

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Reformed and Always Reforming: Race
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Genesis 1:26-27; Galatians 3:23-29

It seemed like a good idea at the time. When Rev. Bethany and I were discussing this sermon series it seemed like a good idea to add the issue of race to all the other issues over which the church has struggled and changed. But as I have discovered since the advent of the Black Lives Matter movement, talking about race can be an issue fraught with emotion; pain, anger and guilt. Talking about race can stir feelings that many of us were not even aware of. The discussion about race can also be seen as a divisive issue that perhaps, like the old saying about religion and politics, is not to be addressed in polite company. And so I have to say that for a moment, I considered finding a less controversial topic. Yet in the end choosing this topic for this week appears to be rather providential considering that not only did we celebrate the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. last Monday, but that this week a Black Asian woman was sworn in as Vice- President of the United States, and the Rev. Raphael Warnock, pastor of Dr. King's former congregation was sworn in as only the 11th Black senator in US history. This sermon will be a bit different than my usual sermons. It will be divided into two parts, the "then" and the "now" with two seemingly contradictory images in each.

We begin with the then. In her book "Caste," Isabel Wilkerson, tells the story of a Presbyterian Elder out riding in one of the slave holding states, prior to the Civil War. As he is riding, he hears a man screaming out in pain. Riding toward the sound he sees a Black man strung up by his hands with a chain slung over a tree branch, suspending the man in the air. The slave's feet are tied to a post in the ground so that he cannot move. He is being brutally whipped. The elder then saunters over to the man doing the beating and asks what the Black man had done. The response is that the master of the plantation had told the slave that the rows of corn the slave had planted were not perfectly straight. The slave had responded by saying that the same amount of corn grows on crooked rows as on straight rows. The flogging was in response to that inappropriate response. The Presbyterian Elder, in his diary, said, "That was enough," meaning that was certainly enough of an outrage for this punishment. The contradiction here, at least in our minds, should be that this incident took place in a nation whose founding documents declared that all men are created equal and are endowed with the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

How did this contradiction come to be? It came to be because Europeans had created the concept of race and had used the Bible to justify not only the concept of race, but to use race to enslave and annihilate entire peoples. What do I mean by the concept of race? What I mean is that race is not a Biblical or a biological concept. It is a human construct intended to create a hierarchy of humanity in which certain people, who look like me, are set on top of the hierarchy and given power over those whose skin is different from mine. We can trace this concept of race back to Pope Nicholas V, who in 1452 declared that Europeans could capture, kill, convert and enslave for perpetuity any person in Africa, which began to create a hierarchy based on skin color. The rise of race continued during the European exploration of Africa. Even though the explorers encountered civilizations rivaling those of Europe, the explorers brought back tales of wild, animal-like creatures that looked like human beings. These tales

slowly began to take root in European imaginations spawning a pseudo-science of European superiority. As Europeans came to the Americas, they brought these concepts with them. And when the south needed cheap labor, the concept of race came in handy. Planters were allowed to perpetually enslave Africans under horrific conditions because they were of an “inferior race” and importantly for us this morning, because the Bible said slavery was an acceptable institution. This claim, that slavery was an acceptable institution, was made regardless of the fact that slavery in the Bible was very different from slavery in America. Slavery in the Bible had nothing to do with the color of someone’s skin and was often a condition from which a slave could buy or earn their freedom. Other slavers argued that slavery was also Biblically based because Africans were not descendants of Adam and Eve. They were an entirely different “race.” This belief was called polygenesis, meaning that God had created multiple species of human-like creatures, but only one race of people that were the true children of God, meaning white people. And while we may find this odd, it was a powerful “scientific theory” held by Voltaire and many others. Thus, whites were superior to all others and all non-whites could be treated in any manner whites so chose.

We continue with the now. We begin with the fact that this nation twice elected a Black man, Barack Obama, to the Presidency and now has elected Kamala Harris, a Black Asian woman to the Vice Presidency. Additionally, the state of Georgia has elected the 11th Black US senator in the Reverend Raphael Warnock. All these events would have been unimaginable to that Presbyterian Elder. Yet, at the same time we also have a three-year investigative report by Newsday of housing discrimination in Long Island, New York. Newsday spent three years investigating why Long Island is one of America’s most segregated areas. In this experiment, Newsday sent couples paired with either a Black, Hispanic or Asian couple to visit local realtors. The couples would then ask to be shown homes all across the area. The interactions were videoed and reviewed by experts in housing discrimination. The results were that Black buyers were discriminated against in comparison to white buyers 49% of the time, Hispanic buyers 39% and Asian buyer, 19%. Examples of this discrimination included showing buyers of color fewer listings, demanding that buyers of color and not white buyers prequalify before seeing listings when white buyers were not asked to do so and then “steering” buyers of color away from majority white neighborhoods and toward mix race neighborhoods. To get a different perspective on this story, I passed this article by one of my cousins who is a very successful Realtor in Houston. She said it shocked her because those actions not only violate the law, but the conduct to which Realtors are to follow. But at the same time, she wrote, it did not surprise her because of what she called “subconscious bias” which we will look at in a minute. So how did we get here?

The positive part of how we got here comes because of our giving scripture its due. We listen to Genesis 1 and acknowledge that it declares that all human beings, regardless of the color of their skin, are created in the image of God and contain within them the very breath and Spirit of the living God. We listen to the Apostle Paul when he says that in Jesus Christ all worldly differences go away; that there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free; nor in our case one race or another. We have also made God’s freeing of the people from slavery as our controlling narrative rather than that of Paul’s views on slavery. In other words, we have made progress. Slavery is gone. Jim Crow laws are mostly gone. Yet, somehow, we are not there yet; meaning we are not yet to a place where the concept of race does not affect how we see and relate to one another. This can be seen in the work of Harvard Professor David R. Williams.

In an interview for the book “Caste,” Williams says that a variety of studies show that up to 80% of whites and 33% of Blacks hold unconscious, let me repeat, **unconscious** biases against African

Americans and other people of color. When asked what kind of a person would hold these biases, he responds, “This is a wonderful person who has sympathy for the bad things that have happened in the past.” He continues, “So, despite holding no explicit racial prejudices, they nonetheless hold implicit bias that is deep in their subconscious...though self consciously they are not prejudiced, the implicit biases nonetheless operate to shape their behavior” (pg. 187). How is this possible? It is possible because we are what we consume. To illustrate this, Professor Williams, in a Ted Talk (referenced below) refers to a study that looked at all books, magazines and journals from the last 25 years, that an average college educated person would read, and then asked what words are most likely to occur in connection with white people and Black people. Here they are. With white people the words are *wealthy, progressive, conventional, stubborn, successful and educated*. With Black people the words are *poor, violent, religious, lazy, cheerful and dangerous*. His conclusion, based not just on these studies, but on hundreds of studies is that even the best people, people who care about the mistreatment of people of color, who work hard to treat everyone the same, who believe the scriptures that we are all created in God’s image, still carry within them these unconscious biases that affect how they respond to others in multiple situations. This is how we can find ourselves with these contradictions.

Where does all this leave us? I believe it leaves us with hope. We have hope because we as Christians have learned to listen more carefully to the scriptures and their embrace of all human beings as beloved children of God. I believe there is hope because we see that the world can and does change when we allow the Spirit to lead us. I believe there is hope because much of the church, including ours, has made a commitment to learn about and to do our best to deal with the issues of implicit bias and racism. I believe there is hope because we are Reformed and always reforming under the word of God such that we can have an ongoing conversation with the scriptures and learn new things. I believe there is hope because the Spirit of God is at work in us, in the church and in the world, creating new possibilities for all human beings to come together in the one family of God.

My challenge for you then is to take the time to look inward, to explore and find those places where subconscious bias might live, then acknowledge and work on them.

“Caste” by Isabel Wilkerson, Random House Books

(Newsday study on race and housing)

<https://projects.newsday.com/long-island/real-estate-agents-investigation/>

(Dr. David R. Williams, on How Racism Makes Us Sick)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VzyjDR_AWzE

(Subconscious bias test) <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>