
Racism - we need to talk - we need to listen
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 1:17-27 and Matthew 23:23-28, 37-38

As some of you know I am currently writing a book that takes a scientific approach to understanding Christianity as a spring-board for creating a vision of Christianity that is more meaningful in society today. The first part of the book begins by outlining the scientific concept of “first principles” with applications for physics, but also for Christianity, and for society in general. The second part of the book creates 5 first principles that I argue Christianity needs to live up to in order to be relevant today. The third part of the book is about how to use those principles to re-imagine Christianity in ways that more helpfully deal with real social issues. That part includes chapters on Climate Justice, Food Security, wealth, war, and racism. The basic project is to re-imagine Christianity in a way that can truly impact those important social issues, because if Christianity cannot address our most pressing ethical issues, then perhaps it is no longer relevant. And I believe that Christianity can be made to be more relevant. I have learned a few things while writing this book off and on over the past 2 years.

One thing I have learned is that it is very hard to talk about racism in a way that feels like we are moving the conversation forward. I mean, it’s easy to spout off a bunch of platitudes. It’s easy to make white people feel bad. It’s easy to throw around quotes like the one we read from James today, “If you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors”. There. Problem solved, right? Well, no. It’s actually difficult to say something truly helpful. I mean, I could tell you that racism is wrong. But you would all simply nod in agreement. Trying to explain *why* racism is wrong doesn’t seem to help either. If you agree with me that we are all children of God, then I’m not putting anything new on the table. And if you disagree, I’m sure you’ve already stopped listening. How do we move forward with a conversation about racism?

But today, we have one particular advantage. And that is that we are all touched by racism today. With all the news being about riots in the US started by the murder of

George Perry Floyd, an unarmed black person by police in Minneapolis - well, that plus hundreds of years of treating black people as if they were inferior. The point is that we are all involved here. Perhaps you have your own direct experiences of racism and you connect to the news in that way. Or perhaps you consider yourself colour-blind and you would like to think this has nothing to do with you. But today - whoever you are, we are all concerned about the issues - both the racial issues and the rioting issues by something we all have in common. How many of us have seen footage of what's happening and felt fear? All of us. Perhaps fear because of friends and loved ones living there. Perhaps fear that riots might come to Canada. Perhaps fear that Canada struggles with it's own racism against black people, indigenous people, and in fact many other groups. Perhaps fear that we don't know how to solve these problems. My sense is that today we are all impacted by this situation through a common feeling: fear.

But if our common experience today is fear - then ok, let's start with that. Perhaps acknowledging our collective fear can take us somewhere. Perhaps our collective fear can be used to move us forward in the conversation around racism.

Back in February, I preached around healing. And I shared the idea that although people and external forces can make us angry in an instant, that anger only lasts a short time - less than 90 seconds. If someone makes you angry, you have no choice but to be angry. But if you are still angry 90 seconds later, you have chosen to stay angry because the residual anger is in fact your own baggage. I'm delighted how many of you seemed to appreciate that message. Well here comes part 2. Anger - even though it is a familiar emotion - is usually a secondary emotion, meaning that most of the time, we are not externally stimulated by anger, we are stimulated by other emotions and we convert those other emotions into anger.

Sounds crazy, right? Why would someone choose to make themselves angry? I don't know if you've ever experienced this yourself, but sometimes, other people upset us. Sometimes we get upset because people do or say something that reminds us of our own faults, our own impotence, our own insecurities, our own limitations. And when that happens, one very natural way to react is with anger. Because in our society, anger looks strong. We often think of angry people as in control and strong, believing that nobody

gets the best of them. Which is funny really. Because if someone is hiding from their true emotions, that's not a sign of strength, it's a sign of weakness.

At [psychologytoday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com) Leon Seltzer said, "It's by now generally agreed upon that anger is almost never a primary emotion. Underlying it ... are such core hurts as feeling disregarded, unimportant, accused, guilty, untrustworthy, devalued, rejected, powerless, and unlovable. And these feelings are capable of engendering considerable emotional pain. It's therefore understandable that so many of us might go to great lengths to find ways of distancing ourselves from them."¹

I hope you noticed that I slid from talking about fear to talking about anger. And that's because the most common trap we fall into is that something happens that generates fear in us, and we respond with "tough guy" anger. Dealing with anger properly requires that we can see the painful emotion that is driving our anger. And often, that painful emotion will be some form of fear. And for bonus points, we need to not just recognize *that* we feel fear, but reflect on what it is that we are afraid of. We need to be able to name our own pain. Because that's where we find our own healing. That's the only healthy way to deal with anger.

Healthy approaches to anger are hard to come by in the Bible. Anger, yes. But dealing with anger in healthy ways, not so much.

[slide: wwjd] Of course, I just can't resist sharing this image with you. When you ask "What would Jesus do?" remember that flipping tables and chasing people with a whip are within the realm of possibilities.

But we do have the story we just read from Matthew, where Jesus lambastes the Jewish leaders for pushing religious traditions while ignoring the deeper meanings of those traditions. And then after his outburst (perhaps 90 seconds later) Jesus expresses his underlying emotions - sadness and fear - sadness and fear because the people of Jerusalem just never listen to God and always kill the prophets that God sends to Jerusalem for the good of the people. Read that way, it's a great story about Jesus feeling fear, responding in anger, and later on reflecting on his feeling of fear that was actually

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201306/anger-how-we-transfer-feelings-guilt-hurt-and-fear>

driving his anger in the first place. That's a story of dealing with anger in a healthy way.

Earlier I claimed - with no proof - that we all feel a certain amount of fear right now. But in that fear, I include any fear that we have already converted to anger. Perhaps some of you felt fear at something you saw on the news and have already converted that to anger at the government, or the looters, or to black people? Perhaps some of you are angry that I'm even talking about this today. But I will suggest that the underlying emotion for all of us is fear.

Last September, I participated in a book discussion group in Scarborough. We discussed the book "Biased", written by Dr. Jennifer Eberhardt.

[slide: book 'biased'] The book discusses hidden prejudices that shape our societies. Eberhardt used scientific methods to measure the brain's responses to different social situations, and determined that it is inherent to the human condition - within our DNA in fact - that we are biased to favour people who look like we do. It has been scientifically proven using Cat-scans and other technologies, combined with social simulators, that we more easily recognize people who look like we do, but have to work a lot harder to recognize people who look different. According to her research, because we are human beings, we have instant knee-jerk reactions to people who look different from us. This leads to profound effects on our societies, and is visible on our streets, in our jails, and in other places. It impacts people's ability to find housing, secure employment for positions for which they are well-qualified, and creates other barriers. Moreover According to Eberhardt's research, most North Americans - including black people - have a knee-jerk reaction that associates black people with crime, theft, and violence.

Racism is deeply embedded in Canadian society, and it can be eliminated, but only over time, at the speed that society evolves. And as we know, society does not always trend towards reducing racism. The human condition dictates that we need to have a knee-jerk reaction to the other in our midst. But of course, we can decide what to do after the knee-jerk.

Don't believe me? I have another story. The story starts like this. My name is Paul Shepherd, and I suffer from racial bias. Last summer I was walking over to the Woodbine Mall, near Martin Grove United Church, where I was in ministry. I was going to hang out

at the mall, work on a sermon, and speak with anyone I could tease into conversation while I was there, something I did on a regular basis. I was preparing to preach on the Lord's Prayer, and that was percolating through my mind as I made the 30 minute walk to the mall. It was mid-day, the sun was shining brightly, it was a beautiful day. I was walking along the Humber River path, just coming up to Highway 27 when I noticed a large black man sitting under the overpass. And for a very brief instant - I felt fear. My knee-jerk reaction was to feel fear. For no rational reason whatsoever, I felt fear because my subconscious connected the sight of a physically intimidating black man with crime, theft, and violence. In broad daylight. In Toronto the good.

I do not enjoy telling you that story, however I am happy to tell you that although I have knee-jerk reactions all the time, they are short-lived. Often in less than a few seconds I recognize a knee-jerk for what it is, and then my brain takes over and I respond rationally. So I can confirm that Dr. Eberhardt's theory is correct. We are wired to have knee-jerk reactions to people who look different, and that causes us - as a society, as a church, and as individuals - to react to the other in our midst.

And I suppose I should tell you the end of the story too. When I approached the man, I gave him a friendly greeting and he responded with a massive smile. Then he told me he was having a great day, enjoying the river and reading his Bible. Some threat, eh?

According to Dr. Eberhardt, and our own hearts if we listen carefully, those type of knee-jerk reactions happen to all of us, all the time. And the stories don't always have such happy endings.

[slide: racism]

I would love to tell you that Christianity and the Bible are great resources for fighting racism. But the sad reality is that racism is woven into the fabric of Christianity. Racism (and slavery) are woven into the Bible, and they are woven into our history. One of the threads that runs through the Bible is the idea that God has "chosen people", which has often been interpreted as an endorsement of racism. There are groups - both Christian groups and Jewish groups, who claim to be better than you based on that childish idea. Fortunately, not all Christians or all Jews believe that. But what the Old Testament calls "chosen", and both testaments call "the elect" has been used as justification for racism

and slavery for ... ever. And the idea is simply wrong. This is one of the reasons I'm writing that book I discussed earlier. As Christians, we can do better. We must do better.

Seeing someone as inferior is an attempt to dehumanize the other. But recognizing the humanity of others is part of the human condition. So you cannot dehumanize the other unless you first dehumanize yourself. Eliminating racism is not just about helping victims. Eliminating racism is a win-win for everyone because it humanizes everyone. Jesus said, "love everyone, including your enemies". We just have to actually do it.

Today, we all feel a mix of fear and perhaps anger around both racism and rioting. We have our own knee-jerk reactions to what is happening today. But we are invited to see beyond our own knee-jerk reactions. We are invited to name our fears for what they are instead of pretending they don't exist or projecting them into anger. We are invited to speak our own story. And if we all speak our own story, and if we all listen deeply, perhaps we can move forward with a conversation on racism.

I look forward to hearing your stories over coffee today and in the weeks to come.
Amen.