

July 26, 2020

“The News God Is Giving”
Acts 17:16-34

FCF: The problem with “the color line”

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The gospel is our best hope for racial reconciliation.
(magnet) This is made clear in the basics of the message.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Dr. David Jones was one of the most wise and godly men I’ve had the honor of knowing. He taught at CTS for 40 years. These are his words from an article in 1996 (**READ quote**):

(In 1906) W.E.B. Dubois made his famous prophecy: “The problem of the 20th century will be the problem of the color line.”... You know the color line is still a problem when, as the most heavily publicized on-going trial in history went to jury (ed., the 1995 double-homicide trial of O.J. Simpson), three out of four white Americans thought the defendant should be convicted, and three out of four black Americans thought he should be acquitted. The only way to account for this discrepancy in judgment along racial lines is the divergent life experiences of the two groups with the toxic waste of racism.

If the color line is the problem, what is the solution? If racial barriers divide people, what will bring them together? If folks are alienated on account of race, how can they be reconciled?

That was 1996. I’d say the color line is still with us. As are the questions. What’s the answer?

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 17:16-34

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

According to reports last week, there could be a widely available COVID-19 vaccine by sometime in early 2021. The federal government is working with several pharmaceutical firms, each taking various approaches towards finding a cure. It would seem that, in this case, it’s possible to have different but helpful ways of addressing the same problem. Which is good.

That said, such a dynamic does not hold in addressing the pandemic of racism. For that is a spiritual problem at the heart level which requires a spiritual solution at the heart level. Let me back up and explain that. Stay with me here for the argument. To the degree that we rely on our own flawed unfinished works instead of Christ’s perfect finished work for our security and significance, we will feel radically insecure. Deep down, we know whatever we have is simply not enough. So we’ll feel the need to bolster our sense of being good and worthy. Our troubled hearts will flail about, looking to seize onto something - often our tribe, our party, or our race. As we do that, an “us vs. them” feeling sets in, a toxic air of superiority. Which leads to racism.

How can such a deep-seated spiritual problem at the heart level be addressed? Through the gospel. The gospel is our best hope for racial reconciliation. This is made clear in the basics of the message. How? In three ways. First, in how the gospel speaks to our common humanity. Second, in how it speaks to our common shame. Third, in how it speaks to our common hope.

I. OUR COMMON HUMANITY

The Athenians saw themselves as a superior people - more wise and noble than any other. So where does Paul begin? He appeals to our common humanity (**READ Acts 17:24-28**).

A) Shared Origin

1. God as Creator

God is the Creator of all things and of all people. Ultimately, we all share the same lineage.

2. God as Sustainer

God is the Creator of all. He is the Sustainer of all. His greatness is stressed. He needs nothing. Our dependence upon Him is stressed as well. We need everything. And that is true for us all.

B) Shared Story

In that sense, we have a shared origin. And we have a shared story as well.

1. God's sovereignty

He is sovereign over history and geography. Ultimately, all nations are under His control.

2. God's purpose

And His rule has a purpose. He desires that we should know Him. He is not far off, as the deists claim. Nor is He part of His creation, as the pantheists claim. He is both real and personal.

We have a shared origin and a shared experience. This is our common humanity.

Illustration:

On June 8, 1941, C.S. Lewis ascended the pulpit at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford and gave one of the most insightful sermons of the 20th century ([READ quote](#)):

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

Application:

This is what it is to speak of our common humanity. Every person - red, yellow, black, or white - has been made in the image of God, according to His likeness. Psalm 8 says we have been “crowned with glory and honor.” Which means that to demean or deny the full dignity and glory of any human person is to demean and deny the glory of God Himself. That can happen in so many ways, whether by sins of omission or commission. Again, ours is a common humanity.

The gospel is our hope for racial reconciliation. This is clear in the basics of the message.

II. OUR COMMON SHAME

But ours is a common shame as well. There is a shared humanity and a shared depravity. After quoting from these Greek writers, Paul then begins to make a shift ([READ Acts 17:29-30](#)).

A) A Call to Repent

1. What this means

This call to repent was surely unexpected by his hearers. It means a change, a turning from and a turning to. Of course, it would imply the need for a change. And the reality of objective truth.

2. Why it is needed

Such repentance is needed for the times of ignorance, of not knowing, are over. The fullness of God's revelation has come with the coming of Jesus, the coming of the one true God in the flesh.

B) The Pull of Idols

1. For them

Which meant the pull of idols had to be addressed (**READ Acts 17:16**). What did Paul see? A city “full of idols” - temples, shrines, statues, and altars. Even an altar to a god unknown so as to cover all the bases. What did Paul feel as he saw this? He was distressed, grieved and jealous for the misplaced allegiance on display here - God being robbed and lives given over to lies.

2. For us

What is an idol? A God substitute - whatever we look to for meaning, security, and significance instead of Him. It could be money, sex, or fame. At a deeper level, it could be power, control, comfort, or approval. It is cosmic treason, a spiritual adultery. And it is common to us all.

Our ordinary idols make for our shared depravity. It is our common shame.

Illustration:

Listen to these words from this article, “The Cure for Racism Is Cancer” (**READ quote**):

The first time you park your car in the vast, cold cavern of the underground garage and step onto the [hospital] elevator, you may feel alien and forsaken. Perhaps you'll feel that you have been singled out unfairly, plucked from your healthy life and cast into this cruel ordeal [of cancer].

Walking through the lobby with a manila envelope of X-rays under your arm and a folder of lab reports and notes from your previous doctor, you'll sense the deep tremor of your animal fear, a barely audible uneasiness trickling up from somewhere inside you.

But there is good news, too. As you pass one hallway after another, looking for elevator B, you'll see that this place is full of people —riding the escalators, reading books and magazines, checking their phones near the coffeepots. And it will dawn on you that most of these people have cancer. In fact, it seems as if the whole world has cancer. With relief and dismay you'll realize, *I'm not special. Everybody here has cancer.* The withered old Jewish lefty newspaper editor. The Latino landscape contractor with the stone-roughened hands. The tough lesbian with the bleached-blond crew cut and the black leather jacket. And you will be cushioned and bolstered by the sheer number and variety of your fellows.

In that sense, cancer is said to be the true democracy. It levels everyone out on the same ground.

Application:

My friends, wherever we go across the face of this earth, we will never meet anyone over whom we may feel morally superior. We all bear the same shame. We are all idolaters. It is not a matter of “if” but “what.” Which can be deeply humbling. It levels us all out as the very same.

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III. OUR COMMON HOPE

Which brings us to the third point, our common hope. God has not left us. The intensity of His love demanded that He act, impelling Him to move towards us (**READ Acts 17:30-31**).

A) An Actual Event

1. The resurrection of Jesus

The resurrection of Jesus is not a memory living on through His teaching or a myth created by His followers. It is an historical verifiable event - an empty tomb, a living Savior, real witnesses.

2. The implications for Paul

You can see the implications this had for Paul. Here he is visiting the great Athens. Yet as he walked those streets, he could see it all so clearly and speak with compassion and conviction.

B) A Real Assurance

For he knew the resurrection to be a real event that brought forth real assurance.

1. Who Jesus is

Real assurance as to who Jesus is - not just a great teacher but the Christ, the Savior of the world.

2. What is coming

Real assurance as to who Jesus is and what is coming - a Day of Judgment in which all will be held accountable and all will be made right. These are implications of Jesus' resurrection.

And these realities form our common hope, something true for all of Jesus' followers.

Application:

The New Testament is very clear on this. In Christ, all the old distinctions have lost their power. Not that there are no distinctions but that all the old divisions and attitudes of superiority and inferiority have been done away with. Which means that, among His disciples, the most important thing as to how we think of ourselves can never be based on the color of our skin, our cultural heritage, or our political preferences. We must never live out of those things, allowing them to hold sway over us. Not for people of the resurrection. For Jesus has made us one.

Let me ask you. For those of you keeping the gospel at bay, did you know this is what you rejected? For those of you who are Christians, did you know this is what you embraced?

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CONCLUSION:

There is power to the gospel as it confronts, heals, and transforms. And this holds fast as the gospel collides with the sin of racism. Have you ever considered the miracle of how many African American slaves came to faith in Christ, "the White Man's Savior"? Did you realize that the gospel was the core motivation behind the Civil Rights Movement? Do you remember the forgiveness extended to Dylan Roof by the survivors and family members of the nine people he murdered the evening of June 17, 2015 at Emanuel AME Church? It was truly breathtaking.

Let me tell you the story of Tom Tarrants. He was a white supremacist serving a 35-year prison sentence for attempting to bomb a Jewish businessman's home. Tarrants grew up in AL, attended church every Sunday with his family. Even as he plotted terrorism, he thought he was fighting for God and country. But, while in prison, he started reading a Bible. Daily life there was such he could not avoid engaging nonwhites. These things combined to crush his racial stereotypes and he became a Christian. After eight years in prison, because of a work-release program and the labors of numerous advocates, Tom Tarrants became a free man. Now 72, he is the president of the C.S. Lewis Institute, a D.C.-based discipleship organization. Over the years, he has co-pastored a multi-racial church, served as interim pastor for an Asian American church, and participated in racial reconciliation events in the city. Friends, there is power to the gospel.

It's said that there's always a "someone" in such stories that is used to awaken a "former's" years of indoctrination and ignorance. It's always through unexpected kindness and empathy. For Tarrants, the "someones" were nonwhite inmates who befriended him, the Jewish

attorney who vouched for him, the chaplains who brought him Christian books and tapes, the prayer group women who interceded for him. There are always the “someones” in such stories. And there is always a “something” as well - the power of the gospel at work in our poor hearts.

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