

“Did You See Their Faces?”

Romans 7:4-6 and 1 Corinthians 6:19

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In our Lenten sermon series, we are addressing how the gospel puts light on social justice issues, but we are working to approach these issues theologically, not by way of the pre-cooked viewpoints and talking points of MSNBC, Fox News, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*, which seem to dominate the way we talk about these hard things. Today, we take up race. But, if we take away those pre-cooked categories, we need a way to bring the gospel to this hard, painful place in our society. We need a place to stand. And we begin with this: together we are the Body of Christ. That is our identity, our comfort, and our challenge. What can it mean for us to address hard issues of race and racism while saying, “Together, we are the Body of Christ”?

Romans 7:4-6: “In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.”

1 Corinthians 6:19: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”

This is the haunting refrain in a poem by Claudia Rankine:

Call out to them.
I don’t see them.
Call out anyway.
Did you see their faces?¹

As a review of Rankine’s work noted, the challenge of making racism relevant, or even evident, to those who do not bear the brunt of its ill effects is tricky. She pushes poetry’s forms to disarm readers and circumvent our carefully constructed defense mechanisms against the hint of possibly being racist ourselves, all while revealing her important truth: what passes as news for some (white) readers is simply lived experience for (black) others.² An incident in a drugstore in which a man inadvertently cuts the line because he did not see the narrator flows into a haunting meditation on Hurricane Katrina that ends with the following lines of dialogue:

Call out to them.
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For the last 10 days, I've been asking people I know and some I barely know... about racism. The most prevalent comments: Racism is bad. Racism is complicated. Racism is painful. Racism is horrible...and inescapable. Racism is better than it used to be. Racism is as bad as ever. Someone who is black asked, "Are you white folks asking this because of so-called Black History Month?" One white person said, "Are we still having to talk about racism. Can't we move on?" And finally, as more than one of you has said this week, "We seem so *stuck* confronting issues of race." When it comes to race and racism, it really does depend on where we stand on how we experience "racism."

Just so, many white Americans tend to see the problem of racism as unfortunate incidents based on individual circumstances. Black Americans see a system in which their black lives matter less than white lives.³ And I know that "race" is far bigger than black-white. But for today, that's the place we are going to start.) And then there are the things we do know, or at least things our scholars and surveys tell us:

- * Two scholars sent out fictitious résumés, responding to job ads. Each résumé was given a name that either sounded stereotypically African-American or one that sounded white, but the résumés were otherwise basically the same. The study found that a résumé with a name like Emily or Greg received 50 percent more callbacks than the same resume with a name like Lakisha or Jamal. Having a white-sounding name was as beneficial as eight years' work experience.⁴

- * That's interesting, considering that a 2011 study by scholars at Harvard and Tufts, that found that whites, on average, believed that anti-white racism was a bigger problem than anti-black racism

- * The net worth of the average black household in the United States is \$6,000, compared with \$110,000 for the average white household. The United States now has a greater wealth gap by race than South Africa did during apartheid.

- * The black-white income gap is roughly 40 percent greater today than in 1967.

- * A black boy born today in the United States has a life expectancy five years shorter than that of a white boy.

- * Black students are significantly less likely to attend schools offering advanced math and science courses than white students. They are three times as likely to be suspended and expelled, setting them up for educational failure.

- * Black men in their 20s without a high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated today than employed. Nearly 70 percent of middle-aged black men who never graduated from high school have been imprisoned.⁵

To all of us who think the good intentions of good people make a difference in regard to racism, here are two more:

- * Police arrest blacks at 3.7 times the rate of whites for marijuana possession, even though surveys find that both use marijuana at roughly similar rates.

- * Scholars have found that blacks and Hispanics treated by doctors for a broken leg received pain medication significantly *less* often than white patients with the same injury.⁶

Enough? I'm not sure knowing this can *ever* be enough for me. It is a world I can scarcely imagine. I want to tell you—even in the face of this—of my good intentions in regard to race. How exactly do my good intentions alone go up against all that? "Did you see their faces?"⁷

What faces do we see? Often, we can have good intentions but end up talking in such a way that seems to suggest that black people know what race is in a way white people don't, as if somehow black people have race while white people don't, because white people represent some kind of primeval default setting from which other races differ in varying degrees? But of course that's nonsense. Race is something everyone has, and it's a significant part of anyone's identity because it's not subject to change.

There are also times in our good intentions we downplay, as Sam Wells reminds us, the historic injustice and present imbalance in the relation of black and white in this country by setting it in a wider context of the assimilation of a host of races and nationalities into this nation's culture, or even going wider and looking to the mutual hospitality, understanding, and appreciation of many kinds of difference ranging across class to disability to sexual orientation, all under the general label of diversity. In this spirit, it has sometimes been said that Martin Luther King died and rose again as a white liberal, because his legacy has somehow been hitched to a multitude of causes about which he expressed no public view.⁸

But some time this week, go to a dictionary—online or otherwise. Listen to this entry under *Black*: “Black commonly represents lack, evil, darkness, bad luck, crime, mystery, silence, concealment, elegance, execution, end, chaos, death, secrecy. Black magic is a destructive or evil form of magic, often connected with death. Evil witches are stereotypically dressed in black.” And then click across and listen to this entry on *White*: “White commonly represents purity, snow, ice, peace, life, death, nothing, frost, good, air. White is the color worn by brides at weddings. Angels are typically depicted as clothed in white robes. Someone who is whiter than white is completely good and honest and never does anything bad.” The characterization of pale skin as white and pure and those of dark brown skin as black and therefore frightening runs so deep in our culture that it still permeates an online dictionary in 2015.

Black persons in the English-speaking world, even in the unlikely event that they've never been racially abused, discriminated against, excluded, or humiliated, still pick up any dictionary and find the weight of culture as a burden on their shoulders and the incline of social standing set to permanently uphill. But we're gathered in worship this morning—gathered as Christians, and so together we ask, “What is the question of race really about?” We can't be content with sociological answers. We want theological answers. What's the problem? In what ways does Jesus address the problem? How does the church witness to the way Jesus has addressed the problem?

Paul, writing to an early church, asked a very penetrating question: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” What does it mean to be the Body of Christ? That's more than membership. It's more than affiliation. It's much more than like minded people binding together. It's so much more than the collection of our good intentions. We understand ourselves to be before God and responsible to God. That is our identity that comes before all other important identities. It comes before race; it comes before nation; it comes before family; it comes before job, church, school, or anything else.

Our forbearer, John Calvin, contemplating the verse “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that

you are not your own?” wrote: “We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will therefore sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for God and die for God. We are God’s: let God’s wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward God as our only lawful goal.”

Five hundred years after Calvin, that still means that our lives may be ordered by commitments to many different things: wealth, power, reputation, sex, nation, church, tribe, race, or ethnic group. But we are not meant only for these things. Our belonging to God must serve and order all those other loyalties, and under God’s guidance this will mean what any call of God means—at times we must sacrifice our wants for God’s vision; we must give up our rights for God’s ways; we must set down our loyalties for God’s promises. God wants us together—all of us—in the Body of Christ. Period. We must do anything—and everything—to follow God there. Human life is well ordered when it is oriented toward the larger reality of God and God’s glory.⁹

We get to glimpse the glory of God not through judging skin color, not through holding on to what we need, not by protecting “our rights.” We glimpse God’s glory when we live the truth: together we are the Body of Christ. There may be no more counter-cultural statement than that. Together we are the Body of Christ means that we are *not* our own. That yes, we have our own gifts, our own perspectives, our own convictions, our own histories, our own ethnicity, our own skin color, but even with all that, our chief identity is that we belong to God. We are not our own. It means what Dorothy Day once said, “Whenever I groan within myself and think how hard it is to keep writing about love in these times of tension and strife which may, at any moment, become for us all a time of terror, I think to myself: What else is the world interested in? What else do we all want, each one of us, except to love and be loved, in our families, in our work—in all our relationships? God is love. Love casts out fear. Even the most ardent revolutionist, seeking to change the world, is trying to make a world where it is easier for people to love, to stand in that relationship to each other.”¹⁰

Racial reconciliation isn’t something that any of us can delegate to anyone else. It’s something we each have to embark on for ourselves. And we have to do it individually, but also together—as the Body of Christ. For a long while our good intentions have had us speaking the language of rights and access and entitlement. That’s important, but it can’t achieve the change that really matters. It’s only when the language of rights and access and entitlement are transformed into the realities of understanding and vulnerability and trust that the dividing wall of racism can possibly begin to come down. This is hard journey. We can’t do it by ourselves. We can’t do it if we think we belong only to ourselves or our tribe. Together, we are the Body of Christ—that is an imperative. That is a call to all our life.

Do you not know that you are not your own?

Call out to them.
I don’t see them.
Call out anyway.
Did you see their faces?

Notes

- 1 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, 2014).
- 2 Holy Bass, “How It Feels to Be Black in America,” a review of *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine, *The New York Times*, December 28, 2014.
- 3 Jim Wallis, “A Pastoral Letter to White Americans,” *Sojo.net*, December 11, 2014.
- 4 Nicholas Kristof, “Straight Talk for White Men,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2014.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Nicholas Kristof, “Is Everyone a Little Bit Racist?” *The New York Times*, August 28, 2014.
- 7 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, 2014).
- 8 Sam Wells, “You Are Not Your Own,” preached at Duke Chapel on January 18, 2009. This sermon owes a huge debt to Wells’ sermon and his other sermons and writings on this topic.
- 9 Douglas Ottati, *Feasting on the Word*—Year B, Volume 1: “Advent through Transfiguration, Theological Perspective on 1 Corinthians 6:12-20.”
- 10 “Daily Dig for February 22” from Plough.com.