

Chuck Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor
First Christian Church
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“Here We Receive New Life”

4. In The Relationship Between the Races

Acts 11:1-18a 11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3 saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" 4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. 6 As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' 10 This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11 At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12 The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; 14 he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" 18 When they heard this, they were silenced.

One of my hobbies, as many of you know, is travel. I enjoy flying, I enjoy discovering creative ways to both accrue and spend frequent flyer and frequent hotel miles and points. But I am an utter amateur compared to some folks I've become acquainted with through an internet travel bulletin board I've been a part of for the last 15 years. There are many folks on that board who have discovered that you can “churn,” as the word for it goes, credit card applications which have points or miles sign-up bonuses. Some of these folks have complicated spreadsheets by which they track

when they opened and when they should close this or that credit card, and talk about “limiting” themselves to no more than eight new credit cards per month. Why such incredible effort? Well, virtually all of these folks talk about how amassing such points and miles allows them to do what they call “aspirational trips.” “Aspirational,” from the word “aspire,” meaning that they collect all these points and miles because they **aspire** to be able to cheaply travel to places that they could only otherwise dream about – like Hawaii or Fiji or Tahiti. These folks positively love to write about all the “aspirational trips” they’ve been able to do via credit card churning.

The New Testament also has an aspirational theme in it. It’s best stated in Paul’s famous words (Ephesians 3:28): *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male and female, **for all are one in Christ Jesus.**”* But we need to be very clear here: from God’s point of view, this statement is indeed a reality. That is, the God whom we worship bears unconditional love to each and all. Period. No one gets more love or less love because of who he or she is. God’s love knows no distinctions. But from the **human** perspective, Paul’s words indeed remain an aspiration, are not yet a reality. Why? Well, we human beings are imperfect. We have our prejudices and preconceptions that affect how we treat and view others, oftentimes even when we don’t intend to. In our scripture today, Peter is attempting to explain his decision to go to pagans, gentiles, those “others,” whom all of his prejudices and presumptions told him were not worthy of his time or his love. Like the non-kosher food that God told Peter to eat as a way of preparing him for his mission to these folks, he had always thought of both such food and “those people” as, in the words of my wife Barbara’s wonderful sermon on this story which she has preached here in the past,

“ooh nasty!” But God told him otherwise. God told him that from God’s point of view, there was no distinction between those Gentiles and him, and he then explicitly told Peter to make that his own aspiration as well. It has not been true here on earth, but now God is telling Peter to help make it true. He is to aspire to such a vision in all his work from then on, and, as the story says “not to make a distinction between them and us.”

What does all of this have to do with the topic of this morning’s sermon, the latest in our Easter sermon series about how Easter’s good news can offer us new life? There is no question that the topic of “new life in the relationship between the races” is a fraught and freighted topic, isn’t it? And yet, the topic of the relationship between racial groups in America has been on every mind and heart and the focus of many a conversation, newscast, blog and Facebook post for many many months now. And surely we don’t want to say that we can’t talk about in church what is being talked about all around us! No, what better place to try to address the hard things of our life together than in church. So with that in mind, I want to say but a few things this morning on the topic of the relationship between the races in America and how Easter’s good news can bring new life to those relationships. I am also utterly aware that neither I nor anyone can ever say everything that needs to be said on this subject, especially in fifteen minutes, but that is not an excuse for not saying anything.

The first thing I want to say is that I believe that the prerequisite for us as a people for ever beginning to be able to achieve the equality that Paul describes, to ever truly work on aspiring to it, is for those of us who are white to realize and acknowledge that the reality of life in America is just different and often more harsh for persons of

color. It just is. But too often folks who usually quite freely grant to others that they may have superior knowledge of their fields don't do so when the topic is that of race. Back in the day when I was an active private pilot, I remember one conversation with someone that was just maddening. It was a very marginal day weather-wise and the person I was talking to simply would not acknowledge that I knew what I was talking about when I told him the weather was too iffy for me to take him on the flight that I had promised. He insisted that he "knew" that flying in such weather was no different than driving in it. He also had shown up with two friends and wanted them to go up too. And while the plane was a four-seater, he along with his friends were, how shall I say it, persons of girth and I knew that taking them – and after all, I'm not exactly slim either – would not be possible and would dangerously overload the plane. But he kept annoyingly insisting that it would be "no problem," even though he had absolutely no basis whatsoever for his opinion. As the old saying goes, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but they're not entitled to their own facts." I know that everyone in this room also has certain skills and talents and it is puzzling and off-putting, isn't it, when people don't acknowledge your skill and experience in your very own field and act like they know more than you do even when they clearly don't.

Let me gently say that it is the same for the perspectives of white folks versus those of persons of color. I will tell you this because I know that he has told some of you this as well: our Ministerial Intern, Darryl, has more than once been stopped and frisked while out walking. And my friends, that just doesn't happen in the same way at anything like the same rate to those who are not African-American. As with my non-pilot friend, why then would we be defensive or incredulous about hearing from our

African-American brothers and sisters of their experience in this way? Why would we disrespect them in that way? We simply don't have the experiences that they have had. It is simply indisputably the case that African-Americans are several times more likely to be followed in department stores, to be stopped for traffic violations, and to be sentenced to longer sentences for the same crime. Our brother Darryl will tell you that this sort of thing is indeed first-hand experience, and, again, why would we not believe him or countless other persons of color who will echo these things from their experience? To deny the truth of it is simply disrespectful and does not allow us to truly begin to aspire to the kind of equality that Paul describes. To admit and acknowledge that Paul's vision of "no distinction" remains un-achieved because of fundamental differences in the way that whites and blacks are treated is the first step towards aspiring, indeed, to something different, something better, something more like what God intends and wants.

I also believe that acknowledging such truth will also allow us to understand – without unnecessary politicizing or defensive or harsh language – the truth behind the Black Lives Matter movement. In the 1850s, you could find all over New York City and Boston signs in stores and restaurants and bars that said "Irish Are Not Welcome," and there are stories of police brutality towards Irish folks that are hair-raising. In late 19th century Hawaii and through the 1920s in California you could find signs in public places that said "No Japanese or Chinese (although the words on these signs were actually slur words not fit for the pulpit), and laws forbade Japanese- and Chinese-Americans from owning property or even, in some cases, going to public school. During World War I, the same signs appeared but this time said "No Germans Welcome" and

German-Americans too often found themselves the brunt police brutality and mob fury. From the end of World War II until at least the late 1960s, government agencies and business colluded to keep African-Americans out of certain neighborhoods and imposed mortgage practices which almost assured that many families in certain areas would never be able to own their homes free and clear.¹ Unfortunately and tragically and awfully, it seems that in every era of American life there have been those whose lives mattered less than others due to custom, law, and practice. Do “all lives matter”? Absolutely. Is it the case in certain eras some lives are more threatened than others? Also absolutely. The best analogy I have seen is the cartoon depicting two homes, one on fire, and those gathered around saying “We can’t put out the one that’s on fire, because all houses matter.” Well, of course they do. But one house is on fire and in that moment it is the one that needs our attention if all houses are to be protected!

When St. Paul said that there is “neither Jew nor Greek,” when St. Peter said there is to be no distinction between people in God’s eyes, that doesn’t mean that at a particular time and place some folks, some groups, some races, are more in need of protection, more in need of changing a culture and a society that too often victimizes them. This isn’t about whether your or I intend to be racists; I am convinced we don’t. But it is about honestly admitting that where we fail to acknowledge institutional racism as the sin that God says it is, acknowledging it in this era, just as we do for earlier eras, we postpone the day for the fulfillment for real reconciliation. When persons of color tell us of their experiences we are, again, called to respect their perspectives and

¹Cf. the brilliant and disturbing essay by Ta-Nehisi Coates “The Case for Reparations.”
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

acknowledge that the God who calls all of us His children thereby intends for us to call one another brothers and sisters. Indeed as we aspire to recognize the things that keep God's vision from becoming a reality we will also be inspired to seek to change those things for the better.

Two hundred and twenty five years ago, President George Washington wrote some powerful words to a Jewish congregation in Rhode Island, a people who sadly have too often have also known their share of institutional bigotry and prejudice. Hear what Washington had to tell them: the people and "...the Government of the United States... give to bigotry no sanction [and] to persecution no assistance." Rather, Washington went on to say, with words that could indeed be a fitting summation of the aspiration to which God calls each of us as citizens and as Christians, may all

who dwell in this land continue to merit... the good will of the other inhabitants — while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths....²

Washington's words indeed remind us that our job, our aspiration, is to use God's light to recognize where we fall short, to acknowledge where institutionalized prejudice and bigotry yet abide, and to do all we can to make that Godly vision of safety and hope and equality a reality. With God's help, may it be so. Amen.

²<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-the-hebrew-congregation-at-newport/>