring-be-allies?fbclid=IwAR3aHpgLNKmg3Zo57PM6wsXf2e_tQJAJ9c2tCFEJirwTD9bNie919NGySss

I am not going to do much coddling here; I don’t know that I believe that love requires coddling. Here are six things you can do to be stronger allies.

1. Listen more; talk less. You don’t have to have something to say all of the time. You don’t have to post something on social media that points to how liberal/how aware/how cool/how good you are. You are lovely, human, and amazing. You have also had the microphone for most of the time, for a very long time, and it will be good to give the microphone to someone else who is living a different experience than your own.

2. For one out of every three opinions/insights shared by a person of color in your life, try to resist the need to respond with a *better* or *different* insight about something that you read or listened to as it relates to their shared opinion. Try just to listen and sit with someone else’s experience. When you do share in response to what someone has shared with you, it can sometimes (not always) feel like “whitesplaining” — meaning to

explain or comment on something in an over-confident or condescending way. This adds to the silencing of the voices of people of color.

3. Being an ally is different than simply wanting not to be racist (thank you for that, by the way). Being an ally requires you to educate yourself about systemic racism in this country. Read Michelle Alexander's ***The New Jim Crow*** and Ta-Nehisi Coates' ***Between the World and Me*** and Claudia Rankine's ***Citizen*** and so many other great **books** and **articles** that illuminate oppression and structures of white supremacy and white privilege. Use your voice and influence to direct the folks that walk alongside you in real life (or follow you on the internet), toward the voice of someone that is living a marginalized/disenfranchised experience.

4. Please try not to, "I can't believe that something like this would happen in this day and age!" your way into being an ally when atrocities like the events in Charleston, S.C., and Charlottesville, Va., happen. People of color have been aware of this kind of hatred and violence in America for centuries, and it belittles our experience for you to show up 300 years late to the oppression-party suddenly caring about the world. Don't get me wrong, I welcome you. I want for you to come into a place of awareness. However, your shock and outrage at the existence of racism in America echoes the fact that you have lived an entire life with the luxury of indifference about the lives of marginalized/disenfranchised folks. Please take several seats.

5. Ask when you don't know — but do the work first. This is nuanced. Some marginalized/disenfranchised folks will tell you not to ask them anything; don't be offended by that. Folks are tired, and that is understandable because it is exhausting to be a marginalized person in this world. However, there is something special that happens within human connections and relationships. In a nutshell, don't expect for people to educate you. Do the work to educate yourself. Ask questions within relationships that feel safe, and do so respectfully.

6. And finally, stop talking about colorblindness. It's not a thing. Colorblindness is totally impossible in a nation whose land was taken from the indigenous inhabitants through an attempt at genocide and horrific colonization. The same nation that enslaved humans and exploited them in every way imaginable built a nation on their backs, hung them, hunted them, and for centuries kept them from their basic inalienable rights and still does. The same nation that exploits and deports immigrants who were promised refuge within the American Constitution. The same nation that incarcerated Japanese Americans during World War II and continues to promote bigotry, exclusion, and

violence against LGBTQ/gender non-identifying folks. This nation that allows swastika-wearing, Confederate-flag-toting, anti-Semitic racists to have a platform for their hate. The same nation that promised religious freedom, yet targets those who do not believe in a white, capitalist Jesus.

I love Jesus. And promise, Jesus was not white (literally brown, and wonderfully Jewish) and would have never been a capitalist.

It will never be possible for us to be colorblind, and we shouldn't ever want to be.

I heard a saying once at an Al-Anon meeting that offered me liberation: "We are only as sick as our secrets (and our shame)." Shame can only live in the darkness; it can live within the systems of denial and defensiveness that we use to cover it up. We have to name these things, acknowledge them, and begin to do the deep work of transformation, restoration — and reparation.

Yup, now I'm talking about **reparations**.

Privilege means that you owe a debt. You were born with it. You didn't ask for it. And you didn't pay for it either. No one is blaming you for having it. You are lovely, human, and amazing. Being a citizen of a society requires work from everyone within that society. It is up to you whether you choose to acknowledge the work that is yours to do. It is up to you whether you choose to pay this debt and how you choose to do so.

Sometimes living with privilege can disillusion us into thinking that being in community with other humans doesn't require work. This is a lie; it requires a great deal of work. And all of that work requires being a human and trying to love other humans well.

I believe that this is holy work, the work of justice, the pursuit of it. It doesn't need an audience, and it will not always have one. It will happen most days in ways that are unseen. It might mean providing a meal or shelter, listening, using your particular area of expertise to help someone in need of that expertise who might not have access to it otherwise, bailing a protester out of jail, or paying a family's rent one month (if you have the resources to do so), or marching at a rally with marginalized folks alongside other allies. There may not always be a practical, tangible way to pursue this work, but I believe you will know it when you meet it face-to-face.

However it looks, it will be something that you do without needing to be thanked or receive praise — you are not a savior. Marginalized/disenfranchised folks can and will survive without you — we are magic. However, I urge you to pursue this work, knowing that a system of white privilege afforded you access to opportunities while denying them to so many others.

Above all, I urge you keep trying. You're going to make mistakes; expect this. But keep showing up. Be compassionate. Lead with empathy, always. Keep learning and growing. If you do this, I truly believe you'll be doing the work of an ally.

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-sociologist-examines-the-white-fragility-that-pr-events-white-americans-from-confronting-racism>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/opinion/minneapolis-police-brutality.html>

A note on police brutality:

Law enforcement, military, emergency management... these cultures create very tight knit and supportive connections, more like family than coworkers (which is often highlighted), which makes holding each other accountable and disciplining members very difficult

How we deal with racism/tribalism/bias in our communities

Improving policies is the only way. We need to actually invest in opportunities that empower the marginalized to succeed.

Elect more diversity into our leadership (I was so devastated that the presidential race diminished from an admirable range of diversity to yet-another-old-white-man

Responding to the riots: The one point I wanted to make is I think there are two main things going on right now: Protests and opportunism, often by different people. It is tragic, infuriating, and utterly predictable that as the marginalized and oppressed and murdered groups fight for attention and justice, the privileged once again take advantage of the chaos.

Conclusion: Proposal: Honest, collaborative tribalism.

<https://hbr.org/2009/05/why-teams-dont-work>