

Theology and Race

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Whenever the Church responds in direct ways to what we might call current, hot-button topics, it can appear that the Church is being political. Biblical scholars and theologians remind us that Jesus commented on the political as well. See Luke 20:20-26 (also Matthew 22:15-22 and Mark 12:13-17) for the question of paying taxes, as one instance. If the Church is anything, it is the mystical Body of Christ that stretches to fill the whole earth. That means our thinking supersedes partisan categories of Democrats or Republicans, Conservatives or Progressives because it is grounded in the Gospel. And yet we live in a particular place and time, we live in a particular *polis* and swim in these political waters. For the Episcopal Church and this particular congregation of St. John's Cathedral, we are immersed in the American experience.

So when we proclaim the Gospel, we must do so in a way that is both faithful to the message handed on since Pentecost and responsive to our context. How, then, should we respond in the present moment, in the midst of a pandemic as protests over racial injustice continue?

When Paul describes what the Church is, he describes it as the single, unified Body of Christ, where Jews and Gentiles are united: "For Christ Jesus is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us" (Ephesians 2:13, NRSV). Scripture portrays a great rift in humanity between Jews and Gentiles: that is, between those who descend from Abraham through Jacob's line, and – literally – everyone else.

In other words, from the very beginning, the Church's message has been: Behold! In Christ, all humanity is united. There are no divisions.

If that fundamental rift between the Jewish people and the rest of humanity has been healed, then other conclusions about divisions, hierarchies, and community follow.

One of them we find as early as the fourth century. Gregory of Nyssa preached a homily on Ecclesiastes that argues the following: if God has set all people free in Christ, then no human should condemn another human to slavery. In other words, he makes explicit what is implicit in Paul's Letter to Philemon and other New Testament texts: we are united in Christ by baptism, made equals, made into a family. You cannot own a member of your family. You cannot own someone who is made in the image of God.

So early on in our tradition – from the beginning of the Church – and looking across the whole of Scripture – including in Genesis and certainly in the Prophets – the Gospel message has insisted on the unity of all the peoples on earth. That remains the Church's message. In Christ, all things are made new, including our relationships with one another. We are now liberated to see all humans as what they are: beloved children of God, created in God's image.

Right now, we live in an age where it might appear that the Church is reacting to the present moment by talking about race. I emphasize the above points because the Church has been proactively discussing these things from the beginning.

It is shameful that for centuries, Christians listened to theologians such as Augustine and assumed (and at times argued) that slavery was a sinful but necessary institution rather than to Gregory who argued for its abolition. Sometimes the Church argued it was not even necessarily sinful. But I think we would be hard pressed to find a period in history where there were not Christian voices proclaiming the message we find Gregory shouting in his homily: you cannot own slaves. You cannot think you are better than another human because we are all – each one of us – created in God's image.

In every age, the Church has to figure out how to proclaim this message in ways society can hear. Sometimes we fail miserably but we keep trying.

Until God's Kingdom comes fully, there will be people on earth who are belittled, whose humanity is not recognized. The Church's task is to preach the Gospel and live it out. To bear witness to the Kingdom we see in Jesus, in whose death and resurrection that fundamental division in humanity was healed: there is no longer Jew nor Gentile. We have to proclaim the Gospel in words our context can understand.

We know the mystery of God in Christ – he made in himself one humanity in place of two. Certainly every person's life matters, but in the present moment, it is a fact that one part of the human family is treated systematically so poorly, with racism and discrimination woven into systems that will benefit one race of people and be withheld from other races, that people of color have to remind the American people that their lives matter. Even the pandemic numbers and the underlying health care and quality inequities reveal this reality. So in our context the Church needs to speak in a way that affirms the dignity of those lives, the fact that they share the Image of God. Far from taking political sides, we should see this moment as an opportunity to repent and to bear witness, to feel a sense of shame that churches in America have not already proclaimed the Gospel loud enough for society to hear.