

“Tearing Down the Walls that Separate Us”

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(Eph. 2:11-22)

Introduction.

On February 8, 1960, Carl Wesley Matthews sat by himself at the lunch counter of the S.H. Kress department store, and this began the sit-in movement in Winston-Salem to protest segregation. As a black man, it was unlawful in the city of Winston-Salem for him to do that. The next few days others began to join Carl, and the sit-ins moved to the lunch counter at Woolworths on the corner of Fourth and Trade Streets.

On February 23rd, 60 years ago today, 11 African American students from Winston-Salem Teachers College (which is now Winston-Salem State) and 10 white students from Wake Forest University joined Mr. Matthews in the protest. The 21 students were arrested for trespassing and disturbing the peace, but their solidarity in objecting to the segregation laws in our city led to change. On May 25th, Winston-Salem became the first city in North Carolina to desegregate, and Mr. Matthews was the first African American to be served at a desegregated lunch counter.

Today marks the 60th anniversary of the students joining Mr. Matthews to protest the racist laws in our community, and it seems an appropriate Sunday for us to talk about tearing down the walls of race that separate us. Today we’re also going to make available for you a paper the Session endorsed last fall which articulates a theological vision for our congregation in regard to biblical reconciliation and justice, and you can pick one up after the services at the Welcome Centers of our church. Now, reconciliation and justice involve much more than just racial reconciliation and racial justice, and the paper the Session endorsed explains this, but in this cultural moment in our country where there is tension and even racial hatred, and on this anniversary of the sit-ins, it provides a wonderful “case study,” if you will, of the implications of the gospel for how you and I are supposed to live lives of love under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

I. The Bible’s Teaching about Reconciliation and Justice.

One cannot read very much of the Bible without coming face-to-face with the reality of God’s concern for reconciliation and justice. It’s at the heart of what the Gospel is all about. In Genesis we read that after God created the world good, our first parents fell from a state of grace through their disobedience, and the result was that it affected not only Adam and Eve but all of creation as well. Their relationships with God, self, others, and even the created order were all damaged by their sin, and we’re still dealing with effects of the Fall today.

However, God didn’t leave humanity in this condition of sin and death. Instead, He launched a rescue mission, born out of His love, to redeem fallen humanity, and, in fact, to redeem the whole world. This mission culminated in sending His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross in our place, and in His resurrection Christ demonstrated His ability to overcome sin and death and bring salvation to the world. And now God invites us to join Him on His mission of love to bring this reconciliation to the whole world.

This is the fundamental calling of every Christian. We who have been reconciled to God through Christ are now called to be His ambassadors of reconciliation in the world. The apostle

Paul put it this way 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...*” (2 Cor. 5:18,19). Jesus is the strong center pole on which a church’s ministry of reconciliation must be built.

Reconciliation includes racial reconciliation, and God calls each of us to help tear down the walls of race that separate us. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul writes, “*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 Gentiles. Racism and discrimination are nothing new, and they were alive and well in the first century too. Christians back then who came from different ethnicities had just as great a challenge of getting along as we do today. The gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to tear down all the walls that separate people and build bridges of mutual understanding and sacrificial love.

Jews and Gentiles had great contempt for one another in the ancient world. For example, Jews said that Gentiles were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell, and they called Gentiles “dogs.” It wasn’t lawful for a Jewish person to help a Gentile mother when she was giving birth, because that would simply bring another Gentile into the world. If a Jewish son or daughter married a Gentile, the family would actually have a formal funeral for the child, and they would be shunned, regarded as dead, for the rest of their lives. In addition, the Jews practiced a rigid policy of segregation, and a Jewish person wouldn’t ever enter a Gentile’s home. There was even a notice posted in the Temple, the place of the worship of God, with an inscription that read, “No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure around the Temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”

Against this backdrop of segregation and hatred, Paul writes about the wall of hostility being torn down by the love of God in Christ, and the way He made the two races one so that He might reconcile them to one another. Elsewhere in the letter to the Galatians, the apostle said, “*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal. 3:26-28). In Jesus Christ God created a new human unity that overcomes racial hatred and the differences that separate us, and He wants the church to be a demonstration of His reconciling work in the world.

Any pursuit of racial reconciliation will inevitably lead to a concern for racial justice, and the people of God should be actively engaged in challenging racism in all its forms and take up the call to advocate for people who are discriminated against because of their color. (S) As Timothy Dalrymple recently wrote in an editorial for *Christianity Today*, “If white Christians wish to stand on the bridge [of reconciliation] with brothers and sisters of other colors and backgrounds, they need to stand with them first in the foxhole [of injustice] If we abandon our sister in the foxhole, we cannot expect her to attend our potluck.”¹

The word “justice” is a polarizing and emotionally charged word these days, but it’s a word that comes right out of the Bible. The Hebrew word *mishpat*, which means “justice,” appears over 200 times in the OT, and the Greek words for “justice” and “righteousness” appear nearly 100 times in the NT. 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 to 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."

Biblical justice isn't about politics. It transcends politics. It isn't affiliated with any political party, economic system, or social construct. It isn't liberal or conservative, progressive or fundamentalistic. It is simply living out the implications of the gospel and the horizontal demands of loving one's neighbor as oneself. Biblical justice is part of what it means to live a life of love.

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. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."² I need to attempt to see the world through my neighbor's eyes and try to understand what it's like to be in his or her shoes. If my neighbor isn't being treated fairly, then, in so far as it is in my power to do so, I am called to do something to help make things right for him or her. This is the clear implication of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, and it is our missional calling in Christ.

The Incarnation of Jesus is a demonstration of the biblical mandate for personal engagement with the disorder and injustice of the world. God sent His Son to make things right. For us this may involve individual acts of love-in-action, or it may include institutional efforts to address systemic issues. Both are equally valid expressions of God's concern for justice, but the *why* and *how* believers oppose evil differentiates them from the rest of the world, because there is no justice without love, and acts of justice done without love are not reflective of our calling in Christ.

The Bible says that one day Jesus will return, and all the nations, tribes and ethnic groups of the world will be united into a single international, interracial, and intercultural 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 they are to do all they can to help make that in-breaking kingdom of God a reality 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 personal evangelism, and we're to love our neighbors as ourselves through personal and corporate acts of righteousness. It's a ministry of reconciliation in word and action.

II. One Person's Story of Personal Engagement.

What does this look like in real life? How can I live a life of love and help make things right in the world when it comes to racism? I began my sermon talking about the sit-ins at the lunch counter in Winston-Salem which led to desegregation in our city, and I shared with you that students from Wake Forest and Winston-Salem State were involved. I'd like you to hear the story of one of those students at Wake Forest who eventually got involved, and I'd like to invite Dr. Elms Allen to come and share with you his story.

Q. Tell us what it was like at Wake Forest and in Winston in 1960

A. In 1960 I was a 19 year old sophomore from small town North Carolina. The student body was totally white except for a few students from Japan and China. Most of the students were from NC or surrounding states. The faculty was entirely white.

Had I been a black student at Winston-Salem State, I would not have been able to eat at a lunch counter or most any other dining facility in downtown Winston. There were laws prohibiting it. If I used the bus station I would have a separate waiting room, a separate bath room, and a specially labeled water

fountain. I could not go next door to eat at the K&W, and I certainly could not go down the block and have lunch in the dining room of the Robert E. Lee Hotel!

I loved being at Wake Forest. I was excited to be there. I was totally oblivious to my white privilege.

Q. So tell me about the sit ins

A. The sit-in movement began in Greensboro in early February 1960 when four students from A&T sat down at the lunch counter at Woolworths in downtown Greensboro and asked to be served. They were refused but continued to sit and continued to return. Their actions are memorialized in a museum at the original Woolworth site and includes the four counter stools.

Carl Matthews, a worker at McLean trucking, learned of the actions of the A&T students and began his own sit-in at Kresge in Winston Salem. He, too, was refused service. Students at Winston-Salem State (then Teachers College, now University) learned of Mr. Matthews sit-in and proceeded to join him, first at Kresge and then moved to Woolworths lunch counter. They, too, were refused service. The lunch counters would be shut down while they were there and then reopened when they left.

A group of students at Wake Forest learned of this and commuted to join the sit-ins believing that it was morally wrong for black students not to be able to eat at a lunch counter. Most of these students were pre-ministerial. Several met with students from Winston-Salem State and planned their actions. They agreed that on February 23 the two groups would meet at Woolworths and join together to sit-in and protest the segregation of the lunch counter.

One of the Wake students was Bill Stevens, my fraternity brother and suite mate. He was a Quaker, a senior, and would be heading to Yale Divinity School in the Fall. Another was his fiancée Margaret Dutton. Both were close friends. The night before the sit-in I was in Bill's room and he shared what was going to happen the next day. He said, "Elms, you need to come down to Woolworths tomorrow after chapel and see this happen. We're going to make history!" I think I waved him off and gave the excuse that I had a class.

On the 23rd, 10 students from Wake Forest and 11 from Winston-Salem State met, joined arms and occupied 21 stools at the lunch counter. Some of the Wake students were able to order food but the WS State students were refused. A crowd of customers soon gathered behind the students expecting to have lunch and soon more joined them and began to hurl expletives and racial slurs and the students. The management asked the students to leave and of course they did not. The police were called, and when they arrived they arrested the 21 students, put them in the paddy wagon, and took them to jail. There they were fingerprinted and charged with trespassing. They were released after posting bail and told to cease and desist.

Word quickly spread through the fraternity house that Bill and Margaret had been arrested and jailed for sitting in with some black students. The all too common reaction from some of my brothers was, "Well, they got what they deserved".

That evening I sat in Bill's room at the fraternity house, and he told me the experience had been awesome. He said he would do it again even if they kept him in jail. He said something that evening that I still remember vividly to this day. He said, "If our black brothers are going to be successful in ending this evil that is segregation, it is going to be necessary for us white brothers to get involved."

The sit-ins continued on a fairly regular basis in the coming weeks. A group of Wake students would agree on a day to meet at Woolworths and would occupy the lunch counter for an hour or so as a reminder that the segregation issue had not been resolved. These were less dramatic than the one on the 23rd. The police were not called and there were no further arrests.

In late March I told Bill I was ready to go downtown. I went with 4 Wake students and we met 4 students from WS State and very quietly went in and sat down at 9 adjoining stools with a WS State student beside

every Wake students. By this time the waitresses were familiar with the drill and basically ignored us other than a scowl or two. No one asked for an order and no one was served. We sat quietly for about an hour. There were a few folks who gathered and protested our protest with several expletives and racial slurs. We quietly got up and left. On the street we shook hands and someone said, "See you next week."

I regret to say there was not a next week or any other week for me. I did not sit-in again. What I had done seems very small compared to those brave students who were there on the 23rd. I wish I had done more, but this day is a red letter day in my memory.

The good news is that less than 3 months after the first sit-in at Woolworths, the city rescinded the laws making it illegal for blacks to be served at a "white" establishment, and on May 25 the lunch counter at Woolworths (as well as many other establishments) was integrated. Carl Matthews was the first black person served at Woolworths.

Q So why did you do it?

A. I think maybe the fog of my white privilege lifted enough for me to see the wrong of segregation.

I also think the words of Bill Stevens on the night after the first sit-in were on my mind: "If our black brothers are going to be successful in ending this evil of segregation, it is going to be necessary for us white brothers to get involved"

But there is also what I call my "Rhoda Story." In 1950 (I was 10) my mother was diagnosed with an inoperable cancer. It was going to be necessary for her to be away for 7 or more weeks of intensive radiation treatments. I lived in a multigenerational house—in addition to my Mom, Dad and me there was my Mom's elderly mother (my grandmother) and my tragically widowed sister and her 4 year old son. My Mom was the CEO and chief engineer of this house and with her gone, we needed help.

We were fortunate to find Rhoda, a wonderful young black lady, who was with us for the next 5 years. She cooked, did the washing and ironing, and cleaning plus whatever else came up. She looked after my nephew while his Mom worked and also my grandmother. One of my great memories is Rhoda sitting with my grandmother in her room and singing hymns with her. And importantly for me, she was always there for me.

Rhoda had 3 sons and in the summer she would sometimes bring them to work with her. We would play games together, have a picnic lunch in the yard, and I would often read to them. They were like my little brothers. Sometimes I would take them to town to buy candy, bubble gum, and snacks. One day I vividly remember to this day, I had taken them to buy ice cream. In the store, the ice cream freezer was a box that you leaned into to get the ice cream. I was lifting the youngest up so they could choose what they wanted. There were 3 men (old codgers) sitting on Coca Cola crates around the potbelly stove (even in the summer). While I was picking one of the boys up, one of them said in a very loud voice, "Since when did that Allen boy get to be such a N----- lover?" (These are words I would be called again as I sat at a lunch counter 9 years later.) At first, I was devastated and perhaps embarrassed, but then I became angry. That man had disrespected my friends and their mother. I wanted to go over and kick his Coca Cola crate out from under him – but I didn't. I quietly paid for our ice cream and left the store. Walking home I told the boys I was sorry for what that man said. The oldest one replied, "Don't worry, I've heard it before"

This is the first time I can recall experiencing racism, and it made me angry then and still does!

Rhoda stayed with us until my Mom had totally recovered, my grandmother had passed away and my sister was in the process of remarrying. She was a very special person for me and was there for me at a very fragile time in my life.

As I sat at that lunch counter in 1960, the words that came over and over silently from my lips were, "Rhoda, this is for you. Rhoda, this is for you....."

N—— lover. Those were the words directed at me in 1951 when I was lifting a young man up to pick out his ice cream. N—— lover. Those were the words I heard in 1960 as I sat at the Woolworth lunch counter. Just maybe the N word should be Neighbor. Certainly the young man was my friend—my neighbor. The Winston-Salem State students sitting on either side of me were my neighbors. The second commandment is love your neighbor as yourself N—— lover. Neighbor lover. The N word is my neighbor no matter what derisive word one chooses to label another person.

Conclusion.

A number of years ago, my friend Pat and his father watched a documentary on television about the civil rights movement in the 1960s. It had footage of the attack dogs that were loosed on demonstrators, the water cannons which tried to break up protests, and the lynchings of black people. It was a very sobering film. At the end of watching the documentary, Pat's father, who was now an old man, reflected on that difficult time and how black people had been discriminated against in such awful ways for so many years in the history of our country. He turned to his son and said, "Where was I? All this was going on in our country, and I just looked the other way. Where was I?"

Friends, I don't want to look back with regret over the course of my life when I get to the end of it and wonder, "Where was I?" Instead, I want to roll up my sleeves and get involved and try to do something about the injustice that exists in our world. I want to love my neighbor as myself, and I want to work to correct what is wrong in this world, like the Good Samaritan did on the dangerous road to Jericho. I want to be able to look Jesus in the eye when my life is done and say, "Lord, I did what I could. It wasn't much, but I tried." It won't be easy, and this is very difficult work. But it's the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and He invites us to join Him.

What do you say? Will you join me as we follow Christ together on His mission of love to bring reconciliation and justice to the racial divide that exists in our city and in our world? Will you make a commitment that in the next week you will learn more about the difficulty people of color have living in this country and in our community, and will you take a step toward a person of a different race and seek to love them as you love yourself. We've got some resources for you if you want to take the next step, and they are available at the Welcome Centers of our church.

If God's people unite, if people of peace will come together and stand against hatred and contempt, we can change our community, and we can change the world. I really believe it. Do you? If so, let's start today. Amen.

¹ Timothy Dalrymple, "On Court Prophets and Wilderness Prophets," July 19, 2019. Online editorial for *Christianity Today*. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/july-web-only/prophets-trump-nathan-david-john-baptist.html>

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail."