

Trending
“Je Suis Charleston”
July 12, 2015

PRELUDE – “Our God’s Alive”
Feature – “Only In America”

Good morning everyone.

In the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, we read these words.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

In America, we believe that all men are created equal. We believe that all men are endowed with God-given rights that cannot be destroyed. We believe that all men, *by virtue* of being equal and endowed, are entitled to freely pursue the life

they desire; the life they believe will bring them happiness.

That's the vision on which this country was founded. That's the dream. That's the goal.

And, *amazingly*, in the 240 year timespan since that document was signed, for many Americans it has also been the reality. To put it in terms of the song we just heard, they've been given a chance; they've gotten to dance. But for others (for far too many) the dream of equality and freedom has *not* been the reality ... simply because of the color of their skin.

That's what we're going to talk about this morning as we continue in our series, *Trending* – taking a look at the major cultural issues of the day – which is something we do at this time every summer. *When the weather heats up around here, so do the topics.*

And, given the sensational events of recent

weeks and months in which race played a huge role ...

- The murder of nine of our brothers and sisters in Christ at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina by a young white-supremacist.
- The death of a bound and subdued Freddie Gray while in police custody in Baltimore – and the riots that followed.
- The police shooting of an unarmed and non-confrontational Walter Scott, also in Charleston.
- Then, of course, the situation that occurred last summer not too far from home when Michael Brown was shot and killed by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson.

The list could go on and on if we had the time.

Given these events and others like them, it's safe to say that, right now, there is probably no topic hotter than that of racism in America.

Now, I will confess to you right up front that I fought long and hard with myself (and with God) about addressing this topic because, quite frankly, it kind of messes with me. Specifically ...

1. I feel a little more vulnerable today than I'm comfortable with. With the exception of four years in NJ, I've lived most of my life in suburban communities that are overwhelming white. And in NJ, the non-white population was predominantly Puerto-Rican and Asian. So, I do not have a lot of firsthand experience in the kind of racism we're talking about today. And I'm a little nervous about saying something that's ignorant or inappropriate or offensive.
2. I'm confused about who or what to believe when it comes to the situations involving police. Some of the finest people I know are cops and more than a few of them have had

my back in the past year. And yet, reading the DOJ report on the culture and practices of the Ferguson Police Department (as well as research by the Baltimore Sun newspaper on the Baltimore PD) leaves little room to doubt the systematic violation of civil rights of law-abiding citizens who happen to be black.

3. I'm conflicted over the concept of "white privilege" – the idea that those of us who are white do not have to deal with the roadblocks that African Americans do simply because we *are* white. On the one hand the concept is offensive to me because I don't think *I personally* have treated people differently because of their race and I didn't ask for the privilege. On the other hand, I'm also not black and trying to make my way in the world after 200+ years of legal discrimination and worse ... so maybe there's something I don't see.

Those are just a few of the reasons why I did not want to do this message.

And here's why I decided to do it anyway – to dig in and study the issue both culturally and biblically.

- First of all, I'm quite positive that *God* is *extremely interested* in this issue. So many scriptures from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament address the idea of dealing *justly, fairly, equitably* with all people ... but *especially* with those who are outsiders or disadvantaged and have no power and no voice.

For example, when God lays out the moral code that will guide the newborn nation of Israel, he tells them:

The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you

*were foreigners in Egypt. I am the
LORD your God.
Leviticus 19:3 (NIV)*

**When He later tells the people of Israel to
“learn to do what is good” he defines it
like this:**

*Seek justice. Help the oppressed.
Defend the cause of orphans. Fight
for the rights of widows.
Isaiah 1:17 (NLT)*

In the NT, Jesus makes it even more personal. In describing how God will reward or punish believers on the day of Judgement ...

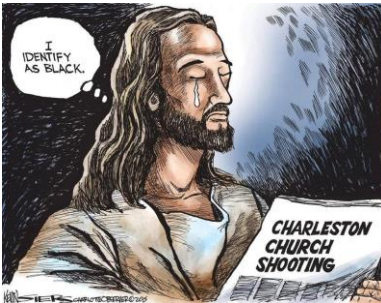
He says ...

*The King will say, “I tell you the
truth, when you did it to one of the
least of these my brothers and
sisters, you were doing it to me!”
Matthew 25:40 (NLT)*

God so identifies with “the least” that what we do to them is like doing it to Him.

This idea was brilliantly captured in a political cartoon titled “Je Suis Charleston” which appeared in the Charlotte Observer just days after the shooting. I liked it so much that I named this message after it.

Here it is.



What Dylan Roof did to those African American Christians in Charleston, he was doing to Jesus ... because Jesus identifies with them that closely.

My point is that this issue is extremely

important to God and if it's important to God, it ought to be important to the People of God (which, of course, makes you wonder why so many Christians 50, 100 and 200 years ago didn't see it that way. The answer is "they didn't want to" ... as we'll see).

- Secondly, I decided to talk about it because I think this is a critical issue for the church. And by that, I mean not just the church-at-large. I mean *our church*. More and more people of color – and not just African American – are moving to the Northland. I think God wants us not only to be aware of that but also to leverage it for the Gospel and for His Kingdom. This church – North Heartland – *needs* to become more diverse racially and ethnically. And to do that we have to have some understanding of the issue, especially those of us who are white.
- The final reason I decided to talk about this

issue is that I suspect most of you who are white feel the same way about it as I do. You're not sure who to believe or what to think. You're afraid of coming off as ignorant or insensitive. You don't like the thought that you might have an unfair advantage.

So, for all those reasons and more ... let's get to it. Let's talk about racism in America ... and in our own personal lives.

And the way I want to do that is by looking at a little bit of history – which gives us context. Then I want to make a draw some conclusions specifically for those of us who are Christians.

To help me with that, I've invited several members of our congregation – *African-American* members of our congregation – to share some of their thoughts and their perspective, particularly what it means to be a Christian in a world in which there is tension over racial injustice.

Let me introduce them to you now.

Video Clip - 01 MEET THE PANEL (2.9 min)

(Begin) Fade up on Kingsley

(End) Fades as Jason laughs

I have to tell you that after spending about 90 minutes with these folks I was *so encouraged* by hearing how their relationship with Jesus Christ and the Gospel has affected them in this. I wish I could show you the whole thing in this service but that's impossible so we'll be posting up the entire interview on Facebook and our website later this week when the audio and video from the message goes up.

How to Think About the Problem

Now, before we get into it, I should probably tell you that I spent many, many hours reading the history and listening to conservative and liberal voices as well as black and white voices. And as I

did that, I began to notice a few things about what I was reading and hearing. So, I wrote down two observations that kind of gave me a framework on how to interpret; how to even *think* about the problem in the first place.

Maybe these will be helpful to you, too, as you try to think about the problem for yourself.

Observation #1. No one is seeing the whole picture ... even people of like mind and race often disagree on what it is they are seeing.

I read President Obama's eulogy at the memorial service in Charleston. In it he said, "We need to have a deeper conversation in this country about race." Then I listened to Mike Wallace interview Morgan Freeman about race in America and *he* said, "We need to stop talking about it."

Then I listened to a 12-minute presentation by a white commentator explaining why he will not "check his privilege" because it doesn't exist.

Then I listened to a sermon by another white man about why every white person in America *needs* to ask themselves the 50 questions that will demonstrate the *reality* of white privilege.

No one sees the whole picture. Therefore I think it's wise to keep an open mind and avoid groupthink. I think it's wise to listen to what people who are not like you have to say.

Observation# 2. Sweeping generalizations regarding racism may make a dramatic impression (which is sometimes needed) but, in reality, it varies from place to place and person to person.

So much of what I came across talked about “*America* needing to solve its racism problem” as if it is in all places at all times and all whites are equally complicit whether consciously or unconsciously. But that's not true. The experience is not the same for all African-Americans ... which is one of the things I picked up in my interviews.

Here's just one example from Kingsley. Listen to how he learned that his experience is different and then also how he responded (which is really cool).

Video Clip - 02 DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES (2.5 min)

(Begin) Kingsley: "When I first came to the United States ..."

(End) Kingsley: "He loves that."

A Brief History of Racism

OK, enough of my advice about how to think about the issue ... for the next 10 minutes or so we're going to dig into a bit of the history of racism.

And I think this is necessary because a lot of us (and I'm speaking to my white brothers and sisters) ... a lot of us have lived sheltered lives. We haven't had to think about this issue in the

same way our black brothers and sisters have. We don't look back at our family tree and see that our great-grandparents and their parents were slaves. We don't have stories to tell of how our parents and grandparents were treated simply because of their color.

As an example, when I was interviewing Jason, he told me that *he is the first generation in his family that has not picked cotton*. That floored me. I have no frame of reference for that.

So, I want to show you three videos that were very helpful in becoming a little more educated about the issue. And I will tell you that there are so many great resources that it was almost impossible to narrow it down. But I've chosen these three because I think they not only illustrate the basic history of how racial tension came to exist in this country, they also illustrate the greater global context of that history and the implications of the history: two aspects of this issue which I think are often overlooked to our

detriment.

The first clip is a brief history of the “Atlantic Slave Trade” which (obviously) is how a very large number of men and women from Africa ended up on this continent. In case you’re wondering what the source is, this was created by the educational branch of TED Talks.

Let’s watch.

Video Clip – 03 ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE – GLOBAL IMPACTS (3.4 min)

(Begin) Voice: “Slavery: the treatment of human beings as property ...”

(End) Voice: “... whose impact has continued long after its abolition.”

That’s a very important observation – “an injustice on a massive scale whose impact has continued long after its abolition.” We’ll come back to that.

Now, the second clip I want to show was produced by an organization called the *Equal Justice Initiative*. It very briefly addresses the effect of 200 years of slavery and then, legal segregation, on an entire race of people and also talks about a key element of healing.

Let's watch.

Video Clip – 04 AMERICA'S HISTORY OF RACIAL INEQUALITY (2.6 min)

(Begin) Music under picture of police dog attacking black man

(End) EJI screen fades to black

Another very important statement to remember: we changed some laws but we refused to talk about what had happened.

We'll come back to that, too, but let's fast forward from the past to the present and consider how the combined effect of all of those years might still be with us – even though most

whites these days are *not* overtly racist.

Video Clip – 05 RACISM IS REAL (2.8 min)

(Begin) Coffee cup being filled

(End) Fades to black as music comes to an end.

Observations and Conclusions

Now, what does all this mean?

Before I answer let me be clear that I'm responding personally, for me. You may not agree and that's OK. Also, let me be clear that I'm not responding as an American citizen. I'm responding as a Christian – as believer in the good news that Jesus of Nazareth was God in the flesh and he died for sinners and rose from the dead and will one day return to set all things right. I'm trying to respond out of that framework because, quite frankly, I don't think there is any other framework that will solve the root problem.

So, what this means from a Christian perspective, I think, is that we have to call this what it is – *sin*: falling short of God’s glorious intentions for those created to reflect who He is.

But it’s more than just our own personal sin at whatever level it is we participate. This is very important to understand.

1. Racism experienced by African-Americans today (at whatever level) is the *fruit* of an international and intergenerational sin.

As we heard in the first video, the Atlantic Slave Trade was “an injustice on a massive scale whose impact has continued long after its abolition.” This is big, big sin at work, covering three continents and three centuries. Sin upon sin upon sin ...

The good news about that (if there is any good news) is that racism is not exclusively a “white person” problem. There’s not some special

character flaw to which only whites in America are susceptible. Many nations and races – including Africans – willfully participated in this sin in one way or another ... and for a long, long time.

The bad news is that it's within every single one of us to dominate others in this way ... which is why we see riots and looting. The dominated have it within them to dominate, too. That's how sin always works. We're, at the same time, both victims and victimizers. And healing can only start when we admit that.

Video Clip – 06 ON SIN (1.1 min)

(Begin) Courtenay: “My parents ...”

(End) Courtenay: “I could be doing the same thing or worse ... maybe different ... but, yeah.”

Ok, here's the second conclusion I've drawn as a Christian.

2. Big sin always has big consequences

... and systemic “white privilege” is one of them.

When a people have for so long and so thoroughly participated in the evil of demeaning others created in the image of God, that kind of sin takes a long time to wear off.

That’s what is meant, in part, by what God said when he spoke to the Nation of Israel when giving them their Law.

“I the Lord...visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

Exodus 20:5 (ESV)

The structure of evil that has been created doesn’t go away just because the people who created it die off ... or pass laws. It doesn’t go away just because their descendants are uncomfortable with it. It sticks around for oh,

three or four generations ... which is why it's still with us today in the form of "white privilege" even though we (I'm speaking of the white "we") don't like the idea; even though we believe that, given the choice, we wouldn't choose it (which is questionable).

It's really kind of ironic in a sad way. The sin of slave owners and Jim Crow lawmakers still negatively affects African Americans (at various levels). But, it also negatively affects contemporary white folks like me because it puts me in a very uncomfortable position: I am privileged in a way that a black man is not. I never have to worry about how I am perceived because of my skin color ... and so many other things.

So, what am I supposed to do – as a white Christian – with this privilege that, even though I didn't ask for it, was gained through sinful means?ⁱ

Well, that leads to my next conclusion.

3. Many Christians participated in the sin of racism for the purpose of power and greed. Therefore, repentance and restitution is in order.

As the first video explained, European and American Christians did all sorts of mental and spiritual gymnastics to justify owning and possessing a being clearly created in the image of God. They told themselves that black skin made someone less than human.

At first, they did it to make money on cotton and other things. But, later it was because, well, that's just the way they liked it.

“But Rick, that's what *they* did, not what *we* did.”

Yeah but they're dead now. And the evil they created still remains ... which means that you and I have to confess it and repent of it ... which, by, the way, is biblical.

“When the OT Israelites returned to their land from exile in Babylon,” one commentator writes “they had to rebuild not only their cities but also their relationship with God. Even as they had to clear the land in order to lay new foundations, so the people had to reestablish their relationship with God by clearing away the rubble of sin that had plagued them for generations. They had suffered not only because of their own sin but also because of the sin of their ancestors. Therefore, when they made confession, they repented not only for themselves but also for those who had gone before.”ⁱⁱ

They had to look back and talk about what had happened. It wasn't enough to say, “Well, let's just fix it going forward.” That never works because, the scripture tells us, confession and healing go hand in hand.

Oh, and by the way, confession and repentance over the sins of our ancestors isn't just for white

Christians. It's for black Christians, too, since – quite frankly – your ancestors were as bad as mine. My ancestors bought your people like animals but your ancestors sold them like animals ... for money ... for profit ... for their own comfort, just like the plantation owners.

Now, if you're a black Christian, I'm not sure how it should work out when it comes to restitution because you're not in a position of privilege. I'm not sure that applies to you.

But if you're a white Christian and you have so many blessings and advantages in comparison to your brothers and sisters of color you need to do in one way or another what Zacchaeus did. You may remember the story – Zach was a tax collector and we know from history that there was a systemic cheat that allowed tax collectors to take advantage of people.

And when Zach met Jesus an amazing thing happened:

Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"
Luke 19:8 (NIV)

Do you see what he is saying?

"I'm going to own my share of the systemic damage done to the poor. And I will also take responsibility for my personally inflicted damage. And I'm going to do it with my money."

And friends (I'm probably going to cause a lot of trouble by saying this but I'm going to) ... if you're a white Christian and you've been educated and you have a good job and you live in a nice suburban neighborhood and you have lots of money going into your 401K and you're taking fancy vacations and buying new cars every other year ... and you don't give at least 10% to charity (whether it's the church or some other

organization) ... you need to do a serious, serious heart check and change that ... because you're Zacchaeus! You're at the top of the heap of white privilege.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not a socialist. I'm not a redistributionist. I don't believe that economics is a zero-sum game and I believe capitalism is the best system on earth (until Jesus comes back). But when you're a white Christian at the top of the heap, you (and me because I'm there with you) have a responsibility to make restitution of your forefathers by giving back financially to this culture.

“But, Rick, we pay taxes for that!”

Seriously, that's the answer? We hate paying taxes. We don't like how the government spends our money. That's not good enough. It really isn't.

But let's move on before I cause any more trouble.

And really, that's not the main point of what I want to say about this, especially from a Christian viewpoint.

What I really want to say is that, through the power of the Gospel we already belong to the greatest social equality movement ever conceived on the face of the earth – the Body of Christ, the church. This principle is all over the New Testament ...

But nowhere more clearly than in Paul's letter to the Christians in the province of Galatia.

All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:27-28 (NIV)

In Christ all of our racial, ethnic, gender and social backgrounds are made secondary to our identity in Christ.

This is why those nine amazing believers in Charleston were willing to invite their mortal enemy to sit among them. To them, it didn't matter that he was white. He was a potential brother.

Now, having said that, I know that at times, the church in some quarters has not lived up to this ideal. We just saw it. But when it does, it makes a huge difference.

As I said earlier, one of the most encouraging things about my interview panel was hearing the impact that the church and the gospel had on them and, in particular, with respect to this issue of racism because they experience it – maybe not as overtly as other African Americans but it's

part of the deal for them.

So I put together a bit of a video montage of their comments and we're going to watch it. And as we do, if you're a Christian (of any color!), I want you to ask yourself if your faith and trust in God is impacting you in a similar way. Is the good news of Jesus having an effect; changing your perspective and giving you the strength to deal with adversity?

Ok, let's watch.

Video Clip – 07 The Power of the Gospel (3.9)

(Begin) Kingsley: “Before I became a believer ...”

(End) Courtenay: “They can love people they don't understand right now.”

Feature – “Colored People”

Communion

Reflection

Through his work on the cross, Jesus not only forgives our sins, but he opens the door to a new creation, a new world where the lion lies down with the lamb, a new humanity where people with extraordinary differences become one in Christ.

One of the ways we symbolize this is through communion. We all take from the same bread. We all take of the same cup. We remember that Jesus' body and blood were given not just for our sins and to reconcile us to the Father; it was given to reconcile us to one another. That's part of the reason we call it communion – “common union” – we have Jesus in common and therefore we are in union with one another and also with millions of other believers of every race and tribe on the earth.

This morning, I want to invite you to express that common union with other believers. And if

God has so moved you this morning, you might consider using this time as moment of repentance – admitting the truth about yourself and your ancestors – and then thanking Jesus and rejoicing in Him that you are completely forgiven because of his body and blood.

<prayer>

Communion @ stations – “Before the Throne”

Closing Comments

- Teacher Supply Giveaway
- Next week ... the transgender issue.
- Offering @ Door

Endnotes

ⁱ For a more thorough discussion see <http://www.atacrossroads.net/positioning-white-privilege-actually-can-talk/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.biblegateway.com/devotionals/niv-365-devotional/2015/03/08>