

What can the church do to promote racial reconciliation?

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Brian R. Wipf

This past summer around Father's Day, Korby gave me the gift of sneaking away to the cabin for a couple of days to relax and unwind. It was a great gift. On Wednesday nights, there is a pizza buffet at the P'Town Bar close to where our cabin is located; I said to myself, "Why not?" And just like I thought, it hit the spot. Eating alone feels a little weird, though; I find myself staring at odd things and at the P'Town bar, there's plenty of odd things to study. They have a few old video lottery machines, an arcade game or two that I'm surprised still work. There's a few handwritten signs behind the bar that give some specific instructions to enjoy your time at the P'Town and of course, there are plenty of dead animals on the wall watching everyone eat. Come to think of it, that sounds like every tavern in the Taylor County, right?

When I went to the buffet for my second helping of pizza, something else caught my attention. It was a conversation from a couple of men cursing about what's wrong with the North Woods. Two guys half drunk in a Wisconsin bar are as insightful about current affairs as the Kardashians so I really didn't think much about what they were saying until I heard something rather disappointing. They said that one big problem with the North Woods was the increased population of Hmong residents. Hmong are people of Asian descent and are originally from the areas of southern China, Vietnam and Laos. Around the time of the Vietnam war, many Hmong people became refugees, just like many Syrians today fleeing the Middle East. After first going to Thailand most found asylum in the United States. When Korby and I lived just outside of St. Paul around 2000 we learned that the largest group of Hmong refugees in America resided in The Twin Cities area. Then a few years later when we move to Medford, I was told that Wausau had a large Hmong population, too.

And that, according to these two men, is what's was wrong in the North Woods. Not alcoholism, adultery, laziness or pride. They spoke with contempt. They didn't share their convictions cautiously under their breath; I wasn't trying to eavesdrop. Anyone within 20 feet could hear their musings. The words were filled with curses. I remember very clearly walking away with my second helping of pizza hearing the one say, "The only good Hmong is a dead Hmong." And at that moment it was confirmed to me in a way that I hadn't quite felt before (do you know what I mean... felt?) that prejudice and racism are bigger problems in our world (even in our backyard) then I thought.

Prejudice and racism are not unique or local problems; prejudice and racism are not new problems. So, I hate to say it: get used to prejudice and racism; they are not going away until the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. I don't say that to discourage you and I don't say "get used to them" meaning, "get comfortable with them." No, never get comfortable with them; hate prejudice and racism like you hate Satan himself. But, prejudice and racism have always been with us because they come from a heart that is separated from God; they come from a heart that hates God and hates what God has made; racism is supported by historical decisions and systems in our

culture that originated from a selfish mind and desires. Racism and prejudice come from a heart that prizes and cherishes its own good, its own prosperity, its own comfort, its own success. And that kind of heart will always seek and find advantages at the expense of others. And there's only one thing that can change our hearts; it's the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the penetrating work of God's Spirit when we hear about our sin and the coming judgment, and when we hear about God's love found in Christ and our coming hope. That alone changes a man or a woman; and then these new men and women can begin making just decisions for racial reconciliation. And until God calls his children home and judges his enemies, racism will not go away.

What can the church do to promote racial reconciliation? That's our question today. And I pray that you want that, my brothers and sisters. I pray that the evidence of prejudice and racism in our world today grieves your heart. I hope that the little pockets of prejudice and racism that still exist in your heart and in my heart grieves us more. Let's ask God to do something about that today. If you have hope that God will help us with such things, first turn to Rev. 7 (READ vs. 9-13).

I think those verses are somewhat self-explanatory. This image that John is writing about shows a great multitude praising God. They are clothed in white robes symbolizing the purifying and cleansing work of Jesus Christ for God's own people; they are waving palm branches because they are in joyful praise. They are united together as one people as evidenced by their worship: "Salvation belongs to *our* God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" So, they all together belong to God. But this unified group is hardly the same. We're told in vs. 9 that this unified multitude is made up of people from every nation, from every tribe, people and language. Have you seen pictures of different tribes? Look at these pictures that I found (PIC). What do you notice? They look different! Their skin; their facial features; their body type. Friends, God has and will rescue men, women and children from every tribe, nation, people and language. Heaven will be a tapestry of colors, personalities and cultures that all submit and rejoice in King Jesus. All these different races, different tribes and nations will gather together around the throne of grace and will praise him together. We will all have our own unique experiences and cultures, we may all still do it in our own languages (who knows) but what will matter most is our King... Jesus.

Now, get this (this is an important step as we consider what the church can do to promote racial reconciliation): we can begin living that future reality today. That is a future reality; that is a picture of what will happen someday. We can't and won't experience that reality in all of its glory and joy now, but the Bible says we can *begin* experiencing it. We can *begin* enjoying that unity with others. We don't have to wait until that final day to begin experiencing the coming reality of racial harmony and reconciliation.

Remember the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray; there's something very important for us to consider in it; let's read it together (READ vs. 9-13). Notice how after Jesus spends time praising God in this instructive prayer, he then asks God (it's here in vs. 10) "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." So, consider what Jesus is saying. He's not saying our prayers should consist of requests for God to whisk us away from this broken world so we can go home and leave this broken world in the mess it's in; his prayer is that God's

kingdom, our future home and reality someday, would come here. He's praying that God's will, God's purposes would be done on earth now as they will be done one day in heaven. Jesus tells us we should pray for the future, glorious reality of heaven to invade our communities of Medford, Athens, Abbotsford/Colby and Rib Lake.

And what did we just learn from Revelation 7 will happen someday in heaven? Because Jesus died for people from every nation, tribe, people and language on the cross, heaven will be a harmonious chorus of praise to God more colorful than the best of Bob Rosses happy paintings. One of God's heavenly purposes is unity between the races in glorious praise of Jesus. And in Matthew 6 Jesus says, "Pray to your father that what will happen one day in heaven, what God will accomplish in heaven one day, would come to earth today. That we would experience that reality right now."

And that's what Paul says is true in Eph 2. So, let's look at the last of our main passages before we dig into application. Let's just read Eph. 2:13-16 and comment along the way (READ).

- vs. 13 ~ "you" are Gentiles. People not ethnically Jewish.
- vs. 13 ~ "near" : near to what? near to God? yes. But near to the people of God.
- vs. 14 ~ Jesus is our peace. "our"? Jew and Gentile; made *us* one. How? by breaking the wall of hostility.
- vs. 16 ~ he killed the hostility between Jew and Gentile through reconciliation.

Notice how Paul talks like this has already happened; because it has. Jesus won the victory of reconciliation on the cross. That means we don't have to wait for that final day to happen to *begin* experience racial reconciliation; we can bring God's kingdom way to earth by faithfully living into the finished work of Christ.

How do we do that? How do we begin experiencing this coming reality? We do that by grace through faith. By continually confessing our sins and repenting of them as God makes us aware of them believing, knowing that there's forgiveness and acceptance from God. And what's the aim of our faith? Paul says it beautifully in the context of racial reconciliation from Galatians 5:6 when he says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love." That's the aim of Paul's charge and faith: love for others.

So, this is what I hope has happened so far. I pray that through the scriptures you can see very clearly God's will and purposes of racial reconciliation. God has built reconciliation into the very heart of his gospel and has it planned for his very family. And to be a follower of Jesus, to count him your Master, your Lord, your Everything, you want and will work for reconciliation, too. I pray that you see how overt and subtle racist thoughts and feelings are at odds with God and his way. But when God reveals or shows you prejudicial or racist tendencies still existing in your heart, you have no need to fear; Jesus is here to forgive you and purify you.

The first thing we can do to promote racial reconciliation is to know and celebrate what we've been talking about so far. The second thing we can do is promote the royal law of love. So,

as we lean into putting this into practice, remember that it fits under the banner of faith working itself out through love.

To begin, and maybe you won't be surprised by me saying this, we are not helped much by popular culture when it comes to meaningful discussions or action in promoting racial reconciliation. The Church of Jesus Christ can find such better examples and ideas than from popular culture. To be blunt, don't get your ideas about racial reconciliation from the news, from what's highlighted and promoted in popular culture. The ladies on the View or blog posts from the last person who played Batman or Spider Man are hardly helpful or reliable voices for followers of Jesus. Rise above the cultural discussions, my brother and sisters, that focus on primarily on finger-pointing, name-calling and foolish solutions. Let the words that come out of your mouth be those of Christ from his word rather than this particular liberal advocate or this particular conservative politician. And then when you've done that, bring God's words, God's themes, God's values to larger conversations with the public

So, what does love demand? First, if I'm guided by love for God and love for neighbor I take look on the inside to see if there is sin I need to confess. How might I be wrong? How might I be a hindrance or road block to racial reconciliation? To help you, my brothers and sisters, consider your love and commitment to yourself. Do you need to confess some self-love, self-promotion, which can work itself out in privileging myself at the expense of others who look different than me? That's where hatred towards others begins; it begins with the commitment and love of oneself. And when you hear the word "hatred" don't merely think of seething, scornful feelings and actions; quiet indifference that ignores or looks away is hatred, too. It works like this: because I love and am committed to myself, I'm against other people who pose as obstacles to my desires and happiness. That's hatred

Another question we might want to ask of ourselves and then confess if it's true is this: how comfortable am I with racial injustice in the world? I may not think I prejudicial or hateful feelings or thoughts in my heart, but am I comfortable with the racial injustice around me (again) because my commitment to myself is greater than my love for others?

Racial injustice is around us, my brothers and sisters. It's not something we can wish away just because we have new awareness and appreciation that America is a melting pot. And racism exists because of decisions in the past that have lasting effects. Cultural decisions can create climates or systems of injustice that can last a really long time. I'll give you an example from my home state of SD.

While the relationship between Native Americans and the US government and population is complex and we can't possibly do justice to all of its complexities this morning, a brief summary will demonstrate what I mean (hang in there with me as we do a little history lesson first). While the US government was pushing an expanding and developing country westerly across the Midwest and plains in the early to mid 19th century, conflicts with Native Americans grew and intensified. Bargaining with Native Americans or trying to assimilate them into the new American culture wasn't

working and sometimes the government's solution ended in war. In an attempt to be fair and judicious and also to avoid war and battles, the US government made treaties and established reservations with Native American tribes that would define a clear demarcation from the Native American nations and the nation of the United States. But over the course of time, the US government realized that a lot of the land designated Native American land in these treaties was desirable land rich with resources. So rather than honoring the treaties they made, the US government simply worked to include the land back into the United States of America. The Black Hills of South Dakota is the prime example of that.

The Fort Laramie Treaty ratified in 1868 said that the Great Sioux Reservation, which included the Black Hills would be, "set apart for the absolute and undisturbed use and occupation of the Indians." But a few years later, guess what people found in the rocks and streams of the Black Hills? Gold! And as miners and settlers went to the Black Hills in droves, the Black Hills was eventually ripped out of the hands of the Sioux Nation. The famous battle of Custer's Last Stand signifies the hostilities that culminated in the Sioux Nation losing the Black Hills by force.. In 1980, the US Supreme court ruled in an 8-1 decision that the Sioux Nation was unlawfully deprived of the Black Hills and should be justly compensated. What, of course, couldn't be paid back were the years lost by these Native Americans.

Instead of having the rich land of the Black Hills with its resources, the Sioux Nation had only what was left, the barren, infertile and desolate ground of the Pine Ridge and a few other plots of ground in Western SD. I've been to the Pine Ridge Reservation; it's nestled right by the Badlands of SD. I wouldn't want to live there. Economic options are few and far between; the land isn't good for much and it lacks many other resources.

Here's the point I'm making: those decisions years ago still make an impact today. The future would be brighter for the Sioux Nation if they had the Black Hills instead of the Pine Ridge. Similar decisions about urban housing for African Americans and internment camps for Japanese Americans during WW2 make a lasting impact.

I'm not saying that I know what ought to be done about things like this. There are no easy answers. But as followers of Jesus intent on bringing God's kingdom to earth, it's right to know about such things and right to care, and to prayerfully seek to love others in light of their unique history. Those are the first steps towards love for neighbors that God demands.

Key Verse: Rev. 7:9-10, "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages... crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"

Questions for the week

- Do you see evidence of prejudice and racism in our country today? Share that with a friend or family member in your conversations.
- What was the most impactful truth from God's word that you heard today?

- What thoughts and actions should you change to help bring God's kingdom to our communities today?