

“JUSTICE, OR JUST US?”
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-40
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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One of the reasons you and I worship on Sundays is to experience the peace of God in the midst of unpeaceful times. But try as we may, it is impossible to escape the sound of discord that rings constantly in our ears.

An editorial cartoon in Friday’s newspaper showed a pollster questioning a woman at her front door. He asks her, “Ma’am, if the election was held today, which neighborhood yard signs would you kick over in a fit of rage?” He was referring, of course, to the current presidential race and the bitter conflict it has stirred up between people of opposing political persuasions. Americans have always disagreed about public issues and have expressed their disagreement at the ballot box. But never in my memory have people been so disagreeable in their disagreement. Never has so much animosity been expressed toward those on the other side of the political spectrum. Never has there been such extreme partisanship and polarization among the American people.

The times we are living in have been referred to as “apocalyptic” – a biblical term referring to a decisive conflict between good and evil at the end of history. No one would dispute that we are living in such a time of conflict today. But in our Christian New Testament, the word “apocalyptic” literally means “disclosing” or “unveiling.” An apocalyptic time is a time when falsehoods are exposed and truth is revealed. We are living in an apocalyptic time today because the supposed unity of the United States is being exposed as a myth, and what is being revealed are the deep fault lines that divide us – red versus blue, white versus black, the privileged versus the disenfranchised, pro-life versus pro-choice, big government versus small government – and on and on it goes in an endless catalog of differences and divisions.

One issue dividing Americans should be of special note to people of biblical faith – namely, the challenge of providing not only liberty, but “justice for all.” Justice is a big word in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The God of the Bible is a God who executes justice and demands that God’s people practice justice in the treatment of their neighbors. But the question remains: how? How are we to do justice in a way that is honoring to God and helpful to other people?

The fact is that sincere, committed Christians disagree about what justice even looks like and about the right methods for achieving justice. Some persons of faith equate justice with “law and order.” They say that a society can only be just if it holds accountable those who do violence, thereby ensuring peace and safety for law-abiding citizens. Other persons of faith define justice as providing a level playing field for all people, especially for those who occupy a lower status in society. Doing justice means taking corrective measures to ensure equal rights and equal opportunities for those who suffer inequality.

Now comes the hard part. Most of the discussion about justice today has specifically to do with racial justice – or the absence of it. In recent months we’ve witnessed the killing of black people by careless or callous police officers. These incidents have touched off a time of racial reckoning like we haven’t seen since the 1960’s.

Nearly all Americans agree that violence against people of color is abhorrent and has no place in a society that claims to be free and fair. But beyond that common conviction, Americans disagree dramatically about the state of race relations in our country. On the one hand, some say that the problem is being exaggerated, that minority groups have made great advancements and race relations have vastly improved over the past several decades. Many whites decry the excesses they perceive in the fight for racial justice. They concur that black lives matter, but they assert that white lives matter, too. On the other hand, some insist that racism is America's original sin, and that in spite of our efforts to atone for this sin by ending slavery and segregation, the sin persists in the form of ongoing discrimination toward people of color. These folks claim that racism in America is "systemic," that it pervades our institutions as well as our hearts. They believe that some of America's leaders are making matters worse either by denying that the problem exists or by enflaming it with heated rhetoric.

In sum, this is an apocalyptic time in race relations, as it is on so many other issues. The fault lines of division are being clearly exposed – yes, even at the corner of Main and Church Streets in Woodbury, Connecticut. Several members of our congregation have participated in the recent demonstrations against racial injustice held across the street on the North Green and also at the major crossroads in Southbury. At the same time, several of our members vigorously opposed the appearance of message signs about racism on our church lawn, arguing that they were too political and sent the wrong message from our community of faith. So even within the Church, even among those who are deeply committed to following Jesus Christ, racial justice looks differently to different people.

Over the past few days, I've sought guidance on how to speak and lead as a pastor on this sensitive matter. I participated in a three-part webinar entitled "Justice, Love, and Humility," sponsored by Amplify Media, an online resource for United Methodists. I'm going to summarize the insights I gleaned from that event and share three conclusions I reached.

Conclusion Number One: Racism is not just "fake news" or a political battlecry; it is a real problem. It seems to be in our human DNA to look with suspicion at people who are different from us and to treat them differently. Racism rears its head throughout the Bible in the form of tribal warfare – Hebrews versus Canaanites; and also in the form of religious exclusion – Jews versus Gentiles. America was founded on the noble ideal of "liberty and justice for all"; but for centuries, large groups of people were denied the full benefits of that ideal, simply because of their gender or color. Today, the playing field may be more level than ever before, but African-Americans still find themselves on a downward slope looking up. They feel unappreciated and unsafe in midst of a white majority. Racism is not the figment of black imagination; it is a real problem.

Conclusion Number Two: we, the white Christians of America, are a part of the problem. The speakers in the webinar I attended all shared a common view with which I must sadly agree: the Church has been complicit in the racism that pervades America as a whole. Instead of being counter-cultural like the 1st Century Christians were, in many ways we simply endorsed the culture around us. Instead of creating communities that were open to all people, we created communities that were selective and segregated. And, by and large, we did this to protect our own interests. Most white churches took the path of least resistance, avoiding controversy and change because we were afraid of losing members, money, and power. When racial injustice could no longer be denied or ignored, we remained silent, not wanting to stir up further trouble, especially for

ourselves. We remained not only silent but siloed, sealed off from those who had different experiences and convictions. At times we have escaped our silos to perform individual acts of charity for those on the other side of the tracks, but we have not been attentive to the need for justice in society as a whole. The conclusion is inescapable: the Church's track record with regard to racism has been spotty at best and shameful at worst.

Thankfully, the analysis of the webinar speakers did not stop there, and neither does mine. So here is my Conclusion Number Three: yes, the Church has been a part of the problem of racial injustice, but it can also be a part of the solution. It's not too late for us to change course and help to dismantle racism in our society.

I heard a term in this webinar that I had never heard before – the term “historical hope.” One of the speakers pointed to the fact that Americans have been deeply divided on other occasions in the past – for example, during the Civil War and the Great Depression – and we got through those periods and emerged stronger and more unified than ever before. Christians have an even greater source of historical hope. Our New Testament describes a time when Jews and Gentiles swallowed their pride, transcended their differences, and became one body in Jesus Christ. The Church has not always lived up to this ideal, but it does have real-life experience in overcoming prejudice and promoting justice. We've done it before and we can do it again!

To advocate for justice today, you and I need to overcome our reticence to speak out about the wrongs we see inflicted on our fellow human beings. In the past, we often justified our silence by the claim that the Church should not be involved in politics. Now, it's true that the Jesus we meet in the Gospels is not a politician; he doesn't align himself with a political party; he doesn't proclaim a political platform in shades of red or blue; least of all does he try to overthrow Rome and establish himself as emperor. But Jesus does speak out repeatedly on behalf of the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed; he does speak out against those who wield power in oppressive ways; and, make no mistake about it, this kind of talk places him squarely in the middle of a political discussion. His message is a direct challenge to the political majority in both Judaism and the Roman Empire, who hold that some people are better than others and that those “others” deserve to be treated with disdain and abuse.

Above all, Jesus reaffirms the central tenets of biblical faith. In today's Gospel lesson, one of the Pharisees asks Jesus to sift through all the requirements of the law and identify the greatest commandment. He replies by giving them two commandments for the price of one: love God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Notice: Jesus make the two commandments inseparable; love for God is authentic if and only if it is expressed in love for our neighbors. And who are our neighbors? Well, according to Jesus, our neighbors are not just those in our own zip code or economic class; not just those with our skin color or social breeding; and most shockingly, not just those in our own religious group. Our neighbors are all of God's children, both near and far, and especially those who get disowned as God's children, those who are victims of prejudice and discrimination.

The second part of the Great Commandment raises a crucial question about the Church's agenda today: Is it about justice or just us? You and I readily cry out for justice when our own little hot dog stand is threatened. When our rights and privileges are being challenged, we are quick to protest. But justice is not about just us. It is also about taking up the cause of others who get slighted; it is about being fair and equitable to all people. We are to love our neighbors as we

love ourselves. You and I must embrace this agenda if we are serious about being good citizens in both the kingdom of God and the republic of America. There is nothing we could do that is more Christian or patriotic than to end racism. To work for racial justice is not about being a Democrat or a Republican; it is about being faithful to the ideals of our spiritual and national founders, to the values enshrined in both the Bible and the Constitution.

Now, I'll grant you that dismantling racism seems like an overwhelming task. When you and I grasp the scope and depth of the problem, we may feel that our voice and our vote can make little difference. But we can at least start by holding ourselves accountable, by admitting the biases that still linger in our own hearts and surrendering them to God for cleansing and transformation. And, we can try to influence others in our everyday settings to help create a more just and loving society. You and I may not have the ear of politicians in Hartford or Washington, but we do have the ear of our family members and friends.

During one of the webinars I attended, I heard the story of a man who was having a conversation with a group of co-workers in his office. One of his colleagues started to tell a joke that was clearly headed in a racist direction. The man interrupted the joke-teller by saying, "I'm not comfortable with where this is going, and I don't think this kind of talk is appropriate here in our workplace or anywhere else for that matter." And do you know what happened? His colleague stopped telling the joke. The man later realized that what he had done was to "interrupt racism." He didn't call his friend a racist and start an ugly argument. He simply took a stand that put an end to one small expression of a much larger problem.

Friends, you and I live in a racially divided nation. We are part of a Church that has differing views of racial justice. I believe we can hold a space for multiple understandings without holding a space for harm. We can love others and meet them where they are and still hold our values and give voice to them. God help us to be faithful.