

Confronting the Power of Prejudice

Series: Joining God for the City

March 8, 2015

Intro

50 years ago...our nation found itself face to face with an enemy... the harsh reality of racial discrimination. On Sunday March 7, 1965...600 people started a planned march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to call for the right to vote to be honored for all. When state troopers met the demonstrators at the edge of the city by the Edmund Pettus Bridge, that day became known as "Bloody Sunday."

In the recent movie about Selma... we see the power of bringing the darkness into the light...as we see the role of injustice play out on national television...and a nation had to confront itself...the **collective conscious** is widened and awakened.

This **led to the passage** that year of the **Voting Rights Act**, a landmark federal achievement of the 1960s American Civil Rights Movement.

> **Something wrong was moved towards good...the common good.**

As we gather here exactly 50 years later on this weekend...there is something to be thankful for... there is no doubt we have grown as a nation. (The fact that 50 years ago...the nation was forced to watch...now such a movie draws lives across all racial backgrounds...who pay to watch...and face the discomfort it raises.)

But needless to say... it was a step...but not the end. While legislation has helped set a far better framework for justice...for equality... it does not by itself resolve the tensions within us.

We are a people who are led by Jesus...and he revealed the nature of laws to make people better. While we can make laws to **protect discrimination** in the **courtroom...**but you **can't make laws** to **protect discrimination** in our **human hearts**. Legislation is a good backdrop for morality...but legislation doesn't make us morally right people.

And so the cities of the world are still **filled with tensions** related to our racial differences... as seen in Ferguson, Missouri (part of the greater ST Louis). And Los Angeles

> Cities are filled with higher tension...but also with greater change.

When we face that are cities are filled with a greater level of racial tension... we need to realize that is as much a statement of a problem as it is a potential.

The City's Power to Redeem our Diversity

The City Can Redeem our Diversity

Cities are the place where diversity must face itself...and must seek to find what unites us.

It's in the **cities like Los Angeles...**that **cultures have tasted one another's foods...**begun to **enjoy one another's musical forms...learned one another's languages.**

God smiles.

(I think it is something we all have some sense of good in... why people I know who move out of Los Angeles to other smaller towns often tell me they miss the diversity.)

But what we have not reached...is the deeper sharing of full regard and trust.

I believe that ...

The Root of our Challenge Lies in Our Use of Power

The deepest root of our racial division and discrimination...is our desire for power...and control.

We are naturally more comfortable with what is familiar. We feel more secure in what we feel in control of... and what gives us a sense of power.

That's why we can **value some diversity...** but **too much becomes a threat.**

So the **majority becomes threatened** and the **majority is generally the one's most vulnerable to unjust use of power and discrimination.**

Those in the **majority don't like to hear this...**but it is true.

But it's important to realize that it is **not a matter of the majority being worse people...but of bearing the most responsibility.**

White people are not more prejudice than any other people. We all share the **same propensity.** Look across the globe of human cultures and you will see that it is the majority...of any color or culture...who can abuse power with prejudice.

So if you are white...I want to tell you...if you are carrying "white guilt"... it doesn't serve anybody because it isn't real. **What we do need to take up...**is the responsibility that comes with being the majority. And the same is **true of everyone...**because you are **likely the majority somewhere.** (Think of any setting where there may be more of you...than others... even a group of three ...four...five friends. That is where you will have to face the potential to claim rather than share power.)

And what we find is that the **minority cultures will have to use what they have to exercise their desire for power.**

While the majority may use their **majority strength...education...wealth... minorities will often use violence.** Again...not because they are more violent...but because we use what we have to get power.

In this room... we all have sources of power... men...women...and we will use it.

Indeed, **neither lines drawn up long ago on maps...** nor **legislation drawn up in courts of law,** are proving an answer to the deep pain and prejudice felt in the heart of men and women throughout our world. [1]

Needless to say, those of us living in this city need few reminders of how deep and wide this unhealed wound is. If America was indeed to be a melting pot of cultures, as it once envisioned itself to be, we as Los Angeles would indeed be the prize pot of stew.

> But the vision has proved simplistic and the world is anxiously waiting for a new vision of hope.

The world is longing for a vision prepared to celebrate both our unity and diversity.

- **A vision that is not simply based in rhetorical ideals... but redemptive reality.**
- **A vision able to replace apprehension with appreciation.**
- **A vision that is not simply imposed but inspired.**
- **A vision that is not simply political but personal.**

So how can a city filled with such diversity discover it's God-given potential?

That question is larger than we can fully plumb in our brief time...but let me suggest 3 things.

We can become agents of redeeming diversity as we are changed by...

1. A God-centered reality that defines our equality and unity in relationship to the Source of all power

We need that which is God-centered... that usurps our sense that we are center or source of power.. Nothing is more destructive than when those who want to maintain personal power for themselves... attach God to themselves.

It usually begins with taking a blessing that one group has been given by grace...and claiming that it reflects something of their personal superiority.

Israel to outsiders. They were blessed with that which bore a responsibility to serve the world...and began to see themselves as superior.

Nearly every majority culture... Hitler tried to draw upon the superiority of the Aryan race...

northerners looking down on southerners. And in every context...the minority will respond with their own sense of indignation against those who oppress them.

Indeed this world is longing for the KINGDOM OF GOD ...where every tongue, tribe, and nation would be as one before God. The GOOD NEWS is that Jesus didn't come to impart the Kingdom of God as merely a new vision, but as a **new reality.**

Jesus has declared that the **kingdom of God is at hand**... which means that the **rightful rule of God** is at hand. God is going to restore life back to its proper order.... And that means we are all under God...united by God.

And as he was nearing the end...he prayed these words:

John 17:11 (NIV)

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name--the name you gave me--so that they may be one as we are one.

Jesus prayed forth the very will of God; that all who would believe would be one; all who would forever be drawn to God's revelation of new life through Christ...what He knew would include the unparalleled diversity of today.

And what kind of oneness are we to discover?

> The oneness he has with the Father;

A oneness in which we like them are united yet unique; equal yet distinct. Jesus prayed, that in all our diversity we would be equal and united before God.... And enter the reality of a unity based on mutual sacrificial respect and regard.

In Pentecost we find that **Jesus' prayer** for all to be united was **set in motion by the Spirit**.

When the Holy Spirit first comes to empower and fill the church, (which is known as Pentecost and recorded in chapter 2 of the Book of Acts), it says that it drew a crowd who represented every nation on earth and under heaven... and as the disciples were filled with the Spirit they began to speak in every language so that those from every nation could understand.

The Spirit has set in motion the restoration of what God had first created.

The priority of our unity is seen...

in the purpose and prayer of Jesus ...that we be one;
in the power of Pentecost, when the Spirit first falls upon the church;
in the picture of eternity, given in Revelation, when we see every tongue, tribe, and nation – literally every ethnic group- in worship before God.

As Jesus declared in Mark 11:7: “My Father’s house shall be called a **house of prayer for all the nations.**” The Greek word translated “nations” = “**ethnos**” = **all ethnic groups**.

This is a reality he made possible.

Thus the apostle Paul says in...

Galatians 3:26-28 -

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for YOU ARE ALL ONE IN CHRIST.”

That may sound like a nice simple statement... but stop and consider who declared this and what it meant to arrive at such a statement. The apostle Paul had been the rising star of religious leaders...the most esteemed ... defending the uniquely Jewish heritage provided him with power...and prestige. No one could have been more attached to the reality that Jew and Gentile were were the difference in life...and in identity. But God broke into his reality...and changed that reality. And he wrestled...and now declares...even leads the way in declaring that there is no essential difference in worth.

As some have noted...this was the biggest issue which the early followers of Christ would have to deal with. The **Jerusalem church's biggest struggles** involved **not Christology or eschatology**, but how to **embrace fellowship with Gentile believers**.

Paul spends the last quarter of Acts in Roman custody because he refuses to compromise the message of God's love for Gentiles. He was charged with profaning the Temple by admitting an Ephesian Gentile. From custody he tells Ephesian Christians that God has shattered the Temple's ethnic barrier (Eph. 2:14) and established a new temple of all peoples by the Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22).

Inherent in our new life in Christ is the **fulfillment of the vision of eternity given in Revelation**, when every tongue, tribe, and nation will be united before God. Every “nation,” every ethnos...every ethnic group.

> God is glorified when every ethnic group are again as one, BECAUSE ONLY TOGETHER ARE WE THE FULLNESS OF THE HUMAN RACE WHICH GOD CREATED TO BE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH AND TO BE GLORIFIED THROUGH. ONLY IN THE FULLNESS OF OUR DIVERSITY WILL GOD BE FULLY GLORIFIED.

That is why **Jesus said he would not return and bring the consummation of human history**, as we know it, **until the Good News of eternal life in Him reached every nation, every distinct culture, and people**.

We can understand then, that when he prayed that “all would be one” even all who would eventually receive the good news, he meant every ethnic group would be one.

AND THAT IS WHAT THE SPIRIT SET IN MOTION AT PENTECOST...THE GLORY OF OUR UNITY.

The **glory of Pentecost** allows us to understand the **significance** of allowing **division and discrimination to develop or remain among us.**

Secondly, we can become agents of redeeming diversity as we are changed by...

2. A God-provided grace to engage the wounds of our past

As we realize the Spirit of God is at work to declare the great value of every tongue, tribe, and nation, **we can understand the significance of what lies in our heritage.**

Most of us know more than enough of our history as a nation to know that **alongside that which was most honorable there lay the wounds of great dishonor** as well. It's truly a startling **entanglement of righteous and unrighteous roots.**

Every step and every charter established declared with great conviction that this was a COVENANT PROCESS, a **covenant confessing God as the sovereign provider**, and declaring that only such honor to him would prove a blessing...But the competing ideals of servicing and conquest rose together quickly.

This **led to the eventual posture** taken towards the NATIVE AMERICANS, whose possession of the land was stripped by the sins of superiority and deceit.

- **While judging the Indians for their worship of idols**, it was the **idolatry of the European Americans** for land and possessions that was **being bowed down to.**
- **Our covenant before God was broken as we conquered and cheated our neighbor**, forged unprovoked massacres on women and children, broke 400 treaties and eventually broke the spirit of a people whose suicide and alcohol related deaths are now six times the national average.

And if our deepest wounds lie in Native Americans, our **widest wounds lie with those of African descent. Bought, shipped, and sold to produce profits.**

- **Beaten, murdered, raped for the pleasure** of those privileged by their European descent.
- **Families pulled apart** so that no bonds would be known but those of slave and owner...a legacy still proving tragic in the experience of Black families today.

...And of course there is **the experience of SO MANY IMMIGRANTS WHO FOLLOWED** those of **Irish, Jewish, Japanese, Asian, and Hispanic descent** to name a few; many **being degraded, devalued, and demeaned as second class.**

WHY BRING THIS UP...ESPECIALLY THE PART THAT IS IN THE PAST? Because much of it fills this room... lying in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, as well as the **world around us.**

- I recall when previously engaging such issues.... That a wonderful woman who was a major servant to this community...from Japanese descent...finally shared something... that she was raised in the equivalent of concentration camps that all who were of Japanese descent were placed into surrounding WW2. Remembers most was the years after... going to school... the neighborhood...the name calling. None of us...knowing her for years...had ever known.
- In many respects it is **A WOUND LEFT OPEN**. America **found a semblance of conviction, but fell short of its confession**. We have tried to provide **recognition without repentance**...and we can never honor our covenant with God and one another without the deeper work of **recognition** that comes with **repentance** and **confession**.

- I know that many feel that we just need to move on...and that it's time for the past to be forgotten...or at least forgiven. But **the process of forgiveness is not something one can dictate for another**. And being a people who acknowledge the past can help that process.

..and finally,

We can become agents of redeeming diversity as we are changed by...

3. A God-formed heart to share power with others.

To extend someone power...is to extend their influence. The root of extending power to someone...begin when someone matters to us.

Three things that will bring change in us and through us...

1. Recognize that our idea of “normal” is not God’s...and our prejudice is a prison that confines us from the fullness of life with God.

We all have a sense of what is normal...and it's rooted in whatever culture we grew up in. That's normal to us. And naturally everything else is...not normal.

There is a natural fear of what is not normal...not familiar. We feel less secure...less comfortable. What can help us...is to recognize that the multi-cultural world is normal...diversity is about differences...not between normal and abnormal...but between variations of what is normal.

If God is fully glorified when all people...from all tongues, tribes, and nations are united in him...then until we see others as equals....we can't enter his presence as we should.

If we can't see others as equal, we can't see God correctly.

2. Dare to face our own false sources of worth....because they can be false attachments that keep us from seeing the real and equal worth in others.

Ask yourself....what do you find security and significance in?

(It could be your looks...your success...your work.)

What allows us to feel secure and significant is what we most often judge others by. What we find our sense of worth in, is often “coverings” that can keep us from seeing the real and equal worth of others.

Joe Castanos... a former pastor of a Hispanic Vineyard once said... -

The Church needs to be a place safe from the onslaught of insecurity and identity. We must be the place that offer life beyond the commercial market values of the world. People should be free from defending their work...which ethnic minorities in particular often have to do.

A beautiful call to be those whose identity lies in God...in such a way that one does not have to justify themselves by their work...or where they live.

3. Explore the experience of others...and let it help shape your understanding and commitment of “the common good.”

I'm not suggesting that we go ask someone to fulfill our class assignment... but we all know people who are from different cultures...and part of just caring about them, is exploring their experience.

As the Psalmist wrote and the apostle Peter quoted: "Seek peace, and pursue it."

Many of us may have friendships with those of different backgrounds but we rarely if ever openly explore their experience and perspective.

Closing: Let me help us grasp the center of what God offers us. This is a huge issue that lies before us. Far more to explore...but I believe God wants us to grasp that the cit is full of potential ...His potential ...particularly because of the diversity that is drawn together. And I believe He wants us to help shape the conversation....to help redeem the conversation.

To help embody what it means to surrender to God's power over our own.

To recognize the grace to acknowledge the sins of our past.

To open our hearts to allow others to matter....for they do.

Notes:

1. The premise of racial superiority has played out in Africa, both black Hutsi and Tuts, in Europe, between white Serbs and Croats, Russia between ethnic Russians and Chechens; in Asia between Japanese and Koreans.

The following presents the less noted role of such a mindset in the Iran.

"Indeed, Iranian belief in Persian racial superiority is not something to be taken lightly. The Pahlavi dynasty that preceded the 1979 revolution featured "Aryamehr" as one of the Shah's titles, meaning "Light of the Aryans." As for the link between anti-Sunni and anti-Arab sentiment, it is notable how many pan- Iranian and Iranian nationalist factions such as SUMKA and the Aryan League view Shi'ism in Iran as a form of "Aryanized Islam..."

In short, the continuing tensions between Iran and the Gulf Arab states in particular are at least in part the product of traditional Arab-Persian racial animosity, predating the rise of the Islamist regime.

Thus, even with regime change and an end to an Iranian existential threat to Israel, the nation will still strive to shift the balance of regional power and influence in the Middle East away from Saudi Arabia, provided there is no common enemy to fight, and will likely continue its nuclear program to achieve this goal."

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<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdCon...>

Speakers: Robert Baer and Victor Davis Hanson

2. The current realization that "race" is not the biological reality it was presumed to be:

<http://theconversation.com/human-races-biological-reality-or-cultural-delusion-30419>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/busting-myths-about-human-nature/201204/race-is-real-not-in-the-way-many-people-think>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/evolution/does-race-exist.html>

Leading anthropologists, Dr. Loring Brace of the University of Michigan

There is no such thing as a biological entity that warrants the term "race."

...the long-term residents of the various parts of the world have patterns of features that we can easily identify as characteristic of the areas from which they come...but it does not make them coherent biological entities. "Races" defined in such a way are products of our perceptions. "Seeing is believing" will be the retort, and, after all, aren't we seeing reality in those regional differences?

"There is nothing wrong with using geographic labels to designate people."

I should point out that this is the same argument that was made against Copernicus and Galileo almost half a millennium ago. To this day, few have actually made the observations and done the calculations that led those Renaissance scholars to challenge the universal perception that the sun sets in the evening to rise again at the dawn. It was just a matter of common sense to believe that the sun revolves around the Earth, just as it was common sense to "know" that the Earth was flat. Our beliefs concerning "race" are based on the same sort of common sense, and they are just as basically wrong.