

For God So Loved the World: A conversation on Race”

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I. SO WHY NOW? Three reasons . . .

1. **I’m a Citizen** of a nation: and we’re at a “moment” where the sheer violence and volume of deaths linked to race in the past 8 years forces the issue
2. **I’m a Pastor** of a Church: & there’s pain in the body of Christ; We have been commanded to “weep with those who weep”
3. **I’m a Colleague** of Fellow Pastors:
 - What my Black pastor colleagues say is “Say Something”

II. SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE SAID, BUT WHAT?

- According to the brief questionnaire I shared last week
- *Most of you watching already see this as a big issue*
Most been reading up
- *But a few you do not see this as a big issue at all . .*

So my approach is

- not only to summarize the conversation for those already “on the inside”
- But to speak in such a way that those outside the conversation might have something to think about

So last week I began by focusing on my own experience growing up in Scotland

By trying to put the issue of racism in the United States into what I think is a bigger, global, human context

The bigger context is

- not only enmity between white people and people of color
- But enmity between tribes of the same color

- i. Think of the centuries of wars in Europe as “white tribal wars”
- ii. or the genocide of Jews in WWII,
- iii. or in terms of black on black tribal genocide b/ Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994
- iv. Or you could go to Asia and the enmities b/ Japanese, Koreans and Chinese . . and countless others

. . so I pointed to the more general issues of

- Tribalism (the need to belong, that paradoxically creates division)
- Class, caste, & Poverty
- Majorities and Minorities

So last week I said that to me, the issue in our own country is part of a broader more general issue than race

BUT HAVING SAID THAT

there is no doubt in my mind that

- OUR UNIQUE HISTORY & its ramifications
in social structures, laws and access to money and power.
- Means that **we have a particular issue** in the United States
with a particular set of circumstances that needs to be addressed

And I broke this down into seven distinct but related issues
(repeat – but expand in different ways)

1. **We have the historical reality of Slavery, in which the color of skin**
was integrally related to the maintenance of slavery, and that
marked it out from indentured servitude. (the Scots late 1700’s)
Difference? Limited length of time;
could blend into free society . .

2. The development of stories (myths, stereotypes, justifications) told and believed about white superiority and black inferiority that justified or excused slavery and suppression – that lingers on to today

- Stereotype of **Black violence – physical or sexual**
- Stereotype of **Blacks being equipped for manual labor, not intellectual**
 - manifest in the 1915 blockbuster movie, Birth of a Nation which glorified the KKK,
 - and backed up by the Bible (what's called the curse of Ham, Genesis 9:20-27 . . . supposedly linked to black Africans, but nowhere is this said!! Indeed, = specifically related to descendants of the non-African Canaanites!)

In terms of modern day ramifications . .

- Leads to the crime of “driving while black”
→ See this past Sunday's Washington Post?
Montgomery Co.Council in Md is discussing a recent report in which blacks in Montgomery county are 7x more likely to be stopped than whites; and 2x more likely to be searched)
- Or in my own life (*last week, I did not mean to indicate that I am immune from racial prejudice: none of us are free-- Di Angelo, Kendi*). . In fact there's a particular incident that haunts me when at graduate school . .
 - in a seminar . . a graduate student from Africa was visiting . .
 - he asked a question following the presentation; entered into a dialog with the presenter.
 - = a powerful moment – he was brilliant, fluent in multiple languages; questions not arrogant . . but precise
 - And I was caught by surprise . .
 - Was it general: who is this new guy?
 - Or particular: wow! He's black! And brilliant?

• (Slavery, Stereotypes)

3. The fact that there are problematic sections in the Constitution, both the original, and the 13th Amendment

- (Art1, §2, clause 3) assumed the existence of slavery -- with the infamous 3/5 clause – for tax purposes, slaves were worth 3/5 of a person; (which did not apply to free blacks: not all blacks were counted as less than human.). But you still need an amendment to make it right.
- And in **the 13th amendment**, felons can be still be treated as servants if not slaves.
Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.
-- unique business of convict labor

4. Following slavery, in 1896, w/ the Supreme Court decision of Plessy vs. Ferguson -- affirmation of segregation as legitimate – separate but equal . . that ruled for 50 years, officially, and for at least 70 years in practice.

5. One ramification of this not just in the South but the North was the Redlining of neighborhoods and the signing of community covenants

– that kept white residential areas white, and property values high.

[This] existed until a mere 43 years ago 1977 (Community Reinvestment Act; Fair Housing Act, 1968)

So here's the bad news:

According to the federal reserve, in a report summarized by a group known as Blackdemographics (who supply information for both left and right wing organizations)

- The average difference in net worth b/ black households and white is \$153,000
 - \$170K White
 - \$17k Black

The good news? . . Black Middle class is growing . . . 55% of all blacks . . BUT (bad news) still compares to 70% of all whites.

5. Then you come to matters of justice and injustice

A. the **sanctioning of blatant injustice – making a mockery of justice**

By many white Christians in the form of
almost 4000 recorded lynchings and other white on black
crimes that have gone unpunished with stacked law courts that
-- That let people get away with murder.

**(Recent book by Richerd Gergel called Unexampled Courage: The
blinding of Sargeant Isaac Woodard) . . Now a PBS Documentary**

B. Rates of Incarceration leaving about 1/3 of all black males (Journal,
Demography) with felony records

- Rates of Incarceration in general
 - have sky-rocketed in the last 50 years
 - from 370k in 1979 to 2.3m in 2014 –
 - rates that are 4-5 times higher than that of any Western European Nation, and not just for violent criminals. **(True for both Black and whites)**
- **But – in the last 40 years WAR ON DRUGS that**
 - *focused more on crack cocaine*
 - *than on cocaine itself . .*
 - has effectively led to mass incarceration of poor black persons, while middle class cocaine using and dealing whites remained free,
 - Newt Gingrich has admitted “was a mistake”—[documentary “13th”]

The impact of this affects both voting rights and families

- a. The 1/3 of black males who have felony records – cannot vote ..
- b. & Countless black households are missing a father
Black intellectuals like Thomas Sowell, dispute that family breakdown in the Black community is attributable to slavery – but even if that’s the case

Present Incarceration is a leading cause of family breakdown
And leaves 100s of thousands Black children with three strikes
against them -- *through no fault of their own,*

Let me digress a little bit here . .

To say that one of the most remarkable Christian (and Evangelical)
ministries to day is Chuck Colson’s PRISON FELLOWSHIP

While their task to begin with has always been

- to *come alongside people* who are incarcerated and their families with the message of Jesus Christ
- Now heavily involved in BIPARTISAN ADVOCACY FOR PRISON REFORM . .
- check out their web-site . .

SO –

a. **Are The Facts Twisted? And The Narrative Wrong?**

-- Maybe in part – but not in whole

b. Is the issue of race in America tied into other social issues like
like poverty, family, class, group identity, education and more?

That affect not only blacks but whites? Yes

- *Beverly Tatum, President emerita of Spellman indicates this in Why Are All the Black Kids . .*
- *Or Hillbilly Elegy by JD Vance)*

c. But is it also about race and color? YES

- **Both in terms of prejudices & stereotypes?**
- **And whether we personally intend it or not in terms of systems, structures, and access to power**

YES. ABSOLUTELY

Which leads me to two new topics I want to address this evening

The second has to do with

- The interest of the Bible not just in individuals but in structures and institutions

THE FIRST has to do with History – and with the question that some people ask . .

- Why in the world should we keep on dragging up all this dirt from the past: *it's depressing, crippling, paralyzing*
- Can't we just move on and forget it?
Well yes . . we do need to move on
But not before we drag it up!!
-- In fact unless we drag it up . . we will almost certainly not be able to move on; the past will always return to haunt us.

On a secular level:

- Imagine the outrage of the world if the German Government suddenly bulldozed all the concentration camps of WWII and said "enough, we no longer want to remember"
- OR if the churches in which there has been sexual abuse said . . *"statute of limitations; this is all too distasteful, let's keep it buried."*
- Without exposing stories from the past, especially of abuse, that have not been told or that we don't want to tell there can be no healing
 - Think the power of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

OLMPIAW

- **Is it Biblical to keep dragging up the past?**

To which the answer is

- For goodness sake: dragging up the past is a profoundly Biblical and Christian activity.

The most obvious place to see this is in the Lord's Supper – Holy Communion

Where Jesus told us to do this on a regular basis. .

- This is my body broken for you
- This is my blood shed for you
- Do this TO REMEMBER ME . .

Remember what? What are we doing??

- Remember His unjust & gruesome death
- Remember that for OUR sins, someone had to die – not just for others, but for us.
- Remember his pain and suffering,
- & Remember that it was not just the ancient Romans of the leaders of the Temple that caused it: WE TOO CAUSED it
- We weren't there, but YET WE WERE!
→ That's the Christian message.

Remember the hymns we sing in Holy Week?

Ah Holy Jesus . . written by John Cruger in 1640

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you?

It is MY treason, Lord that has undone you.

Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied you: I crucified you

Not just those who were there at the time, BUT ME

And then the Spiritual we sing:

- *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*
- *Were you there they nailed him to the tree?*

To which the answer is "YES! I'm there!"

BUT IN THE BIBLE

It's not just Jesus' death, that calls us to remember the past . .

- 50% of the Bible, both Old Testament & New are about history:

stories from the past that are not just Wonderful and peppy,

But some are awful .

they're **not just about**

- Deliverance, but about Slavery
- Freedom, but about slaughter
- Human dignity, but about Human frailty
- Roadmaps for justice but about sideroads of greed and violence

It's all in there – and that's the point . .

We learn **who we are** from going back & remembering
-- indeed it's integral to the task of a preacher
to help the congregation to remember this history

And then to say for all of it:

This is MY STORY . . this is who I am . .

Like Adam & Eve →

I'm caught – and society is caught

Between

The glory of being made in the image of God

& the reality that

we have rebelled against God as sinners

And everything is affected, twisted

-- Not just our relationship with God

-- But our relationships with each other

Whether in families

Nations

Or races

This is our common history –

It's pretty bleak

Except that in the midst of the darkness

God repeatedly enters the picture

And calls imperfect people

to join him in creating a new future

Remember the great future vision of a passage like Isaiah 11: 6-9?

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,

and a little child shall lead them.

7 The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

9 They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

OR, In terms of the story of Jesus:

Remember the story of Jesus' birth

And the deliberate framing of the birth stories in Luke and Matthew

Within the secular history of political world of Jesus' day

Dominated by two powerful and cruel leaders

-- Herod and Augustus Caesar

* **slaughter of the babies**

* **and the decree to be taxed**

**It's in the face of the power of Herod and Augustus
and their successors**

That Jesus teaches us to pray

*"Thy Kingdom come . . Thy will be done . . **on earth** as it is in Heaven"*
. . through us!

And while Good Friday is truly awful,

And reveals the evil that humans are capable of . .

The history we remember includes

the Incredible Good news that

-- Easter follows Good Friday

-- Resurrection follows death

-- Forgiveness follows sin and failure

→& the Power to-change-the-past is promised us by the Holy Spirit

So

Rumaging around in history . .

and finding the right historical contexts in which to situate our lives is a profoundly Biblical and Christian activity'

→ Jesus came into a real world . . and it's in this real world with its history that we are to live as "salt and light"

SO WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY from this talk about history?

1. There's a time to broaden the history that helps shape and determine the nature of our lives

Biblical

Or Secular

Families share a common history

If you are to truly cross over into someone else's world

-- to be more than a mere acquaintance

You have to know their background . . and understand the history.

- If you are Black – white history is the norm.
- BUT – if you are white then one course of action we can take is to learn more about those parts of our history that somehow we have missed

FOR ME?

& I urge you to do this with Black American History read or watch . .

- Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s PBS series on "Reconstruction"
- Or the documentary on Thurgood Marshall (Netflix, Amazon) "Mr Civil Rights"
- Or read a recent history – like "Unexampled Courage" by S.Carolina attorney, Richard Gergel, about the brutal blinding of black army sergeant, Isaac Woodard, on his way home after fighting for our nation in WWII, while still in uniform, and its impact on the court

cases that led up to the undoing of the doctrine of "separate but equal" (Plessy)

OR MORE EDGY and more detailed . .

- Or Ibram Kendi's "Stamped from the Beginning"
 - Jemar Tisby's "The Color of Compromise"
- Let me give you his chapter titles . .

1. The Color of Compromise
2. Making Race in the Colonial Era
3. Understanding Liberty in the Age of Revolution & Revival
4. Institutionalizing Race in the Antebellum Era
5. Defending Slavery at the Onset of the Civil War
6. Reconstructing White Supremacy in the Jim Crow Era
7. Remembering Complicity in the North
8. Compromising with Racism in the Civil Rights Movement
9. Organizing the Religious Right at the end of the 20th Century
10. Reconsidering Racial Reconciliation in the Age of Black Lives Matter
11. The Fierce Urgency of Now

Who is Jemar Tisby?

- He's fairly young. He's Black. He's from and lives in Chicago.
- Is a graduate student at the University of Mississippi
- Is a graduate of Reformed Seminary in both Orlando and Jackson MS, and has taught school in Mississippi.
- Says on his website "my wife and I love the Deep South" (go figure!)

SO WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY from this talk about history?

1. Expand your base

2. Remember what Biblical History teaches us: . . . that

- Utopia, heaven is only possible after Time & History are over . .
- there is only one perfect leader or King: King Jesus.
- ALL the leaders of God's people are profoundly flawed . .

-- But the Bible does not throw them out because of this . . .

→ **Abraham, Jacob, Saul, David, Solomon, Esther, Peter, Paul,**

But -- MLK, Jr. got it right,

He said -- even of those who opposed him and bombed little children to death -- that

“the worst a person is must never define ALL the person is.

Thank God!

Maybe there's room for us too!

What does this mean for the present situation?

Well . . . I have some real problems

- with recent attacks on all the leaders of the past because of their flaws with respect to race!
 - There is quest for human purity that at times is more puritan than the puritans!
 - **Sure -- Remove** leaders of the past them from their status as super-heroes? YES. TO BE SURE!
 - **Sure -- Reveal** the ugly truth and inconsistencies about their lives
- But find the good along with the evil: TRUE!
- **Jefferson** owned slaves
 - **Lincoln** was more interested in preserving the Union than in emancipating the slaves
 - **Mahatma Gandhi** had racist views about Africans when he lived in South Africa
 - **Martin Luther King, Jr.** was a constant adulterer . .

LET'S NOT HIDE IT.

BUT let's not engage in simplistic, self-righteous reductionism:

As MLK said: that's not all that they were . .

- They're all flawed . . and so are we!
- **YET without them** we almost certainly would not have the freedom we cherish to agree to disagree with each other . . that fuels the present discussion
- **In a century from now**, people will look back on the lives even of our greatest 21st century moral crusaders and pick them apart.

And this is true of our nation too—

Some of the rhetoric is anti-American in a way that I do not find helpful! Or true

- SURE – Sadly! Less than the shining city on the hill that once we thought we were?
 - BUT -- What else is new in the history of nations? . .
 - Biblically All kingdoms come and go . . rise and fall . . and some rise again!
- But is there still something wonderful about this grand experiment? YES!!

Thurgood Marshall, first Black Supreme Court Justice, thought so:

The primary litigant for the NCAA in civil rights era

Loved the constitution and the law . . .

& combined courageous radical critique of the U.S. as it was, with incredible confidence and HOPE

That's Biblical – the dirty past and present, linked to hope!

3. THE THIRD TAKEAWAY FROM HISTORY

(and Biblical History in particular)

is a brief word about ceremonies & monuments

- Every society has them . . Washington DC is littered with them!
- And the Bible has them too . . .

In the OT Bible – the Old (not in stone) were

Passover, Circumcision, Sabbath

In the NT Bible – they were changed to

Lord's Supper, baptism, Lord's Day (Sunday)

Two were easy to change: Passover and Sabbath . .

but the change from circumcision to baptism was hard!!

= also about the inclusion of women into the church involved a fight! (Acts 15, Letters of Paul)

SO WHY DIG UP HISTORY -- Even the stuff we don't like?

- IT'S BIBLICAL
- Not to wallow in it But to learn from it
- 1. 'to learn each other's stories . . families have shared histories.
- 2. To remember our common fraility
- 3. To think again about what we choose to remember, what we choose to forget, and what we do not know

ONE MORE THING FOR THIS EVENING

- I want us to think about the church and God's interest,
 - not just in the business of changing individual lives
 - but in building and changing social and societal structures, institutions –

Some people object to the discussion on race

Or the definition of racism

That involves flawed human structures

Because they say that

In the Bible sin is only about personal behavior

Well – maybe not!

LMPILT

When we read the Bible

We tend to read it through an individualistic lens

We ask "what's in this for me?"

AND OFTEN – MAYBE NOT ALWAYS . . BUT OFTEN

- **we leave out those parts of the Bible**
that seem to be boring or irrelevant to our lives.

But the fact is that

the parts we tend to leave out . .

are generally about **God's interest**

in particular structures or institutions

(think of Leviticus and Numbers, and parts of 1 & 2 Chronicles)

- Stories about the building of the tabernacle, the building and rebuilding of the Temple
- The rules and regulations involved in implementing of the systems required to run these structures of worship.

These structures are so important in the life of Israel,

- that if you put a foot wrong in building or operating them,
- you are in serious trouble!
- It's sin!
- Sin is very much described in terms of what you *do or do not* do
 - in relationship not just to other people,
 - but in relationship to the structures . . building, maintaining, operating them

Now Jesus' main ministry is clearly

- not 1st about structures . . (enacts no laws, builds no monuments, writes no books)
- but about his interaction with individuals and his willingness to suffer and die . .

time was short . .

BUT this doesn't mean that this was not his interest:

In fact, in Jesus' ministry we get a glimpse of

- his interest in structures
- when he goes into the temple after the first Palm Sunday . .
- and throws out the money changers.

In Mark 15:29 he is mocked on the cross for claiming that the temple will come to an end . . (which in AD 70, came true).

IOW

- We find him not only cleaning up the place
- But prophesying its destruction & bringing it to an end . .

Remember what Jesus said in the temple?

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it into a den of thieves and robbers

This was not just a statement about literal “thieves and robbers”

But about Jesus’ ***passion to build a new structure***

=The church – “a house of prayer for all nations/ethnicities”

So with Jesus,

the structure of temple comes down,

and loose knit relational structure of the church goes up . . .

-- and God works through this new structure/system

-- that begins to spread like wildfire through the ancient world

BUT not just CASUALLY!!

Even without buildings in the early church

structures and systems and schedules

needed to be developed

so that people can be treated with justice

– and do not sin against each other

Which is what began happening very early on:

The story is in Acts 6:1-5

6Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

2And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.

3Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task . . .

5What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose

1. Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit,
2. together with Philip,
3. Prochorus,
4. Nicanor,
5. Timon,
6. Parmenas,
7. and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

These are all Greek names

. . In other words

There was a deliberate attempt by the 12 Jewish apostles

To create a structure within the church . . .

That was organizational

AND diverse!!

& That would lead to the fair distribution of care

Sin in other words . . is personal

But not just personal . .

And the world that God calls us to live in

Requires us

Not just to grow in personal holiness

But in developing the structures within which love can flourish.