

July 17, 2022
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
Genesis 1:26-31
Luke 10:24-37

Sermons on Demand: God and Race

There are so many ways to talk about race, that approaching today's sermon topic of "God and Race" is truly gargantuan task. We can look at race from a biological and evolutionary standpoint, noticing how humans have developed varying levels of a substance called melanin that darkens the skin, hair, and eyes, and has allowed humans to adapt to the different levels of sun exposure across the earth. We can look at race culturally, looking at the music, food, traditions, and norms that racial groups have developed over time. We can of course study history of race – exploring when the notion of race even began and how the concept and categories of race have changed and evolved with time. A sociological approach would help us to unravel the legacy of the events of history – the African American slave trade, discriminatory immigration policies, Jim Crow Laws, colonialism and westward expansion and the continued influence these events have on our current beliefs, laws, culture, systems and institutions. But I had to keep reminding myself that this is not a lecture at Tulane or a TED talk, this is a sermon, in the midst of worship. We are here examine race through a theological lens and turn to Scripture to illumine for us how God is speaking to us today on the topic of race.

We read this morning from the first creation story in Genesis, the one where God creates the whole world in 7 days. On the 6th day God creates human beings, the pinnacle of God's good creation. Out of everything that God has created only the human beings share in bearing God's very likeness. God created humanity in a diverse tapestry of skin tones, eye color,

hair texture, body shape, and facial features. All equally share in this image of God, there is not one set that of these human particularities that is more God-like or less God-like. If we read a just little further on in Genesis we will get to a story that explains how humanity began to fall off the rails and how God's plans for creation were altered for the first, but certainly not the last, time by sin. We cannot talk about God and race without speaking to and naming the sin of racism – the taking of what God has intended for good and instead creating division and unjust hierarchy based on the human categories of race. And in the world we currently live in, the most dominant and pervasive expression of racism is in our beliefs, systems, and structures that privilege the light skin and European ancestry of the white race over and above all others.

Now if talking about race hasn't made us all thoroughly uncomfortable by now, I'm going to delve even deeper into perhaps the only other topic that may make us even more uncomfortable – sin. Regretfully, the church has long used and abused the concept or the idea of sin as a way to coerce and conform behavior into culturally prescribed norms – most of which I would argue have little to nothing to do with the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. And it's done by triggering shame – that feeling that we are unlovable and that we don't belong. A healthier and more productive way for us to talk about sin in the ways that it gives us language around and opportunities to tell the truth– about our imperfections and brokenness and to in turn draw closer to God, finding healing and connection in God's grace and forgiveness. So we're going to talk about what sin really is. Sin is all that separates us from God and one another. It is broken relationship. We sin through intentional actions – doing those things we know are wrong and we do them anyway; through actions left undone – failing to act or take responsibility to act when it is in our power to do so; and through the systems and

structures which maintain human brokenness and perpetuate injustice – this includes things like our churches, our government and laws, our traditions, our economic and education systems.

In face of the brokenness of humanity, God is always working to make us whole again. That's the story of Scripture – God working to redeem us from sin. God doesn't leave us to our sin. In our church we practice the regular confession and acknowledgment of sin in our lives – not to elicit that shame response, but instead to point ourselves to God and God's grace. It is not about focusing on how bad we are, but turning instead to focus on how good God is. The conversation about race and racism, is one that is particularly hard for white people and white communities, for the same reasons we do not like to talk about sin. It elicits in us the same shame responses that we think will protect us from our deep seeded fear that we are not good people and we are unworthy of love. And shame thrives in the dark, it thrives on judgement and secrecy, and pretending that there's no problem here. And so in order to be healed from the sin of racism, in order for racial justice and reconciliation to happen, we have to turn on the light and see and acknowledge the pain and the hurt that needs healing.

Our gospel lesson on the parable that is commonly known as “the Good Samaritan” is one that is very likely to be familiar to most if not all of you today. It's one of the Jesus' like platinum hits. The risk we have with such texts though is in our familiarity we are anesthetized to the truly radical lessons embedded in Jesus' teaching. In the cultural context of Jesus' time one would expect the priest and the Levite to be the heroes of the story. Surely they, who were educated religious leaders, would know what it means to be a neighbor and follow the law accordingly. But by casting the Samaritan as the hero, as the example of how to be a neighbor,

Jesus is saying that your neighbor is exactly the person you have been taught to exclude, to devalue, to other. Showing mercy and compassion, hallmark traits of a neighbor, knows no bounds of race or any other human identity.

Naturally one cannot mention the struggle for racial justice and reconciliation without invoking the name of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And this morning I'd like to share with you his take on the story of the Good Samaritan, from his speech, *I Have Been To The Mountaintop*, which he gave the day before his tragic assassination. He addresses the actions of the Priest and the Levite saying:

"But I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible that these men were afraid. You see, the Jericho road is a dangerous road. I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho. And as soon as we got on that road, I said to my wife, "I can see why Jesus used this as a setting for his parable." It's a winding, meandering road. It's really conducive for ambushing. You start out in Jerusalem, which is about 1200 miles, or rather 1200 feet above sea level. And by the time you get down to Jericho, fifteen or twenty minutes later, you're about 2200 feet below sea level. That's a dangerous road. In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass." And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good

Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"¹

Loving our neighbors means reaching into the ditch to pull our neighbors out, bind up their wounds, and aiding them in their healing. We have to get our hands dirty, we cannot keep crossing over on to the other side of the road out of fear. In the midst of the culture wars of our world, where it seems like every conversation we have with others can be riddled with land mines, the road to reconciliation, like the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, is dangerous and not without great risk. There is a great cost to those who buck the status quo, who choose to see everyone as made equally in the image of God and act to dismantle the systems that keep others oppressed and at a disadvantage. There are those who have been at this work for many decades, and they have sacrificed jobs, friendships, reputations, and even their lives. And we look to them now as an example and encouragement as the struggle continues.

One such person for me is Austin Channing Brown, a bestselling author and activist, writes and speaks about her experience as a black woman, not just living in the 21st century United States, but particularly inhabiting spaces of predominantly white church communities. And her summary of the work of anti-racism and healing racial injustice, that it's about "learning how to be a better human to other humans." I think this is exactly what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. The act of loving our neighbors of color as ourselves is one that we have to work at everyday, knowing that as we grow in our knowledge and experience that we're going to mess up sometimes (maybe more than sometimes) – we're going to say black when someone prefers African American, we're going to act on a unconsciously held prejudiced

¹ <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

belief, we're going deny the racial identity of others because we think being color-blind is the kind thing to do, we're going to stay silent when someone expresses a racist sentiment because we don't want to be "that person," we will let ourselves become overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of this particular human brokenness and wonder if anything we do could ever make a difference. Which is why we can't do the work of love alone or out of a sense of shame, but only out of a sense of gratitude – deep and abiding gratitude for the grace from God we have received and all the grace that we will still need. This is the road of true healing, true reconciliation, true peace. Because when our neighbors hurt, we hurt and when our neighbors are healed, we are healed. Through the work of God in Jesus Christ the broken pieces are once again made whole.