

South Bay Community Church

Sermon Reflection

Courageous Conversations – Racial Reconciliation

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Scripture Text: Acts 16:16-40

Sermon Preamble

We are continuing our sermon series, “Courageous Conversations.” We are discussing topics that are sometimes uncomfortable to talk about, but they are topics that the Church must be able to address and respond to. The Word of God is the standard by which we respond. The way we act and the way we treat people must represent Christ whom we serve. Have you ever had an experience that shifted the trajectory of your life? It could be the birth of a baby, a marriage, a new job, or something more difficult like loss of a loved one, a divorce, or the loss of a job. In 2020, our nation had one of those defining moments. The deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd forced America to pull back the cover on the stain deeply imbedded in the fabric of our nation for a long time. That stain is racism and racial inequality. The events of 2020 continue today with undeniable evidence of police brutality, abuse of power by those in authority, and unjust racially motivated murders, legal systems, and court decisions. Evidence points to a racial divide within the Church. Christians today need the spiritual practice of seeking loving, liberating, and life-giving relationship with God and with one another. In this message, we look at a biblical response to racial inequality and need for reconciliation. We strive to heal and transform injustice and brokenness in ourselves, our communities, our institutions, and our society. We seek to understand how important reconciliation is to our Savior, because reconciliation with God and reconciliation with one another are inseparable in God’s saving work. God’s program of reconciliation includes horizontal reconciling of Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised, Caucasian people and people of color.

The Biblical Principle of Racial Reconciliation-Acts 16:16-40

The Bible is full of passages and stories that offer principles of racial reconciliation. One such scripture is Acts 16:16-40. This scriptural account takes place during Paul’s second missionary journey in the Roman colony of Philippi where Paul is joined by Silas, Luke, and Timothy. The slave girl, who had a spirit of divination bringing much profits to her owners from fortune telling, kept saying, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you a way to be saved” (Acts 16:17). This irritated Paul who cast the evil spirit out of the girl. The girl’s owners, who saw that their hope of gain was now gone, dragged Paul and Silas before the rulers and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar” (Acts 16:20).

Racism played a significant role in how Paul and Silas were mistreated that day. We see the differential impact of the unjust system on Romans and Jews in opposition to one another. Before the rulers, the owners called out Paul and Silas for “being Jews,” even though Paul was a Roman citizen. The oppressive owners referred to themselves as part of the dominant group of Romans (Acts 16:21).

Consider how some from different races and cultures experience today the same injustices that Paul and Silas received. Paul and Silas were seized, dragged, unfairly tried, lied on, outnumbered by the crowd, stripped, beaten with rods, wrongfully imprisoned, chained, and placed in a dark inner cell where their feet were locked in stocks by the jailer.

While in jail, at about midnight, Paul and Silas began singing praises to God. In response to their praise, God sent a great earthquake that shook the foundations of the prison and opened all the cell doors of the prison and unfastened everyone’s bonds (Acts 16:26). In one night, God turned a negative episode for Paul and Silas into a life changing experience for the Roman jailer and his family. This passage of scripture provides six principles of reconciliation that we can apply to our lives today.

Principle 1: Racial reconciliation requires mercy and forgiveness

We saw in verses 20 and 21 that race played a part in the mistreatment and wrongful imprisonment of Paul and Silas at the hands of the Romans. Like many people of color in today's world, Paul and Silas were victimized by a racially unjust system. After Paul and Silas praised God and then the earthquake opened the jail cells, the jailer woke up and realized the prisoner doors were open. The jailer was about to kill himself because he knew he would be executed by his superiors. But at that moment, Paul yelled, "Don't harm yourself, because we are all here" (Acts 16:28).

Paul, who has been beaten, locked up, and restrained, is hollering out to his oppressor not to harm himself. How is it possible for Paul to be able to extend mercy to someone who has done him harm? This is an example for us to show mercy. Paul, who formerly was known as Saul, had the reputation of pulling Christians out of worship and persecuting them. But when Paul encountered Jesus and God on the Damascus road, God had great mercy on Paul. Similarly, Paul is now able to extend mercy to someone who is causing him harm. It is easier to extend mercy when we remember the mercy that we have received.

Paul is now experiencing the injustices that he did to other people. What you reap, you will sow even if you are an apostle. In God's justice, how we treat people, what we do, and what we say is coming back to us. Remember to be kind to other people. Treat people well, even those who would oppose you.

One of the greatest, most recent examples of mercy in action took place around the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina (the Emanuel Nine). Nine people went to Bible study and invited a young white man to join them. The young man at the end of the Bible study killed all nine of them. At the young man's trial, the judge invited the family to address the killer. Nadine Collier, the daughter of slain Ethel Lance said to the killer, "I forgive you. You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again....But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul." Other family members came forward to the microphone, lamented, and forgave the murderer also, offering God's mercy to him.

If we are the ones negatively impacted by racial injustice, and we desire to see racial reconciliation, we must be willing to extend the same mercy that God extends to us every day. Mercy to those who have caused us harm is easier said than done. But with the help of the Lord, it is possible.

Principle 2: Racial reconciliation requires courageous humility

The jailer fell down in front of Paul and Silas, as an extreme act of humility. He was a Roman, and for falling down he could have been ridiculed by his peers and even severely punished by his overseers. But the jailer did not care, perhaps because of the mercy he received from Paul. The mercy changed the heart of the jailer, and he now wants to extend himself to Paul and Silas by submitting himself to their leadership. The jailer knew that Paul and Silas were declaring a message from God, so he bows down before them, which demonstrates a submissive heart and a teachable spirit. If we are aligned with the systems that have caused harm in a racially unjust situation, we have to embrace courageous humility with a submissive heart and a teachable spirit. We cannot come to the situation assuming we know everything. We have to humble ourselves one to another in order to hear and listen. The jailer represents humility showing us a submissive heart and a teachable spirit.

Principle 3: Racial reconciliation requires Jesus at the center

The jailer was so moved by the Spirit of God that he did not wait for Paul and Silas to ask him about salvation that led to his conversion. Instead, he asked them, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved." Paul and Silas responded to believe on the Lord Jesus and he would be saved, along with his household. (Acts 16:30-32). We need to keep Jesus at the center of reconciliation. At the feet of Jesus, we are all the same. Jesus died for us all; Jesus loves us all; Jesus created us all the same. There is no black, nor white. There is no other race; it is the human race. Jesus loves every one of us, so we must keep Jesus at the center of it all.

Principle 4: Racial reconciliation requires washing of wounds

The jailer washed the wounds of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:33). The jailer may or may not have directly inflicted the wounds on Paul and Silas, but he was a part of the ethnic group and system that did. Therefore, he bore some level of culpability with responsibility to see healing occur. He did what he could to further the healing of Paul and Silas. He extended the loving and kind act of washing the wounds of the ones he imprisoned. The jailer took Paul and Silas into his home to see and wash the wounds. For racial reconciliation, there has to be a commitment to see, to understand, to look closely at the wounds of the oppressed, and do what is necessary to help them heal. In this process, the oppressor enters into the pain.

We need to look deeply and intentionally at what caused the brokenness of our brothers and sisters. Their brokenness matters. It is not enough to march and get a t-shirt; we have to talk to one another and hear the pain that we (the oppressor and the oppressed) carry.

Principle 5: Racial reconciliation requires fellowship

The jailer brought Paul and Silas into his home and placed food before them (Acts 16:33-34). In that biblical time, sharing a meal together was a sign of acceptance. This jailer could have been executed because he is a Roman and has Jews in his house. While we can have racial integration from being together at some churches on Sunday morning or at a sporting event, racial reconciliation takes place when there is fellowship and friendship. Racial reconciliation means that there has to be conversation and listening to each other as we build friendship and mutual support while in fellowship with one another.

Principle 6: Racial reconciliation requires justice

Injustices occurred in this account when the Romans beat and imprisoned Paul unjustifiably (Acts 16:35-40). The reality is that Paul had rights as a Roman citizen. But they called Paul a Jew, because he was doing what they did not want him to do. As a Roman citizen, he was wrongfully imprisoned. Had Paul pushed the matter legally, the magistrates could have been tried, jailed, tortured, and even executed for mistreating a Roman citizen. Even though Paul decided not to take it up in the legal system, there is a time for the racially oppressed to fight for justice in the legal system. We have to do our part if we want to see systems change for the better. God is a God of justice.

Reconciliation without justice outside of the church and societal change is weak and not biblical. This is concerning all of humanity and anyone who has been oppressed in any way, because Jesus cares about us all.

Reconciliation that started in worship

At the end of this account, we see reconciliation between Paul, Silas, and this Roman jailer. The start of the reconciliation process was not when Paul and the jailer began to talk to each other. Rather, reconciliation started when Paul and Silas began worshiping and the experienced the presence of God. Paul was able to extend mercy to the jailer because Paul had been strengthened by being in the presence of God. When we worship or read the Word of God, then we feel better to do what God requires us to do that may be difficult. That experience of the presence of God empowers us to do the right thing, because we are reminded that it is not about ourselves. We are representing our Lord. If the Lord wants us to do it, we will do it. If we are going to be agents of racial reconciliation, we must start in worship and in God's presence. Everything we do for the Kingdom has to start in God's presence. Like Paul, we have to know that we have connected with God, that we have communed with God, and that God has given us what we are supposed to do. Then we have to be courageous enough to go and do it even if it seems uncomfortable. We need to be concerned about God's Will and not our own will.

Some people will refuse to enter into racial reconciliation because the pain is so deep. Washing the wound is necessary to know what each of us has been through. We set up walls declaring that we do not want to interact with those people. When we see the oppressor set up walls, we are upset, but the oppressed also sets up walls in a reverse way.

In the presence of God, God will speak to us give us direction of what we need to do and how we need to respond. God inhabits the praises of God's people (Psalms 22), and so we trust God that when we praise, God will strengthen us to do what God wants done.

Help from the Holy Spirit

Some things that God requires of us that without the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, it is very difficult to do in our own strength. Love your enemies; turn the other cheek; bless those who persecute you; if your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. We don't have to do any of this in our own flesh of the natural human. We have the Holy Spirit to help us.

Following the example of Jesus

After the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you receive power not just to be witnesses for Jesus and the life of Jesus, but also power in extending grace, forgiveness, and mercy to those who seek to do us harm. Jesus was our greatest example when he said on the cross about those who crucify him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

As followers of Christ, agents of reconciliation, we are called to extend the same forgiveness and mercy as Paul and Jesus. If we find ourselves more aligned with the oppressor, then like the jailer, we have to humble ourselves, seek to acknowledge the message of those who weep as oppressed, acknowledge their wounds, and do everything in our power to heal those wounds. Both sides in this racial divide must be open to genuine fellowship in seeking out ways to bring out true justice to the marginalized.

Why must racial reconciliation happen?

1. Reconciliation confronts and defeats differences. Romans 12:9 declares that love must be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good. God loves all whom he has created. God encourages us to do the same.
2. Reconciliation confronts and defeats self-righteousness. Thinking that one race is better than the other is a form of self-righteousness, and there is no favoritism in God.
3. Reconciliation encourages the body of Christ to freely obey the Great Commission. Matthew 28:19-20 says to Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Great Commission is cross-cultural in its DNA.
4. Reconciliation encourages the body of Christ to obey the great commandment. John 13:34-35 speaks of the new command to love one another just as Jesus has loved you. You must love one another, and by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.
5. Reconciliation honors God. John 3:16 declares that God's act of love was for the world, not just for one race.

Reconciliation as a calling from God

We are the image bearers of Christ in the earth. Therefore, racial reconciliation is not an effort to be made, but it is a calling to be lived out. 2nd Corinthians 5:18 confirm our calling declaring that everything is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

Nelson Mandela article on liberating the oppressor

Nelson Mandela wrote an article looking at racial oppression or inequality from the side of the oppressor. Many times, we do not look at the side of the other person, but Nelson Mandela, declared:

I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color 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, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity

in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.

When I walked out of prison, my mission was to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say that has now been achieved. But I know that that is not the case... We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

Final word on racism and injustice from Jesus

The most important voice we need to hear to instruct us on racism and injustice is the voice of Jesus. We hear Jesus answer the Pharisees' question of what is the greatest commandment. His response masterfully and intentionally answered their question by connecting two commandments that flow into each other. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Sermon Preamble

-The Barna Research Group surveys found that while people see signs of racial injustice and inequality, they, especially those in the Church, are increasingly unmotivated to address racial injustices. What are some reasons why the Church is divided regarding racial injustices and God's calling for racial reconciliation?

The Biblical Principle of Racial Reconciliation-Acts 16:16-40

-The slave girl, possessed by an evil spirit, called the missionaries "servants of the Most High God," a common phrase used by evil spirits describing God, Jesus, and God's followers (Mark 5:7), a term both Jews and Gentiles could understand and have used to describe their God. Once the evil spirit got their attention speaking of a "Most High God," there is a distortion of the truth in the Greek text heard by the original hearers. The phrase for the original hearers as said by the evil spirit, "telling you a way to be saved" does not contain the definite article "the" (meaning the one and only way). This is an important distinction. The evil spirit says that Jesus is a way (among other ways) to salvation, but the truth is that Jesus is the one and only way to salvation. Why is it important that Jesus is the one and only way to salvation, not a way as declared by the evil spirit? Discuss whether this distinction irritated Paul into casting out the demon. When others declare that Jesus is one way among others to salvation, not the one and only way, what should be our response?

-The owners of the slave girl had money and power from exploitation of the slave girl. How did the owners use differences in race, culture, nationality and refusing racial reconciliation to attack Paul and Silas? Why were the owners threatened by Paul and Silas? What other scriptural passages show the biblical principle of some oppressing others with injustice in an attempt to maintain power?

Six principles of racial reconciliation

-Our scripture text, Acts 16:16-40 provides six principles on racial reconciliation that we can apply to our lives today. Those principles are (1) mercy and forgiveness, (2) courageous humility, (3) Jesus at

the center, (4) washing of wounds, (5) fellowship, and (6) justice. What principle resonates with you as being most challenging to apply in God calling us today to a ministry of racial reconciliation?

Reconciliation that started in worship

-When we engage in a spiritual practice like worship, praising God, or reading God's Word, how are we strengthened, like Paul and Silas, in the presence of God to do racial reconciliation?

Help from the Holy Spirit

-As God calls us to the ministry of racial reconciliation, why is it so difficult to do so in our own strength? Why do we need help from the power of the Holy Spirit?

Following the example of Jesus

-As followers of Christ in racial reconciliation, what does our interaction look like with those who are different than us? How do we extend forgiveness to them whether they are the oppressed or the oppressor doing us harm? How can we interact with people who are an oppressor, and are part of the deeply embedded systematic racial injustice, and therefore, "know not what they do?"

Why must racial reconciliation happen?

-Discuss your understanding of each point on why racial reconciliation must happen in the plan of God, across the dividing lines of race, culture, nation, and geography as a principle throughout scripture.

-What is the importance spelled out in the beginning that all humans are created in God's image and after God's likeness (Genesis 1:26)?

Reconciliation as a calling from God

-Why is the ministry of reconciliation not just an effort we are to try in our own strength, but rather reconciliation is our calling from God?

Nelson Mandela article on liberating the oppressor

-Similar to Nelson Mandela or the Apostle Paul in prison, how do we get beyond our defined roles as prisoner (possible victim of injustice) and jailer (part of the system of possible injustice) to see the glimmer of humanity in the other person, since both were created in the image of God? How can we get beyond the roles we have or the groups we are part of to see the humanity of the other person in the process of racial reconciliation?

-What points from this article by Nelson Mandela resonated with you?

Final word on racism and injustice from Jesus

-What does Jesus mean in the second part of the great commandment when he says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39)? How does this scripture relate to God's call to us for racial reconciliation?