

Jesus, Transformation, and Ending Racism

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, April 2, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [2 Corinthians 5:11-21](#) and [Psalm 51:1-12](#)

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I had a seminary professor who thought that the church's mission was summed up in our reading from 2 Corinthians. He said that the church's mission is summed up in the line about how God was in Christ, reconciling the world with God, and now God has given us this ministry of reconciliation. The church's job, this professor said, can be summed up like this: we are to be a vehicle of reconciling the world with God.

While I think the universal church's job does include reconciling humanity and God, I think there is an additional task: Reconciling humanity with itself. Of course, since I don't believe creation and God are all the separable, the act of some aspect of creation coming back into right relationship with itself is a form of that aspect of creation being reconciled with God. So, maybe I'm not disagreeing with my professor all that much. I'll stop there, before I get lost in some theological esoterica, saying this: the church's mission includes, and perhaps should even be focused on, reconciliation.

The full passage we heard from this letter to the Christians in Corinth is about Jesus changing lives. Here's my paraphrase of the reading (remember that Paul is writing): Knowing God revealed in Jesus has changed us. Sure, to some people we now seem a little nuts – but that's because God has changed us. And if we don't seem nuts to you, that's because God is changing you, too. Our priorities have changed. How we view the world has changed. How we view you has changed. We used to live in the world in a way that separated us from God and from people. No more. Now we're reconciled with God. Nothing stands in the way of our relationship with God. And now we are helping people find that change in their own lives.

When I take a metaphoric look at the stories in the gospels of Jesus healing people metaphorically, I see Jesus doing exactly what Paul says Jesus was doing. Jesus was bringing people back into right relationship with God and with their communities. And when I look at what Jesus said, as recorded in the gospels, he was calling communities to get into right relationship with God and all their people.

I think the act of reconciliation is salvific. And that, John claims, is what Jesus was all about: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17, NRSV). But reconciliation isn't easy. If you've ever experienced a betrayal in a relationship with someone you love, you know how difficult reconciliation is. Salvation isn't easy. Jesuit John Harriott wrote, "Salvation is not comfortable. Salvation is not a gentle application of Vaseline to a small cut, but the breaking and resetting of ill-set bones. We discover our need when we are faced with situations over which we have no control, and in which we have no hope."¹

¹ John Harriott, SJ, quoted by Ryan Dowell Baum on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/revryandb/posts/1725011814455430> (posted and accessed 29 March 2017).

A demand of reconciliation is change. And change is hard. A result of salvation is change. And change is hard. But Jesus was about transforming lives. And that hard, painful work is exactly what it's going to take if we are going to be about the work of ending racism.

The rest of the sermon is primarily for the white people in the congregation (including myself). That is because I have come to realize that racism is a white person's disease and it is only if we white people do our work that it can finally be banished.

Being able to claim a "white" identity in the United States comes with certain social, cultural, and economic advantages, from getting a call back for a job interview, to finding an apartment, to getting a booking an Airbnb. I've explored in the previous sermons in this series how this privilege has deep historic roots in our culture. But acknowledging it, this privilege, is not intended to induce guilt. Rather, acknowledging it helps us build a sense of responsibility.²

If you have any doubts about the reality of white privilege, I encourage you to read the essay "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," by Peggy McIntosh.³ In it, she rattles off over two dozen simple ways white folk experience privilege without even realizing it in day-to-day life. These privileges were born out of a culture of white supremacy – a reality I've explored over the past few weeks.

Two professors at Calvin College have pointed out that the denial of the reality of white privilege is actually born out of that same white supremacy. "If you deny white privilege, if society is indeed meritocratic and the game is essentially fair, it is difficult to avoid assumptions about who tends to win and who tends to lose. If the white population is not privileged in some way, how else does one explain the discrepancies between them and people of color? What's left is assuming that white people are just smarter, more moral, work harder, or have a stronger culture."⁴

Peggy McIntosh says, "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks" that white folk walk around with without even realizing it. We even open the knapsack and take out those resources from time to time without even realizing it. Waking up to the reality that we are doing it, waking up to the reality of this privilege is the first step in the transformation of white people, the first step that is needed to end racism.

You see, this is very much a gospel activity. Racism is a sin. And Jesus' ministry of reconciliation is a ministry of repentance, of turning from sin and toward the beloved community. But it's hard work, because white supremacy is an idol, and if you ever want to see someone get mad, really mad, threaten their idol. And just to remind you, an idol is anything we hold onto more tightly than God, anything we worship and honor and value

² Joseph Kuilema and Christina Edmondson, "Confronting White Privilege," *The Banner*, <http://thebanner.org/features/2017/01/confronting-white-privilege> (posted 20 January 2017; accessed 27 March 2017).

³ Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *The National SEED Project*, <https://nationalseedproject.org/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack> (copyright 1989).

⁴ Kuilema and Edmondson, *op. cit.*

more highly than God. An idol is any power that holds more sway in our lives than God. And power, Richard Rohr points out, “never surrenders without a fight.”⁵

“If your entire life has been to live unquestioned in your position of power – a power that was culturally given to you but you think you earned – there is almost no way you will give it up without major failure, suffering, humiliation, or defeat.”⁶ That’s why a growing awareness of white privilege can hurt so much.

Which brings us to the second step in the transformation Jesus wants to work on us white people. The Calvin College professors advise, “Resist rushing past or suppressing the deep sadness of this idolatry. It is so easy to medicate with avoidance, delusion, and quick tears. Repentance requires real sorrow and grief. It is a sorrow that acknowledges that we have missed the mark, that we have fallen so very short.”⁷

Heather Caliri suggests we can find a model in the story of King Josiah in 2 Kings. “In 2 Kings 22, Josiah starts restoring the temple after his father and grandfather neglected it. In the midst of construction, Josiah’s high priest finds the book of the Law and reads it in front of the king. Upon hearing it, Josiah tears his clothes in grief...

“Before Josiah’s reign, two generations of Judeans neglected to teach the law. Josiah and his subjects literally didn’t know any better. “God still holds them responsible for the sins of their fathers. To our Western ears, that might sound unfair, even if generational sin is a constant Biblical theme. Like Josiah, we inherited [the] sin [of racism] not of our own making. Yet it’s very much our problem.

“Saying things are better now is no excuse. Josiah could have said the same – after all, he was trying to restore the temple before he discovered the Law. God required hard repentance anyway.

“Josiah, grieved by his discovery, sent for [the Prophet] Huldah and listened as she blasted him with more bad news. Josiah could have tuned out her negativity – especially when the sins didn’t happen on his watch, and he’d already done so much to change things. Instead, he listened.”⁸

To be honest, that’s mostly what I’ve been doing in this sermon series. I’ve been reading and researching our history and discovering things I’d never been taught. I’ve sought out articles by and stories from people of color to better understand how they experience this culture. I have tried, with some success, to open my eyes to the horror of slavery and its brutal legacy, and to the near genocide of the first peoples who lived on this land. In that process, I have worked on recognizing my prejudices and biases. This has not been easy work, but if we take Josiah’s story seriously, we must do as he did and patiently listen. Then, and only then, will we be ready to take action.

⁵ Romal J. Tune, "Richard Rohr on White Privilege," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/articles/richard-rohr-white-privilege> (posted 19 January 2016; accessed 27 March 2017).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Kuilema and Edmondson, *op. cit.*

⁸ Heather Caliri, "Repenting of Systemic Racism," *Relevant*, <http://archives.relevantmagazine.com/current/repenting-systemic-racism> (posted 7 September 2016; accessed 27 March 2017). I’ve done some re-setting of her paragraphs.

“Once Josiah hears [the Prophet] Huldah’s words, he acts. He burns Asherah poles, deposes priests and dismantles idolatry for 20 years. Josiah demolishes a complex, idolatrous system.

“Systems span generations. When our ancestors set up a sinful system, we carry on sinning unless someone dismantles it with tireless energy. That’s why holding children accountable for the sins of their fathers makes sense.

“Josiah also teaches us who should dismantle systems. Josiah confronted a system that, as king, benefited him enormously. But his leadership was crucial – how can anything change unless those with power take action?

“In our own country, black people and other people of color largely lead the way on racial justice, even though they’ve historically had little institutional power. Though some people and some white institutions have taken brave steps, we have not, as a people, stepped up as Josiah did. [Since] white people created racist systems, God tasks us with the primary responsibility for challenging them.”⁹

So, here are a few concrete things white people can do to start the process of dismantling racism:

1. Don’t ask African-American to forget what their ancestors went through as slaves in this country, or ask them to ignore how that impacts them daily.
2. Don’t detach ourselves from what our ancestors or people that look like us have created, maintained, and have benefited from—and that we continue to benefit from.
3. Remember that we were born into a system of white supremacy that we did not create, but must actively help to dismantle.
4. Don’t be afraid to have the ugly conversations with people who look like us, and don’t be afraid to listen to and learn from the people who don’t look like us.
5. Shut up while people of color tell their own stories, in their own ways, and to their own ends.
6. Accept the truths and experiences of racial injustice shared by people of color as valid.
7. Listen to people of color, advocate for people of color, sympathize with people of color, fight alongside people of color, and raise our voices to match the outcries being made by people of color.
8. Be an ally by standing up against racial injustice, celebrating racial diversity, and taking on this fight as our own.¹⁰

“Josiah’s story is ultimately a tragedy. When he dies, his own son goes right back to the idolatrous systems Josiah worked to eradicate.

“I once assumed that the Civil Rights movement had taken care of the sins of previous generations. Josiah’s failure reveals my naiveté. Between slavery and [the latest] versions of Jim Crow, we’ve experienced nearly [400] years of state-supported racism in America. Josiah, in contrast, inherited a fairly new problem: His father and grandfather wreaked havoc for only 57 years. Yet 20 years of Josiah’s sustained effort wasn’t enough. If

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ This is taken from one of my own Facebook posts from 24 February 2016.

Josiah couldn't accomplish change in one generation, how can we assume we did [or we will]?"¹¹

This will be a long struggle. It is a multi-generational struggle. White people have a lot to confess, and turning the whole system around in an act of societal repentance is a very big ask. But it is the transformational ministry Jesus is doing in us individually and in us as a church. And it is the transformational ministry, this ministry of reconciliation, Jesus has given to us.

Amen.

¹¹ Caliri, *op. cit.*