

Racism Is Real; We Need to Acknowledge That

Message for Sunday, June 7, 2020
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Galatians 3:26-28

I'm pausing in my current series of messages on encouragement, so that we can take time to consider what is happening around us.

This past Monday, President Trump said in a speech, "I am the president of law and order, and an ally of all peaceful protesters." At the very moment he was saying that, his officials were giving order to police and National Guard to use tear gas and rubber bullets to get rid of peaceful protestors nearby. The protest had been going on most of the afternoon, and there was no apparent reason why they were suddenly attacked. The reason soon became clear. It was so that President Trump could walk over that way and stand in front of a church, holding up a Bible. And have his picture taken.

I remember two years ago after the G7 summit, when Trump accused Prime Minister Trudeau of being "dishonest and weak." I thought it was absolutely hilarious for Trump to call someone else dishonest. But to call someone "weak" seems to be the ultimate insult for Trump. He lives in fear of himself ever being perceived as weak. White House aides told reporters that the strategy for the photo op on Monday was to demonstrate to the nation that President Trump was in charge, he was in control, he was strong. He certainly did demonstrate something, but it wasn't what he intended.

But all this controversy over Trump diverts attention from the main issue: racism. George Floyd is the latest of countless black people who have been murdered or beaten or imprisoned because they are black. Simply being a black person means being suspected of having committed a crime. This has been going on for hundreds of years. The laws may have changed, but laws don't change people's attitudes.

Prime Minister Trudeau reminded us that we in Canada have our own issues of racism to deal with, whether it's blacks or Asians or indigenous people. But here's the thing: we're a white congregation living in a mostly white town in a mostly white

county. We don't think of ourselves as racist, mostly because we're not around people of other races. And the occasional time when we do interact with someone who is different, we are polite, and we pat ourselves on the back for being inclusive.

Let's open the Bible, and see what God has to say to us about racism.

1) As children of God we are one family

Galatians 3:26-28, New Living Translation:

For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on the character of Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In the early days of the church, there were some squabbles between people of different ethnic groups [Acts 6:1]. The apostle Paul made it clear that your background didn't matter. Although this passage doesn't list skin colour as one of the characteristics that don't matter, I think it certainly applies. The principle is that through faith in Jesus, we are all children of God. In other words, we are all one family, sisters and brothers in Christ. Racism has no place among Christians.

I've told before my own experience of this. Forty years ago, I was in the South American country of Bolivia. Only the wealthy people own vehicles. For most people, travel between towns is very simple. Freight is carried between towns in large trucks with open tops. When you find a truck going your way, you pay the driver a few pesos and climb on top of the cargo. One time I shared the back of truck with 30 other people for three days. It's a good way to meet people, and get to know them.

So it happened that one day I was sitting at the side of the road waiting for a truck to come along. It could be several hours before the next one passed by. I pulled out my pocket New Testament, and was reading it.

A young man walked by, glanced over at me, then excitedly came over to me and said, "Eres tu hermano?" ("Are you a brother?" in Spanish).

We were from different countries and different cultures. We had different coloured skin. We spoke

different languages (my Spanish was only passable). In short, we were total strangers, having almost nothing in common. Yet, we were brothers! Because we were both Christians: having God as our Father and Jesus as our brother, that made us brothers.

I'll say it again: racism has no place among Christians.

2) Our role is to model love and respect for all

Nelson Mandela said:

No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love.

It's very simple. People absorb whatever their culture teaches them. Jesus tells us to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" [Matthew 5:13, 14]. In other words, we teach with our words, and demonstrate with our lives, a culture of respect and love for all races.

Now it's pretty difficult to treat non-white people with respect and love when we live in an area that is mostly white. But here's what we *can* do.

a) No racial or ethnic jokes

"Did you hear about the Newfie who —" Whether it's Newfies or Jews or Arabs or blondes, just don't tell those kind of jokes. The only exception is: you can tell a joke about your own group. There are some great comedians who tell great stories about what it's like growing up in a Pakistani family, or whatever their background was.

Similarly, if you hear someone else telling a racist joke, simply say, "Racism isn't a joke. It hurts people."

b) Listen and learn

The past few days, the national news has been carrying stories of people across the country who have experienced racism, not just at the hands of the police, but in sports, at work, in the community, and so on. You might get tired of hearing these stories. But, as one person said, "Imagine how people get tired of experiencing racism."

James 1:19, Good News Bible:

Remember this, my dear friends! Everyone must be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Proverbs 18:13, Good News Bible:

Listen before you answer. If you don't, you are being stupid and insulting.

These Bible verses reminds us that it's a virtue to listen, and listen well, before forming our opinions. This is especially true in matters where we don't know what we're talking about!

You see, we have no understanding, no appreciation—no idea at all—what it's like to be black in Canada, or indigenous, or Asian. I'll tell a story to show you what I mean.

About a year ago, I heard on the radio about an evening seminar on gender differences. The person doing the presentation said, "This question is just for the men in the room. How many of you, sometime during the day, looked around yourself to make sure you were safe?" The men looked around at each other, puzzled, not sure if they understood the question. No one put up a hand. Then the presenter said, "This question is just for the women in the room. How many of you, sometime during the day, looked around yourself to make sure you were safe?" Every hand went up.

If I had been in that room, I would have been one of the confused men. Even when I walk down a dark road late at night, it never occurs to me to be afraid or nervous. I have no idea, no experience of the kind of harassment, abuse and more that women deal with on a regular basis.

In the same way, none of us in St. Paul's Church have any idea of the kind of harassment, abuse and more than non-white people deal with on a regular basis.

The way to learn about racism is to listen to people who have experienced it. Hear their stories. Feel their frustration and anger over the injustice they live with.

I'm going to conclude with a story which demonstrates how powerful it can be, when we replace racism with respect. Tony Campolo, a popular Christian speaker tells what happened to him.

More than a decade ago I was on a speaking tour in New Zealand. I found that John Perkins, the prominent African-American Christian leader in community development, had been there a month earlier and had caused quite a stir. As he was pleading for respect for the indigenous Maori culture before an important gathering of church leaders, he was confronted by a man who tried to make the claim that there was no way that Christians could respect the Maori culture because it was permeated by demonic influences. The man made the claim that demon worship was so much a part of the Maori culture that, as Christians, they should destroy it.

John Perkins responded brilliantly. "Perhaps you're right. It may be that the Maori culture is permeated by demonic influences and needs to be purged. But before we try to purge the Maori culture of its demonic influences, perhaps we should first try to purge the white man's culture of its demonic influences."

His answer was inspired. It reiterated the message that Jesus communicated so clearly when He called upon people to not look for the splinters in the eyes of others until they had first gotten rid of the beams in their own eyes.

New Zealand is a small country and its people are very connected. By the time I arrived there, word of Perkins's encounter had spread from one end of the country to the other. It was not long after my arrival that some Maori Christians asked me what I thought about his remarks. I let them know in no uncertain terms that I agreed with them. I went on to explain that I believed that the Maori culture was created by God and that while some evil influences had permeated it, as it had all cultures, God basically loved the Maori way of life and wanted to purify it and lift it up to what it was originally intended to be. I explained that the more Christianized the Maori society became, the more "Maori" it would be. The music, dances, and other art forms of the Maori people should not be rejected, but should be utilized as instruments for glorifying God. It is hard to describe the enthusiasm with which

my Maori friends greeted my perspective on their culture, and I was soon to see its impact.

Two days later, I was speaking at a youth rally on the South Island. The word had gotten down there that I viewed the Maori dances as an instrument of Christian worship and service. In response, some of the young people planned to surprise me during my opening remarks at the rally by confronting me with a Maori dance. I got wind of all of this from a Maori youth leader who explained to me that these young people would be dancing down the aisles of the church chanting the Maori welcome.

If you have ever seen the Maori welcome, you know it could easily be misinterpreted as an array of taunting and threatening gestures. My Maori friend told me not to be shocked by it, and prepared me for it by teaching me the proper Maori response to such a welcome, utilizing the dancing gestures and the language of the Maori people.

The evening of the meeting, things unfolded just as had been predicted. When I rose to speak and took my place behind the pulpit, the back doors of the sanctuary suddenly flung open. Coming down both of the aisles were Maori young people dancing and chanting the Maori welcome. Shock waves went through the entire congregation. The young people danced up to the platform and surrounded me. They stuck out their tongues and made the wild gestures that go with the greeting. As soon as they paused, I started dancing and chanting the response I had just been taught. The Maori youth went wild with joyful excitement. A barrier had been broken! A line had been crossed.

Next Steps:

- Pray: Admit any racism you may hold in your heart. Don't be ashamed; it's very natural to feel uncomfortable when you are with people who are different from you. Ask God to replace any fear or prejudice with love and respect for others.
- Listen and learn from people who have experienced racism. Feel the impact it has upon them.
- Do your part, wherever you can, to model a godly love and respect for all people, regardless of race or ethnic group.