

“Reflections on Racism”

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity – Sept 13, 2020

Outline – Tom Mount – Holy Trinity Chico

Introduction

1. Today we’re going to look at one of the most contentious and divisive issues in our day: race. Why? If we believe that Jesus is Lord of all, then there is no part of human life that doesn’t fall under his direct jurisdiction and doesn’t, therefore, require that we understand and respond to it from a biblical perspective.
2. This is especially true when it comes to an issue that impacts all of us daily at such an emotional level and that disproportionately wounds a sub-set of us (namely our black brothers and sisters) in a profoundly personal way.
3. Jesus embodied both compassion and truth. (John 1:14 - the Word was full of “grace” and “truth”).
4. So today, as we talk about race we want us to begin by listening, then responding with our hearts to our black brothers and sisters who are very disturbed by what’s going on in our country. The goal here is to understand their pain and respond with grace.
5. Then we will pivot to the solution side of the issue and use our heads to try to discern how we can improve the situation. Finally, we will conclude with three scriptural principles that should ground our discussion and guide our thinking about race moving ahead.
6. Three quick things before we get started:
 - I will be using the term “black” rather than African American throughout the talk, because not all blacks come from Africa and because my reading of the literature suggests that it is the preferred term at this time.
 - We’re going to look at just one tiny aspect of American racism: white racism toward blacks.
 - We have to understand the anger that this subject engenders for our black brothers and sisters.

Grace: listening and responding with our hearts

Goal: “Tell me what you are thinking and feeling so I can understand.”

Scriptural guideline:

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

- James 1:19

1. It is an interesting fact that you can form an accurate opinion about what is happening in our country today by taking this verse and turning it on its head. In our current moment in history, the process James prescribes is reversed: First, we’re told by our culture, we should get angry; then, we should speak loudly and continuously; and, finally, we might listen long enough to determine whether the other person agrees with our opinion; if not, we should shout them down.
2. This is the scenario that is being played out daily on American streets. And it is being fueled by a media apparatus that has a vested interest in keeping it going.
3. But the bible tells us: Love listens. I like how that towering theological giant, Mister Rogers, put this: “Listening is where love begins.” Not listening to argue or to prove the other person wrong. But listening to get inside of the other person’s head/heart so as to understand things from their perspective.
4. Our black brothers and sisters want to be heard. They deserve that. When we feel wronged, it violates something deep inside us. It is this sense of violation that is fueling much of the anger we see on the streets of America today: people who don’t feel heard.
5. What will we hear? I can share with you a couple things I’m hearing. They can be summarized into two broad categories.

- 1. As a nation, we haven’t fully dealt with our racist legacy of slavery, Jim Crow and other expressions of racism.**

- By other expressions, I mean the inexpressibly deplorable lynchings, the historic reign of terror by the KKK and other white supremacy groups, the church bombings, the early 20th century destruction of black residences and business districts in places like Tulsa, OK, Rosewood, FL, and Elaine, AK.

- Many of our black friends would say we haven't really come clean on this long and disgraceful racist legacy. And there are two things that frequently get mentioned in this vein.
1. **We've never issued an official formal apology as a nation.** We've officially apologized for other instances of race-based sins. In 1998, President Clinton apologized for the West African slave trade. In 2008 and 2009, the House and Senate passed resolutions apologizing for slavery and Jim Crow. But no joint bill was ever passed and signed by an American president.
 2. **We haven't offered to pay reparations.** The whole reparations debate is complex and controversial. Some blacks are emphatic that 21st century Americans who never owned slaves don't owe any money to 21st century blacks who were never enslaved. Other black Americans point out that to truly atone for past sins involves a willingness to make financial restitution for the harm that those sins caused, even if we did not directly participate in the sins ourselves.
- 2. We have perpetuated systemic or institutionalized forms of racism long after the end of Jim Crow.** These exist in virtually every sector of society whether health care, business, housing, education, criminal justice or policing. And this has resulted in some serious inequities. Two examples:
- In 2016, the median wealth of white families was \$171,000 while the median wealth of black families was just \$17,600 (10%).
 - Blacks have poorer access to healthcare, so, for example, Black mothers are three times more likely to die in childbirth than white mothers, and black children are twice as likely to die in infancy than white children.
 - These examples can be multiplied across several domains, especially in the areas of education, housing and criminal justice. Now, there is an astonishing array of factors that contribute to these inequities, some coming from outside the black community (policies that make it difficult for blacks to break out of impoverished neighborhoods) and some from within (the culture of violence among young black males, for instance, often tied to the absence of father figures in the home). There are no quick and easy fixes for these problems. What Roosevelt's New Deal and Johnson's War on Poverty taught us is that expanding government programs and throwing money at the symptoms often do more harm than good. But what our black

brothers and sisters are asking us to do is to simply recognize the inequities and work to fix them.

5. **Our Heart Response:** Rom 12:15, “weep with those who weep”. We should not be okay with the fact that, 56 years after the Civil Rights Act, we are not further along than we are. As we listen to our black brothers and sisters, we have a unprecedented opportunity to hear their hearts, express love and build relationship.
6. This is where we begin: with grace—listening to and responding with our hearts. It’s not where we end, however. Because relationship requires conversation. So, after having listened with grace and expressed compassion, we have earned the right to speak into the situation in a way that can pivot the discussion from the heart to the head in order to better understand the complexities of the various issues and to get on the solution side and fix them.

Truth: discussing and problem solving with our heads

Goal: “Let’s talk about the issues so we can work together to help fix them.”

Biblical guideline:

“... speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

- Eph 4:15

- There are several items that need to be explored in greater depth in order to better understand them so that we are in a position to help fix them. I want to focus on just three of them: the nature of racism, the history of slavery, and the question of progress.

Racism

1. Feeling superior and treating others differently due to their culture or the color of their skin is plain and simply an inexcusable sin and a vile offence to God.
2. Racism is ugly, wrong and must be repented of and overcome. All racism. Whites don’t hold a monopoly on this particular species of sin, because racism is not a uniquely Caucasian problem; it is a human problem.
3. Three applications can be made from this observation:

- **All racism must be held to the same standard.** It's not okay to condemn white on black racism while ignoring or condoning black on white or any other form of racism. Justice, by its very definition, is blind. Yet in America today it's considered hip and virtuous to denounce white racism but politically suicidal to mention black racism. This double-standard impedes progress in reconciliation because it discriminates on the very basis that it purports to oppose.
- **Racism does not define an entire culture or nation.** A people are not reducible to the sins they commit. To call America a racist nation is, therefore, both misleading and incendiary, and yet it is part of the narrative promoted by one of the major political parties and supported by the media and entertainment industries. This is where the NYTs 1619 project is so deeply flawed and ahistorical.
- **Racism can be disavowed, forgiven and healed, like any other sin.** As followers of Christ, we know first hand God's power to forgive, redeem and transform human hearts. The dominant paradigm of our day, however, assumes that racism is implicit and unconscious and therefore irredeemable. It afflicts every white person by virtue of their being white. Like any other sin, racism is a distortion of our humanity, something Jesus has shown Himself to be eminently qualified to fix.

Slavery

- Taking away the freedom of another human being to exploit their labor is reprehensible, inexcusable and violates our deepest sensibilities as well as Jesus's foremost command that we love one another as God has loved us.
- Very few people today in the West would disagree with this assessment. But what is so clear to us today wasn't necessarily clear to our forebears in previous generations. World opinion on the enslavement of other humans has evolved slowly over the millenia. So, to roundly condemn those living in the 17th-19th centuries for ethical norms so clear to us today is both unfair and uncharitable. It is anachronistic to superimpose 21st century moral sensibilities on our great-great-grandparents' generation.
- As repulsive as the thought is to us today, the fact is, throughout human history slavery was a normal, universally accepted practice in every culture on every populated continent of the planet. This is historically incontrovertible. Africans enslaved other Africans. Pacific Islanders, Europeans, Middle Easterners, Chinese, native Americans, East Indians: for all of these societies slavery was, various times, a significant component of their economies and social life.

- Minimizing or ignoring this fact does not help the cause of racial reconciliation in our day. It hurts it because it creates a false picture of Americans being uniquely pernicious and perverse when in fact, they were employing slavery in ways that were common for their times.
- Now, these facts in no way excuse the 246 years that some Americans owned slaves (76 of those years as an constitutional republic) but they do help us to situate America's sin in its broader historical context so as to better understand it.
- The Atlantic Slave trade, by any measure, was diabolical and abhorrent. Make no mistake: this thing was from the pit of hell. Only evil principalities and powers could inspire a practice so heinous and violent.
- And yet the Atlantic slave trade, which brought slaves to the Americas, was comparable to the other large slave trades being conducted at approximately the same time. Slavery had been flourishing among the different tribes and kingdoms within Africa for centuries before slaves were first brought to the New World. Some scholars believe that, all told, as many as 8 million Africans were taken as slaves by other Africans. And the Arab slave trade, which extended for a much longer period of time, is responsible for perhaps as many as 12-17 million slaves.
- Many people are unaware that North African slavers invaded coastal towns in Italy, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Iceland, France, and England, capturing men and women to be sold as slaves throughout the Middle East. All told, some 1-1.24 million white Europeans were enslaved through these so-called Barbary pirates.
- Furthermore, Europeans themselves had a long history of enslaving other Europeans. So many Eastern Europeans were enslaved over the centuries that their name, Slav, accounts for the etymology of our English word "slave".
- To understand America's participation in slavery, there are several facts that you're not going to read about in the NYT or hear discussed on MSNBC or CNN.
- One of these facts is that, of the roughly 10.7 million slaves that survived the middle passage from West Africa, the vast majority were not intended for North America but for Brazil and the Caribbean. The best estimates are that about 388,000 came directly to the U.S., with some scholars believing that perhaps another 70-80,000 went first to the Caribbean, then to North America. This is important to know because very often the conversation is framed in a way that

implies that America's role was unique in the Atlantic trade when in fact it accounted for a small portion, about 4%, of the slaves trafficked.

- Those 460,000 or so slaves were the basis for the vast majority of the blacks living in the United States in the years prior to the Civil War. According to the 1860 census, there were just under 4 million slaves in the country out of a total population of 31 million. Overall, about 7.4% of American households owned slaves with, of course, the vast majority of these living in the southern states. A little known fact is that of the roughly 250,000 free blacks living in the south in 1860, 4,000 of them owned slaves. It is estimated that fully 28% of free blacks living in New Orleans were slave owners. One of the richest men in the south prior to the war was a free black man named William Ellison of South Carolina who owned dozens of slaves to work his large plantation and to sell to other plantation owners.
- None of these facts make American slavery any less reprehensible. But they do help us to better understand the complex nature of the problem against its historical backdrop.

Progress

- One of the most divisive issues in this conversation concerns whether America has made progress in addressing its racial problems. Many activists assert that no progress has been made: that blacks are essentially no better off today than they were since the end of Jim Crow.
- This is so damaging to reconciliation efforts. The “narrative of zero progress” does a harm in at least three ways:
 1. It makes many whites throw up there hands and say: “Why bother?” After fighting a civil war that wrecked much of our nation; enacting remedial legislation and spending billions of dollars on government programs designed to help the black community, are you telling me it was all for nothing?
 2. It keeps social justice warriors in a state of high alert, looking for the next example of racist policing, so that every shooting of a black person by the police leads to weeks of rioting before the facts of the case are known to form a mature judgment about what actually transpired.
 3. Finally, it discredits the unbelievable sacrifices made by brave men and women like Abraham Lincoln, MLK, Claudette Colvin, Rosa Parks, and countless others who, in many cases, gave their lives to improve the lives of black people.

- An abbreviated list of efforts made to address our racist past includes:
 - The American Civil War, 1861-1865, resulting in the deaths of 625,000 Americans, including nearly one-third of all southern white males between the ages of 18 and 40.
 - The 13th Amendment of 1865, outlawing slavery
 - The 14th Amendment of 1868, insuring citizenship, due process and equal protection
 - The 15th Amendment of 1870, granting voting rights
 - The 24th Amendment, of 1964, invalidating poll taxes
 - The Civil Rights Act of 1964
 - Voting rights Act of 1965

- There have been numerous good faith efforts to redress our sins of the past. Are we done? Not by a long shot. We have a lot more work to go. But we've made a good start that we ought to be proud of. We can build on these achievements and take additional steps to move from our current impasse to a place of improved race relations.

- What remains to be done?

Response with head: solutions

1. **Issue a joint Congressional apology in the next year.** Proverbs 28:13: "Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy."

 2. **Commission federal task forces made up of non-partisan, ethnically diverse experts in various disciplines to recommend actionable steps to attack the five greatest issues afflicting the black community** (probably include education, prison/criminal justice reform, family integrity, reduction of violence).

 3. **Restore order in our cities.** Stop the riots now. Riots breed chaos, fear and destruction, and they end up disproportionately hurting the black community. While peaceful demonstrations are constitutionally protected forms of free speech; riots, looting and destruction of public property are not.
- We've listened with our hearts. We've problem solved with our heads. As we close, let's hear what the Lord says.

Letting the Lord have the last word

- 1. There is just one race: the human race, made in God's image (Gen 1:26-28).**
This is a claim not just made by the bible but by anthropologists, geneticists and lexicographers. Race is a construct. According to Craig Venter, a pioneer of DNA sequencing: "The concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis." We are one species: *homo sapiens*. It was an early 19th century physician, Samuel Morton from Philadelphia, who proposed the idea that there were five races of humans. We now know that genetically, we are 99.9 percent the same. Elizabeth Kolbert: "the mutation that's most responsible for giving Europeans lighter skin is a single tweak in a gene known as *SLC24A5*, which consists of roughly 20,000 base pairs. In one position, where most sub-Saharan Africans have a *G*, Europeans have an *A*."
- 2. Within this one race are many wonderful and unique ethnicities that enrich the race as a whole.** Think of how we would be collectively impoverished without our skin, eye, and hair color variations, our different foods and forms of music, dance and traditions. These add spice to the great common stew of humanity. And God apparently gets a kick out of the diversity. According to Rev 7:9, our ethnic differences will be featured in the life to come: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." We may as well get use to celebrating our ethnic differences now.
- 3. Jesus supersedes all ethnic divisions, making us one in Him.** According to the NT, this is our true identity. Eph 2:14-16 says: "For Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."
- 4. Pray**