

“Our Union in Christ”
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
April 28, 2019
(Jn. 17:20-23; 2 Cor. 5:14-21)

Introduction.

Does it feel to you like there is more conflict and polarization in the world these days than there was in the past? Maybe it’s just me, but I sense the tension, and it feels like unity is hard to come by these days. People are having a difficult time getting along, and it shows up in the halls of government, the world of academia, the neighborhoods we live in, and even in the church. It’s like the cartoon I recently saw which said, “We need to form a conflict-resolution team to decide who is going to be on the conflict-resolution team.”

I have detected some tension in our own congregation in recent months, and as a pastor I’ve been concerned about it. It’s become a matter of prayer for me. On occasion I hear “us and them” language when people are talking about others in our church, and whenever that happens my ears perk up and I’m more sensitive to the possibility of division in the body of Christ. Satan loves to divide. His name in Greek is *diablo*, and it means “splitter.” He seeks to divide and destroy, and he’ll take any opportunity he can to create unrest and cause division. It happened in the early church, and it also happens in churches today.

Some of the unrest I’ve sensed has come on the heels of a Jan term class we offered at our church on Race and the Gospel and also the Forum on Faith and Culture we helped sponsor back in February. You’ll recall that these learning opportunities took up the matter of racial reconciliation and racial justice. In reaction to these events and in conversation with different people in the church, some have asked me, “Is our church changing direction? Are we going to become a different kind of church than we’ve been in the past? And do I still belong here if I don’t agree with everything I’ve heard?”

This morning I want to address these questions and concerns, and I also want to talk about our union in Christ. Now, whenever a pastor wades into waters like these, it’s easy to hit a landmine. I confess that I enter into this discussion with a bit of fear and trepidation. I love this church, and I love each one of you. I also love Christ, and I want to honor the Lord and the authority of what the Bible teaches as I talk about these important and weighty matters. So, I would covet your prayers as I share these things with you today, and I also ask that you extend grace to me and give me the benefit of the doubt if you hear something that troubles or confuses you.

One of the problems with some of the recent discussions about race and the gospel is that I've been told that it has often felt more like a monologue than a dialogue. Well, a sermon is another monologue, so that doesn't really address this concern. We're going to have an opportunity the next two Sundays for some dialogue – the 5th and the 12th. Lay leaders in our church who come from different perspectives on some of these issues have agreed to help me organize and facilitate some round table discussions after church when the 11 o'clock service concludes the next couple of weeks. And we'll be meeting tomorrow to make plans for those times of dialogue. Stay tuned for details.

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Someone asked me recently, "Peter, why do you think our church needs to be involved in talking about racial reconciliation and racial justice, and why should our congregation get involved? Bringing up these issues tends to divide people. Why do we need to talk about these things in church?" There are three reasons I believe our church should deal with these thorny issues: 1) because of what the Bible teaches; 2) because of the problems in our nation and our city; and 3) because of the history and calling of First Pres.

What the Bible Teaches.

If you read through the Bible you'll discover in both the Old and New Testaments that the narrative of Scripture is that God created the world good in the beginning, but through the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, sin and death entered the world. And we've been dealing with the effects of the Fall ever since. All around us we see the results of sin: selfishness, violence, oppression, poverty, disease, anxiety, depression, even death itself. The world isn't the way it was supposed to be when God created it in the beginning. If you read Genesis 3-11, you'll discover there are 14 ways in which our lives and the whole creation were impacted by sin, and that includes racial conflict which many scholars trace back to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

But the good news of the gospel is that God didn't leave us in this state of brokenness. Instead, He decided to undertake a rescue mission of redemption to restore what is broken in us and in the world. And that mission culminated in sending His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sin. Jesus' resurrection, which we just celebrated at Easter, proved that He has the power and the authority to overcome sin and death, and He can break the bondage these things have over us and all creation.

However, this salvation Jesus accomplished wasn't just so we could get our ticket punched and go to heaven. It was intended to redeem the whole world. Paul puts it this way in the passage we've read this morning in 2 Corinthians: "*All this*

is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ... ” (2Cor. 5:18,19).

This ministry of reconciliation should touch every aspect of human brokenness as well as the brokenness in creation. Hunger, corruption, oppression, poverty, the destruction of the planet, the abuse of power – God wants to redeem *all* the brokenness. And biblical scholar N.T. Wright says God intends for His people to join Him in setting things right in the world and help restore it to the way it was intended to be in the beginning. This ministry of reconciliation includes racial reconciliation, and God calls each of us to tear down the walls that separate us.

The apostle Paul writes about this in his letter to the Ephesians, and he says, “*For Jesus Himself is our peace, who has made the two races one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility*” (Eph. 2:14). In this passage Paul is talking about the terrible racial conflict that existed in the ancient world between Jews and Greeks. But it applies equally to our day in the racial conflict we have in this country, and in our community, between people who are black and white, brown and yellow. The gospel of Jesus Christ impacts every area of our lives, and it urges us to be engaged in tearing down all the walls that separate people and build bridges of understanding, mutual love, and support.

If we’re faithful to the gospel, this will inevitably lead us to become involved in matters of justice. If I respond to Jesus’ call to truly love my neighbor as myself, then what harms my neighbor harms me, and what is a problem for my neighbor is a problem for me. If my neighbor isn’t being treated fairly, then I’ve got to do something to help make things right for him, in so far as it is in my power to do so. That’s the clear implication of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan.

Now, I realize that the word “justice” is a polarizing and emotionally charged word these days, but it’s a word that comes right out of the Bible. As Heather pointed out so well a few weeks ago, the Hebrew word *mishpat*, which means “justice,” occurs over 200 times in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament the Greek words for “justice” and “righteousness” appear together almost 100 times.

When Jesus began His public ministry, He quoted the prophet Isaiah and announced, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Lk. 4:18,19). Then Jesus said, “*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*” In effect, the Lord was saying, “Justice is a centerpiece of My message and ministry.”

It's clear from the teachings of Scripture that if you want to know the heart of God, and if you want to be involved with addressing things He cares about, you need to be concerned about justice. Throughout the Bible there are four groups of people God has a special concern for – the poor, the widowed, the orphan, and the immigrant or refugee. Read through the Old Testament and you'll see the writers of Scripture time and time again instruct the people of Israel to treat these groups of people fairly and to fight to protect them. And the reason God wanted His people to advocate for these people is because they were so vulnerable in the ancient world, and people with power often abused and took advantage of them.

Wherever evil raises its ugly head, the people of God are to oppose it. And whenever evil manifests itself in institutions and society as a whole, when it becomes systematic (such as corruption in government, corporate greed, and human trafficking), God calls His people to speak truth to power and seek to correct the injustice. That's why Moses went to Pharaoh and boldly declared, "Let My people go." I can't excuse myself from getting involved just because the problem doesn't affect me personally. If it impacts my community, if it hurts my neighbor, God says I need to be involved. The Incarnation of Jesus is a demonstration of the biblical mandate for personal engagement to help solve the problems of the world. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for you and me.

The Bible says that one day Jesus will return to rule the earth, and all the nations and tribes and ethnic groups of the world will be united into a single multi-cultural choir praising God. The land and its creatures will flourish once again. Peace will reign. Evil will be punished once and for all, and the tyrants of the earth will be judged. The world will be set to rights, and God's kingdom will come to the earth.

Until then, the people of God are to pray "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And we're to do all we can to help make that in-breaking kingdom of God a reality right here now. We're supposed to help fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. We're to proclaim the Good News of God's love in Christ through evangelism, and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves through personal and corporate acts of righteousness. It's a ministry of word and deed.

I think a distinction needs to be made here in our conversation between what some call "social justice" and "biblical justice," or, as some scholars refer to it, "God's justice." Biblical justice isn't affiliated with any political party, economic system, or social construct. It isn't liberal or conservative, progressive or fundamentalistic. It's simply living out the implications of the gospel and the horizontal demands of loving one's neighbor as oneself.

Biblical scholar N.T. has written, "The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be

addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won. If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense—[then] it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my personal spiritual life.

“But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world—news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts. Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things—and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement the victory of Jesus over them all.”¹

So, we engage in racial reconciliation and racial justice because that's what the Bible teaches us to do. But that's not the only reason why we do it.

The Problems in our Nation and in our City.

The history of our nation and the history of our city is both glorious and tragic. It is a source of great pride and a source of embarrassment. This year 2019 marks the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower Compact, which was a revolutionary set of rules for self-government established by the English settlers who traveled to the New World on the Mayflower. It was a precursor of the democratic form of government this nation created which became a beacon of light and an example for the whole world. However, 2019 is another anniversary. It's also the 400th anniversary of slavery in America when the first African slaves were brought to the settlement of Jamestown in Virginia. Condoleezza Rice calls slavery the “birth defect” of America, and we have been dealing with the effects of this sin in our country for the last four centuries.

The history of our city is also a glorious and tragic one. Salem, whose name means “peace,” began as a Christ-centered missionary settlement by the Moravians in the mid-1700s, and it was a model of equality and grace in the New World. However, if you take a tour of Old Salem you will also learn that these early Moravian settlers owned many slaves, and slavery was a dark mark on the history of our community. The Moravian church itself even owned slaves. In an original inventory list of property on display at the Tavern in Old Salem, two slaves are listed right along with the other property: “1 negro boy, 480 dollars. 1 negro girl, 316 dollars.”

While the history of Winston-Salem has been a remarkable tale of an entrepreneurial spirit and boundless optimism which led to the creation of several dynamic businesses, educational institutions, and even industries that led to the flourishing of our city, the unfair treatment of African Americans continued to be part of our story too. And it continues to be so to this day. A recent study revealed that Winston-Salem has the greatest intergenerational poverty of any city in the United States. Only two Native American reservations have a worse incidence of

intergenerational poverty than our city does.²

And most of this poverty is located in the heart of the black community. It is nearly impossible for poor black children in our city to break the cycle of poverty in which they are growing up because the deck is so stacked against them. As a friend of mine said recently, “It is more likely in Winston-Salem that a child growing up in a white middle class family will become the next Bill Gates than it is for a poor black child growing up in an African American home will ever become middle class.”

Twenty-two percent of the children living in Forsyth County experience food insecurity on a regular basis, and most of these children are in the black community. They go to bed hungry at night without enough to eat, and they wonder what the next day is going to bring. We can and should do better as a community. The gospel demands it. The late poet and professor Maya Angelou once said, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, it need not be lived again.”

The History of our Church and the Calling of First Pres.

Our church was founded in 1862 in the middle of the Civil War. What an act of faith! The original members of this congregation believed that the worship of God was essential even in times of great national conflict, and they trusted by faith that the war wasn't going to last forever. So, they built a church on the corner of Third and Cherry Streets, and for 156 years this congregation has been a vibrant witness for Christ in this community.

If you read the history of First Pres, you'll discover that our church has always leaned into the challenges of the day. Whether it was sending money to build a hospital in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the middle of the Great Depression in the 1920s, or Dr. Julian Lake talking about desegregation in the 1950s, First Pres hasn't been afraid to stand in the gap and bring its influence to bear on the social problems of the world.

In the 1980s a homeless man who died in downtown Winston-Salem on Fourth Street on a cold December night. He froze to death. Dr. David Burr, the senior pastor of our church, called an emergency meeting of the other senior pastors of the churches in downtown, and he announced, “Friends, this cannot happen again. Our church will open its fellowship hall to be an emergency shelter for the month of December. Who's going to take January?”

And that was the beginning of what eventually led to the founding of Samaritan Ministries. Just about every non-profit ministry and social agency that has been created in Winston-Salem to help the poor and those on the margins of our community have had members of our church provide strong and visionary leadership to get them established and helped them flourish. Our church has

always been at the forefront of addressing the social ills of our community, and we're going to continue to lean into the problems of our city in the name of Christ. It's our history, and it's our calling.

When someone asks, "Is our church changing its direction? Are we becoming liberal in our theology?" I can say with confidence, "Absolutely not!" We're going to continue to be the same Christ-centered, biblically-faithful, and missionally-engaged congregation we've always been, only in new ways. We're on the same path of trying to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment like we've always been. And our church has always believed that the horizontal implications of the gospel compel us to roll up our sleeves, be willing to get dirty, and even become uncomfortable if necessary for the sake of Christ."

That's why we're talking about race and the gospel. That's why we are partnering with black and white church leaders around our city to collaborate and work together and address some of the inequities that exist in our community. It's in response to the command in Scripture which tells us to tear down the walls that separate us. We really don't have a choice if we want to be faithful to Christ and His Word. First Pres isn't about social activism. We're simply trying to live out the gospel. We are seeking to exercise faith, live in hope, and bring about love for the flourishing of everyone in our community.

Imagine what our church would look like if we became the best neighbors in downtown we can possibly be. Imagine what it would look like if we truly became the welcoming presence of Christ. Imagine what could happen if our church joined with scores of other churches in this town to work on the problems of our city together. Imagine what the witness of the body of Christ could be in this community if all of us said "no" to hate and "yes" to love. Imagine a community in which all the residents – black and white, brown and yellow – had an equal opportunity to flourish and thrive and reach their God-given potential. Imagine a church and city where the residents really loved their neighbors as themselves. Could that happen here? I believe it can!

Conclusion.

The title of my sermon is "Our Union in Christ." The tensions we've experienced in our church aren't uncommon, and every predominantly-white congregation in the South which takes the gospel seriously is having to wrestle with these problems. Things have gotten a little comfortable, people are afraid they are losing something precious they once had, and it challenges the way we live our lives.

I think the key for us is not to talk *about* each other during our differences, but to talk *to* each other, and to see if we can discover a common vision which keeps

Christ at the center as guided by Scripture. We are not all same, and there are differences of opinion in our church about how to deal with the social problems of our day. We've got Democrats and Republicans and Independent voters in our church, and we don't see eye to eye on everything. And that's okay. What binds us together, and what has always been the glue that has held our church together, is our union in Christ.

Greg Ogden wrote a book on discipleship a number of years ago, and in it he said, "The only thing we may have in common with the person in the pew next to us in worship is that [neither of us deserves] to be there. God has wonderfully and gently come into our lives so that each of us has a story of our wooing to tell. What knits our hearts together is that we belong to Christ."³

May God give us the grace and the courage to work together to become the church He desires us to be in the coming days. We can't do it on our own. We need Jesus, and we need His Holy Spirit to guide and empower us. But if we're open to being His vessels, I think the days ahead are exciting and full of hope.

In John 17 Jesus prayed for His disciples, and He prays for you and me, "*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent Me*" (Jn. 17:20,21).

May this prayer become a reality for First Presbyterian Church today. Amen.

¹ N.T. Wright, quoted by Tim Keller in *The Reason for God*, p. 210.

² See the Black Philanthropy Initiative by the Winston-Salem Foundation.

<https://www.wsfoundation.org/strategic-initiatives/black-philanthropy-initiative>.

³ Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation*, p. 37.