

So When Did You Last Hear a Sermon on Racism?

Racism and prophetic protests against racism are part of the biblical message.

I wonder why we hear so few sermons in our churches about this moral issue.

Perhaps Glen Stassen and David Gushee (“Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context”) are correct that the dominant white culture (to which I belong) has taken a social evil and neutered it by reducing it to the level of individual relationships while protesting that we are nice people.

That argument does not work in groups where we hear the stories of people and groups that have suffered from oppression and prejudice embedded in the structures of economics, law, education and social relations.

Here are two biblical examples of racism and the protest against it that call for a higher ethic of justice, equity and mercy:

A well-known expression of racism is found in the Gospel of Luke’s Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

Luke 9:51 marks a key transition in the mission of Jesus. He tells his followers that they will leave Galilee and begin the long journey to Jerusalem.

The chosen route takes them through Samaria, a region with an ethnic population that has a troubled relationship with Hebrew people.

Jesus sends messengers ahead to request hospitality. However, the elders of the community reject this traditional duty because he was traveling to Jerusalem. The Samaritans considered that their temple on Mount Gerizim was the legitimate place for the sacrifices stipulated by the Torah.

Two of the disciples request permission to pray for fire to come down from heaven to destroy the village. I read this as a genocidal petition with an appeal for God to blot out utterly the people of another ethnic group for a perceived offense. Jesus rebukes them and moves on to another village.

The protest is found when a lawyer asks Jesus to define the term “neighbor” (Luke 10:29). Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan in which a despised foreigner is faithful to God’s law.

The story is meant as much for the disciples as it was for the lawyer.

The post-exilic experience of Israel offers a much earlier example.

After the Babylonian exile, there were tensions between the returnees and the people who had remained in the land. The former exiles had the advantage of political power through their connection with the Persian Empire under Cyrus.

The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah show concern for pure bloodlines. Marriages between former exiles and the daughters of the people of the land had contaminated the holy seed, according to those in positions of power (Ezra 9:2). The solution was to send away wives and children of these intermarriages.

The protest against this view is found in the third section of Isaiah (Chapters 56-66).

The prophet speaks into the social situation of post-exilic Jerusalem and the surrounding area. He encourages his listeners to maintain justice and do what is right (Isaiah 56:1), and he advises that the temple will be a house of prayer for all the nations (Isaiah 56:7).

Foreigners joined to the Lord will be admitted to the temple and eunuchs will be welcome in the house of God (Isaiah 56:3-8), and God will gather people from all the nations and that some from these foreign ethnic groups will serve as his priests (Isaiah 66:21).

An inclusive prayer in Isaiah 64:8-9 says this: “O Lord, you are our father; We are the clay, and you are our potter. We are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.”

Embedded racism is such a destructive force in the U.S. and Canada. Surely, we do not need to be convinced.

We need to ask questions about doing justice and loving our neighbor across boundaries of race and ethnicity. I don’t think we can leave the protest up to

professional athletes.

I am bold enough to make a few suggestions for pastoral leaders:

1. Confession is important.

Can we confess before God that we live in social settings with a history of racism? Can we ask God for forgiveness and for direction in living by the standard of his kingdom?

2. Can we expose our congregations to stories of people whose experience of life is different from our own?

My seminary ethics class listened recently to a speech of Cornell West speaking about racial justice. We realized that our tendency was to evaluate social issues from our personal perspectives rather than from those who have suffered from the oppression of the dominant culture.

3. Can we seek to build relationships with other people in order to enter more deeply into their experiences?

In Canada, the challenge is to build relationships of equity and repentance with indigenous people. Majority Caucasian churches in the U.S. are challenged to share their congregational life with African-Americans and Latinos in particular.

We should expect suspicion and questions about our motives. People from other groups will be looking for attitudes that are patronizing and bear messages of superiority.

A contrite heart and broken spirit are more compelling before God and before those who feel pushed to the margins.

4. Can we discover some shared projects in which Caucasian people serve in secondary roles? We do not always have to be the leaders.

Racism is offensive to God, who created every human in his image. Let's do something about it.

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