

What the World Needs Now is Justice

Introduction

Good morning all. It is so great to see you that are with us in person and to connect with those of you who are joining us online live or at a later time.

Welcome to Tension Sunday. Why is the tension Sunday? Because today we are going to look at something we can't get away from, no matter how much we may want to, or even think we have put behind us. Today we are looking at What the World Needs Now is Equality and Justice. See, the tension in this room and online just rose by 100% by saying those two words! I can see some of you tense up right now.

I realize this is an uncomfortable subject, and some might prefer we leave it alone. After all, isn't this just religion inserting itself into politics? One of the reasons this has become a political debate is because we, Christ-followers, have been derelict in our responsibilities and looked to shift this issue for someone else to deal with.

Our unwillingness to wade into the uncomfortable has contributed to the problem when I strongly believe that Christianity can make the best case for the solution.

Today, my goal is not to become political, although as I speak, some of you may equate what I am saying with one political party or another.

I realize that no matter what I say today, one side may say I said too much, meddled too much in things the church should stay out of. The other side may say I didn't say enough and should call out specific people and events.

Fortunately, both sides will agree that I have said something wrong or incorrectly. So if that happens, I am glad I could bring the two sides together in some way.

One quick ground rule for today is I have been making these messages a bit more interactive, both in-person and online. However, because of the sensitive nature of this topic and the fact that far too often we are more concerned about making a point than the person on the receiving end of that point, I would ask we leave the chat window silent today.

And at the end, if you have questions or would like to comment to me directly, you can email me or text me.

With that said, I want to begin by testing your response to some words. Take a look at the screen. Black Lives Matter. All Lives Matter. Blue Lives Matter. White Privilege. Slavery. Equality. Racist. George Floyd. White Flight. America. Jacob Blake. Segregation. Integration.

As you look at those words, how do you feel? Take a look at another set of words. Not answering aloud, but maybe making a note, how did those words make you feel.

Animosity. Anxiety. Apathy. Anger. Anguish. And while there is no right answer, there are some answers that if you feel them, you should probably see how they line up with the values Jesus modeled for us and explore why you might feel that way.

This Isn't New

Why is this such a problem? And where does this come from? To understand this, we need to realize that this is not a uniquely American problem. There is inequality and injustice in other countries, as well. Racism is everywhere.

There's a popular show on Netflix right now called Indian Matchmaker. It shows how families can arrange marriages. After I watched a few episodes, I read an article called "Indian Matchmaking Exposes the Easy Acceptance of Caste: Netflix's popular reality series is a tacit defense of arranged marriages and the role they play in upholding a system of discrimination."

However, even though this exists in other places, it should not be an excuse for us to turn a blind eye to what we see happening around us.

Also, this isn't anything new. Before slavery, before America, all the way back to early civilizations, there have been people in power and people under the control of those in power. Genesis ends with Joseph and his family in Egypt, and Exodus begins with their enslavement.

With God's covenant with Abraham to bless him and make him a chosen nation, there was ongoing, as one article I read this week called it "othering." The belief we are superior and others are inferior.

God chose Abraham and the Jewish people. They took that to be because they were special, better even than those others around them. They missed the entire point of their choosing. When God spoke to Abraham, he said, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:2-3)

This attitude of othering continued. Early in Jesus' ministry, he started teaching and doing miracles, but in Luke 4, he reads from the prophet Isaiah and makes the claim that he is the promised Messiah, the One they had been waiting for.

But some began to question him. And Jesus responds, "Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. "

Don't miss the significance of what Jesus is telling them. He is telling them that God isn't exclusively for the Jewish people. The widow that Elijah helped, the man healed by the prophet Elisha, they were Gentiles, non-Jews. And God went to them, did miracles for them. This so enraged the crowd they tried to throw him off a cliff.

Even Peter, one of the great pillars of the early church, walked with Jesus and was eventually martyred for his faith, stumbled in this area occasionally. Even he had to deal with racism in his heart.

Galatians 2, Paul shares about how he wanted to make sure what he was going around preaching lined up with the other apostles. And they agreed that Paul was preaching Jesus to the Gentiles and should continue.

But Paul continues and writes, "When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy so that by their hypocrisy, even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

Peter was called out; for treating people differently and acting differently when others came around.

And whether it is repeatedly in the Old Testament where God calls his people to care for the poor and the oppressed, the ongoing writings by the early church against favoritism, or the image we are presented in Revelation 7:9 that says there will be "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, the message is clear. This has been a problem. It is still a problem. And unless we do something different than we have done in the past, it will continue to be a problem until Jesus returns.

This is Wrong

Why are inequality and injustice such a big deal? Well, we see that the Bible speaks against it. But at the root, we see something more dangerous. It devalues God's creation.

Here's a question that might get me in trouble, but I am asking anyway. If you were to see on the evening news a cop was shot and killed, what would your reaction be? Oh no. How can we help? Such a tragedy. What a hero. Set up a GoFundMe page.

Now, let's change that to a white person. Maybe less talk about a hero, but possibly a lot of the same reaction. Now let's say the person shot was black. Do we have the same reaction? If that black man was Julian Clark?

Our reaction to those deaths should be the same. One of God's creations, regardless of who they are, their job, their net worth, their life has been ended. But many times, we start asking different questions. Instead of how can we help it become what did they do to deserve this?

And the moment we do that, we have just devalued another person. And the more we do this, the easier it becomes. We might even say, Well, that person is just a waste of skin. Or what a thug.

Please hear my heart on this. I do not care who you vote for in the upcoming election. I do not care if there is a D or an R or XYZ after your name. But if we no longer see individuals as special, but as expendable parts of God's creation, we have lost the heart of God, and we are no longer living as citizens in the kingdom of King Jesus.

Genesis 1:26-28, "Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

Their dignity and worth come not from anything other than Almighty God, who has created them and imprinted His image on them. We have to move beyond an us versus them mentality. This is not from God. In fact, Jesus went to the cross to tear down the divisions we have erected.

Listen to the Apostle Paul again in Ephesians 2. "Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."

By building these walls in our hearts, by looking for a reason for someone to be seen as less than, isn't only to miss the image of God in them. It is also missing the

command to love our neighbor as ourselves. We saw that last week in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

It is also to assume that our salvation is because of something inherently good within us and devalues to the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died for all.

This Still Happens

For some of us we know these things. We don't intentionally look for ways to devalue others. But if we assume that everyone around us is the same as us, has the same opportunities as us, experiences life the same as we do, we would be sorely mistaken.

As I was putting this message together, I ran across some stories I wanted to share. Knowing our church has African, African American, and Indian members, I found some stories I thought might shed light on how they experience life and why they interpret the same news we see in different ways.

Like this story I read by an African woman who has immigrated to the US and now works as a nurse here. Listen to her story:

"As a healthcare worker, I have faced many unwelcome comments about my accent, my color, and my country of origin. I will name a few:

An African American being upset that we come here to take away their jobs because the government pays for our education, and yet they get no help. To set this record straight, international students pay 3x the amount of tuition, and it took a lot of hard work to earn our education.

One patient kicked me out of the room and refused my nursing services, claiming that he needed someone who spoke "English." I speak English.

One patient stated, "I didn't know your kind worked in this field." Being told, "you must be glad you are not starving any longer." One of the first-grade kids telling our daughter that he is allergic to her and refused to play with her at recess. Such a comment will stick in the heart of a child for a long time.

One of my patients once said, "I feel trapped in this room, it feels like I'm in prison, you know what I mean, you've been there before," assuming that I've been to prison based on my skin color. I could write a book, but I will stop at that. I think I've grown immune to the ignorant comments, but there's a part of me that gets upset."

So eye-opening. What about this story by an Indian woman who now lives in the US:

"I've lived in three different countries, including the country I was born in, and I've experienced racism in all three countries. My first experience with racism began when I was only 8 or 9 years old when my family was laughed at for our skin color and ethnicity in my own country.

Here in the US, one of my neighbors comes and tells us that the other neighbor wasn't happy that our neighborhood was becoming very brown lately. There are two or three brown families in our predominantly white neighborhood. The same neighbor's 4-year-old son says, "You are Indians. You smell funny because you are Indians. You are different from me." Who taught him that?

I've heard many Indian parents tell me that Indian kids prefer to take American style cold lunch instead of Indian food for school because Indian food is made fun of. My child in Kindergarten started bringing back her lunch without eating for a whole week. When asked, she said her peers say that her food was stinky and so she had to hide her food while eating, so they won't make fun of her. She requested that I give her food that wasn't Indian. She also came home one time and said I wish my skin color was lighter and that she doesn't like the color of her skin. It felt like a punch in the gut. What's a mother to do when you see the effects of inequality and racism in your child?
"

Or the story from an African American mother:

"My daughter attended a small liberal arts university, and the question she was asked most often when telling people where she went to school was, how did you get in? As if someone left a back door open, and she slipped in when no one was watching. When we moved into our neighborhood in the suburbs, and the neighbor asked how you can afford to live here. And even after getting to know some of the neighbors and my kids playing with other neighborhood kids, our house became known as the N-word house.

My 11-year-old had a note put in her locker, "I am going to kill you," and was told by a classmate, doing a class activity where they were to hold hands was told, "I don't let black people touch me." When she told the teacher, she said I don't want to talk about, go sit down.

My son, when riding with his friends, and they get pulled over, the police pulled him out of the car, searched him, and ran his info for warrants, and he was the passenger, no warrants, and has never been arrested.

And in most of these instances, when I insist, we talk about these instances with the involved adults, I either told it did not happen, or I am mistaken about what really happened.

These are the overt instances of racism we endure daily; this does not cover the microaggressions Like a cashier closing or not opening her line, so she doesn't have to wait on you or to bag my groceries, leaving me to bag them myself.

Being the mother of a black son means you cannot count on the police to help but kill. My son explains that when his white friends go out, his parents say... don't drink, don't do drugs, don't have sex, wear a condom if you do. His mom says, do whatever you need to do to come back alive. Be polite when you see a police officer. If he is

offensive or demeaning or abusive, respectfully take it. It is better to have hurt feelings than be dead.

I could have gone on and on with stories, like the high school student who was called the N-word by a white student while walking down the hall, and when they reported it to the administration, they were told it was that student's freedom of speech, and there was nothing they could do.

These stories are heartbreaking. And I realize that we could easily dismiss them thinking I found them online and they could be exaggerated for effect.

What I failed to mention is that these three stories aren't from Chicago or Atlanta or Birmingham. These stories are from right here in Des Moines and are from women who are a part of Ashworth Church.

Conclusion

Why did I share these stories? Because far too often, we are speaking at people or around people but never talking to people. And these are the stories we need to hear.

You know, too many times, we want to jump right to the big question. Are you a racist? Most of us would say no, even with our occasional and unintentional tendencies. We would still say, of course not.

But what if that isn't the right question? What if the question isn't, are you a racist? What if the question is, are you listening? Are you seeing? There is no question that people of color around us every day are in pain, crying out for someone, anyone, to hear them, to stand with them, to help be a part of the change.

What does it mean that when we hear those stories, the heartbreak, and we look for justification? We look for a reason why it is ok that something horrible happened to someone.

Those who follow Jesus should be the first to step up alongside those who are oppressed economically, educationally, socially, and say enough is enough.

Are you willing to listen? To understand how someone in a minority might be received, might feel? Are you willing to put yourself closer to those who claim to experience racism and injustice? Proximity breeds empathy.

This isn't about picking sides. It is about knowing the heart of God, who says that our response to the poor and oppressed, to those who suffer injustice in this world, reveals who we are really following.

Are we willing to admit we might have blindspots? We can't see them. That's why they are called blind spots. Are we willing to lean in and engage in conversation, and instead of trying to defend everything we do, we have done, or our society has done, we will

hear the pain behind the stories and, in empathy, begin to do the difficult work of bringing the equality and justice of God into our world?

God, Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.