What’s Race Got to do With It?

Dr. Stephen D. Jones, preaching
Text: Acts 10
First Baptist Church, KCMO
Jan. 24, 2016

The topic of race has intrigued me since I was a young teenager. As many of you know, I grew up in the 1960’s in a small town in the foothills of the Ozarks. The decade of the 1960’s was one of those rare moments when America encountered the topic of race head-on. While true throughout much of America, it was a topic largely dismissed in my hometown. You see, Eldon was 100% white. There was one African American family in the schools, but they lived out in the country. Most of the small towns around us had African American neighborhoods. I learned years later that Eldon had strong Ku Klux Klan activity in its early days that steered black people away.

My first crisis of faith was the disparity between the Kansas City Star, which arrived daily at our house, and the sermons of my childhood pastor. The newspapers told of racial riots, changing racial perspectives, the Civil Rights Movement, and heroic faith leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. My pastor never once talked about race, or any societal concern. When I would confront him, he would respond that issues like race and war and poverty have nothing to do with whether Jesus is your personal Lord and Savior. If people would only practice faith in Christ, the problems of the world would go away. His one-by-one pietistic approach struck me as a Great Evasion. At the time, our cities were literally burning and seething, and one more baptism wouldn’t extinguish the fires of injustice.

I came to Kansas City in 1966 to go to college – the height of the civil rights struggle. It was a struggle that touched me deeply – and I still do not fully know why. It didn’t have the same impact on many of my high school friends. The racial insulation of Eldon made these issues seem far away. William Jewell College had around 20 black students at the time – who largely kept to themselves.

Frankly, I came to Kansas City prepared to leave faith behind – as irrelevant to my life-goals. I wanted to be involved in the great issues and social change of the Sixties. As a freshman, I helped organize a group on campus called, “Black and White,” and we began meeting with Liberty’s Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interracial group of men forging more honest and mutual relationships. We opened an inter-racial coffeehouse in downtown Liberty. One of the first issues we faced was that the barbershops of Liberty refused to give haircuts to the black students. They were told to go into the city because the white barbers claimed not to know how to cut their hair. We boycotted and picketed the barber shop, and the barbers finally caved in, and I stood proudly beside my friend, Tracy, who was the first black man to have his haircut on the town square.

For a short while, I dated a young girl I met in Black and White, named Cindy, from the inner city of Kansas City. She was attractive and fun and we had great conversations. But our
worlds were so far apart. Cindy had grown up sleeping in the front room of her house because she didn’t have a room of her own. There was a broken window beside the sofa where she slept which the landlord never repaired. She had stuffed a pillow in the window during sub-zero nights, but she shivered through those nights, often getting sick. She had to stay awake each night until her stepfather came home because he had raped her on several occasions.

The sheltered life that I had lived stood in stark contrast to Cindy’s. And while the chasm that separated us seemed too far to cross, it left a deep impression that something was terribly unjust related to race in America. I wasn’t bold enough to drive to Selma and join Dr. King’s march, but I kept a drumbeat of my own. In fact, Jan and I drove across the Edmond Pettus Bridge in downtown Selma on Friday of this week, but it was my first time there.

The huge issue for me was to discover if a church existed where the morning newspaper and the Bible had anything to do with the other. That was when I discovered this church, worshipping at Linwood and Park. Our pastor, Mal Haughey, was unlike any Baptist preacher I had ever heard. He talked about personal faith in ways relevant to my world. My mother-in-law was one of the first laypersons I knew who modeled racial equality without fanfare. Back in my homophobic days, I remember her lecturing me as she defended homosexuals, several of whom were her close friends in this church. She was a gentle soul but she was intolerant of intolerance.

All of this not only opened my eyes – but helped me to believe again in Christ and the church. I learned that it was possible to be a faithful Christian and care about justice and peace and equality. Amazing! In my sheltered upbringing in mid-Missouri, this had not seemed possible.

One of my most telling experiences from our sabbatical in South Africa was touring neighborhoods with the black pastors who were our hosts. We spent the night in their homes with their families and in the coming days they would inevitably show me the white Baptist church in town. They were always lovely, stately buildings compared to the tin shacks or rented school rooms where the blacks worshipped. And as they would speak to the absence of relationship with their white colleagues, I kept wondering whether a black pastor might be driving a white South African by my church in America, and whether they would have anything better to say of me. I came home determined that they would.

As our prison population in America has grown exponentially, the trend has sharply and disproportionately affected racial and ethnic minorities. In 1980, there were 143,000 black men in prison and 463,700 in college. But by the year 2,000, the numbers were much closer. Thankfully, since the year 2,000, there has been a 100% increase in the number of black men in college. Today, there are 1.4 million black men in college and 840,000 in prison. That remains appalling, but it does represent movement in the right direction. In 2014, 50% of all federal inmates were imprisoned on drug offenses. The rate of incarceration is seven times greater for black males than for white males. While living in Seattle, I participated in a university study which revealed that the majority of those who deliver serious drugs in Seattle are white, and a much smaller percentage are black. And yet, according to Seattle Police arrest records, 62.6% of those arrested for delivery of serious drugs were black; only 19% arrested were white. One authority in Seattle stated, “The question is whether we can tolerate the de-facto
decriminalization of drug activity for whites, while sending thousands of black defendants into our prisons on drug charges.” The statistics are likely similar here in Kansas City. (“Race and the Enforcement of Drug Delivery Laws in Seattle”, by Katherine Beckett, Associate Professor, Dept of Sociology, UW, Nov. 2003)

In the State of Missouri, the Attorney General has been tracking traffic stops since the year 2000. Last year, 66% of all traffic stops in our state targeted black drivers. And that disparity has been growing. Some call it DWB, driving while black. There are injustices, without question.

In order to practice his Jewish faith, Peter felt it necessary to avoid interacting with Gentiles. It was prohibited that he enter a Gentile home. If he did, it would make him ritually unclean. For the Jews to survive in a polytheistic society, it was important to stand apart from others and not mix freely. And yet, Peter heard God call him in a dream to enter the home of a Roman centurion. For the first time, he found himself standing in a non-Jewish home. Later he said, “I now truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation and among all different kinds of people, anyone who fears God and acts justly is acceptable in God’s sight.” (Acts 10:34)

Peter found himself in a new place, a place he had never been before. And unexpectedly, his world widened. He began to see the impartiality of God toward all people of every ethnicity and nationality. Very few of us find ourselves standing in the home of someone not of our ethnicity or background. If we did, we might find ourselves, like Peter, in a changed world. One South African organization that truly made a difference during the years of apartheid was called Koinonia. Their sole purpose was to partner a black family and a white family, and for one week-end, the white family went into the townships and lived with the black family and for another week-end, the roles were reversed with the black family going into a white home. Time and again, peoples’ lives were changed just by entering each others’ homes.

When Jan was growing up in this church and when I first joined in 1969, there were only two black families in our church. Isn’t it ironic, that it took a move away from the center city, to the Red Bridge area in south Kansas City, before our congregation became truly integrated? It was in this location that the first black senior pastor was called. Since I began tutoring at Red Bridge Elementary School, I have been amazed at the racial and ethnic diversity. My classroom of around 20 students is fairly evenly divided between Hispanics, whites and black children. That’s our neighborhood – but too often churches do not reflect that diversity.

Tonight, we will hold the first of two facilitated conversations about race in our congregation. This is important because so often we see things differently from others. We view progress differently. We view police arrests differently. We view Ferguson differently. As our congregation gathers for this dialogue, so will 25 other Kansas City congregations – but ours will likely be the only conversation with the potential to be inter-racial. I look forward to sharing this important evening with you.

One truth is that we all have a common ancestry in Adam and Eve, according to the second creation story in Genesis. We are all brothers and sisters in the human family. I read
something interesting last week: almost all European-background individuals alive today share at least one common ancestor in the last five centuries! If you trace your ancestry back, you’ll loop back to a common ancestor with others, something like a twentieth cousin.

That’s one truth, but it is only half of the truth. On a test, if you score 50%, you still flunk! For the rest of the truth is that we are also part of a tribe, a racial or ethnic group, a nationality. It isn’t possible to relate to me generically. I am a white man in my 60’s. And everyone who relates to me does so with this in mind. You can’t ignore it. I’m not a woman; I’m not Hispanic; and I’m not in my 30’s. And those things make a huge difference in the way we interact. The fact that a former pastor, Dr. Leo Thorne, was a black man from Trinidad, made a lasting impression on our church. Race and human difference have as much to do with how we relate to each other as does our common ancestry as part of the human family. And that’s the whole truth.

As a young college student, I was about to give up on Christianity before I encountered this church. The racial diversity wasn’t in the membership, but it was in its mission as the church gave much energy, leadership and resources serving persons in the Linwood neighborhood. Jan and I learned, as the church’s neighborhood staff in the summer of 1969, that it wasn’t the easiest place to serve. And yet, standing in uncomfortable places, like Peter, we discovered that God’s love is far broader and more inclusive than ever before imagined.

At Lincoln University in Jefferson City, King once said, “America is essentially a dream. It is a dream of a land where people of all races, of all nationalities, and of all creeds can live together as brothers and sisters. The substance of the dream is expressed in those sublime words, words lifted to cosmic proportions: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ That is the dream.”

Faith has everything to do with this dream. May it be our dream as well. Amen.