

Hope Towards Racial Harmony (Ephesians 3:20; John 11:1-44)

The anguish our nation is currently feeling along with the unrest we have been witnessing and experiencing as the result of George Floyd's tragic death caused by the four former police officers in Minneapolis now charged with his death, has once again compelled our attention to the issue of racism that remains an open wound among us. We cannot hope to resolve this in the space of a short message on a Sunday morning. It will take a concerted effort requiring painful and uncomfortable conversation along with a commitment to action by all of us to find our way forward to a better way. But until we pursue this in earnest, the infamous list of names to which Mr. Floyd has now been added, will continue to grow and sympathetic hand-wringing will not stop it.

The church—and here I mean all followers of Jesus—has a responsibility to lead towards this better way. This is not a new issue for us. But as many have said, we haven't been at our best in this. There is still work for us to do in cleaning our own house—which we must also do, but in so doing we gain credibility and a voice in the public square so that we might indeed be the church as the teacher of nations, a school of life which offers and shares that better way as a witness to the grace and power of God to bring about an outcome of racial harmony.

Paul tackled this issue head-on in the early church as he wrote to the Ephesians in chapter 2 of his letter to them as they wrestled with entrenched racial barriers that existed between Jews and Gentiles who found themselves bumping against cultural narratives in their common commitment to faith in Jesus. In vs. 14 and following he wrote, "For Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...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...in him the whole house is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord...a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

The heavy lifting in terms of bridging the gap between races, Christ has done. The barrier has been removed, the way is clear—it remains for us to see the path cleared and to walk in it thus leading the way, compelling the world's notice so that it desires the better way Christ offers. But we're stumbling on that path, and my goal in our time together is to offer a perspective as to why we're stumbling and how we might nurture hope towards that better way of racial harmony.

As I have agonized and prayed over this, my mind has been directed towards the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead recorded in John 11. That seemed odd to me, until I framed this as an allegory which brought it into focus. This is a fairly familiar story; I won't read the passage because it takes up 44 verses in John, but I want to land on a few moments in that account to flesh out some ideas this offers in our situation. For this to make sense, consider Mary and Martha as the church, and Lazarus as embodying racial harmony.

The account begins with the sisters, Mary and Martha—the church, informing Jesus that one he loves, Lazarus, or in our allegory, something he loves, racial harmony, is sick. In fact, it's on its deathbed—we can see the ravages of this sickness playing out on the evening news. We implore Jesus in our crisis, but, he delays his response. The agony of his seeming absence is something our Black sisters and

brothers are especially feeling right now. Where is Jesus as this rhythm of violence continues to roll out? The lament is heartfelt and painful—how long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?” Hab. 1:2. Where are you Lord? We’re doing what we can, what we must, but where are you?

When Jesus finally shows up, racial harmony is dead and buried. We are surrounded by well-meaning comfort, but the reality we live with remains. In frustration the church confronts Jesus, “If you had been here, this wouldn’t have happened.” Jesus simply says, “I’m here now, and racial harmony will live.” Of course, we say, at the end of time, in heaven all will be right. And this is what some, particularly among our sisters and brothers of color, have settled for—this is the way they live with the tension of their present experience that seems intractable. They, and we project harmony into the “not yet, but coming” future. Then Jesus says, “I am the answer...do you believe this?” That’s the question we all have to wrestle with—do we believe him? Do we actually trust him as the answer right now? As good Christians we default to a belief statement that acknowledges his place—you’re the son of God, but we say this without necessarily knowing what that calls for. It’s an article of faith.

Jesus then says, show me where you’ve buried racial harmony—show me the outcome. And we take him to all the places where the dream of racial harmony has died. We run the reel of all that’s transpired in just our recent history—Ahmad Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd along with the places that bear the names of others like Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin—the list is long, that we even have such a list demonstrates our awareness. And Jesus wept: over the brutality of violence visited upon black women and men who suffered and died under the color of authority; Jesus wept over the callous disregard of Blacks, and persons of color who were and are created in the image of God; Jesus wept over the imprint of fear and vulnerability in the lives of Black children who witness this rhythm of violence and see their own father or mother, uncle or brother, or even themselves projected into the present moment and held in the grip of this possibility; Jesus wept over the diminished value of the lives of people of color resulting in inequity where justice, education, healthcare, housing, and equal opportunity are concerned; Jesus wept over the idea that broken windows and stolen merchandise—all of which can be replaced—inflames the sensibility of the populace to a greater degree than the loss of a human person who cannot. Jesus wept, and he is weeping still.

Convulsed with sorrow, Jesus then says, “Remove the Stone!” Take away the barrier that hides the finality of this outcome, that seals it as inevitable. Answering, the church says, “But Lord, it’s nasty and corrupt.” Which is true—it is disturbing and uncomfortable to face this outcome—we shrink back insisting that nothing can be done now—he’s too far gone—racial harmony is dead and gone, it’s the way things are. Instead, Jesus promises glory as the barriers are removed.

Staring at the gap of the opened tomb, Jesus pronounces the redemptive word as a command: Come out! Shocking the by-standers, racial harmony emerges from the fate the world, and many of us with it, have consigned to it. Dumb-founded the crowd stands paralyzed in shocked silence until Jesus prompts the next step—perhaps the most important part of this entire allegorical exercise: “Take off the grave clothes and let him, let it go.” In other words, “Get to work!” Unwind the bonds of

racism that hold harmony captive. Clear away the entanglement of ignorance that refuses to consider the roots of racism. Cut away the layers of cultural entrapment nurturing the seeds of racism that cultivate the trappings of power and feed the fallacy of superiority crippling the free expression of ethnicities different from yours that uniquely contribute to the variegated image of God implanted in the vast spectrum of humanity. Purge it all and let him, let it—racial harmony—accomplish its work.

How do we do this work? We go back to Ephesians, this time to chapter 2, vs. 20: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine”—and right now racial harmony seems to be immeasurably more than we can imagine—to him who is able to do immeasurably more, “according to his power that is at work within us...” Did you catch that? We readily acknowledge the need for the power of Christ to accomplish racial harmony, but in our acknowledgement we too often put the burden for its release back on Jesus as though it is up to him to miraculously intervene in our crisis thereby relieving us of personal responsibility. But that’s not New Testament teaching—the power of Jesus is at work within us—we have the capability of bringing about the better way. For us it’s a matter of will—do we choose to do it? Which brings us back to the question Jesus asked moments ago: Do we believe him—do we trust him as the answer right now? If we do, here are some ways to exercise that trust, and it begins with listening. Now is the time for us to listen to our sisters and brothers of color, to hear them tell the story of their experience, to understand history from their perspective. It is time for the marginalized church to be our teacher. We have much to learn, but there are many resources available if we have the will to be informed.

Secondly, we must train ourselves to view this issue through a theological lens, rather than political or cultural lenses. The loudest voices in this conversation are not generally the best at nurturing our better impulses. Pray for clarity so that you can see this as Jesus does, so that you can follow his lead into the better way. We are centered in Christ, let him direct our attention and guide our actions.

Third, protest unrighteousness with clarity, beginning with yourself. Examine yourself under the guidance of Christ’s Spirit to expose any latent unrighteousness that stands in opposition to racial harmony. I know this is painful—I’m engaged in this practice, and it’s not pleasant, it is, however essential. Call it out in yourself and rely on grace to sort it out. Do this with your family—teach your children, equip your children, lead your children and your extended family. Protest unrighteousness in your circle of influence and in the wider community to raise awareness—bring this particular strand of unrighteousness into the light that it may be seen for what it is. Advocate for policy in the public square that corrects the inequity of unrighteousness.

Lastly, at least for today, be the church—use the power of Christ at work within you to work for change because it is a kingdom value—it is right, though it may not be popular. Continue the conversation within our house and for the sake of the world, which God loves, for which Christ died and rose again—it is the better way which will display the character of God and bring about God’s purpose for the sake of all who are created in God’s image. AMEN