

Be the church: reject racism

Acts 8:26-40

May 3, 2015

Here on Mount Zion the Lord Almighty will prepare a banquet for all the nations of the world -- a banquet of the richest food and the finest wine. Here he will suddenly remove the cloud of sorrow that has been hanging over all the nations. The Sovereign Lord will destroy death forever! He will wipe away the tears from everyone's eyes and take away the disgrace his people have suffered throughout the world. The Lord himself has spoken.

When it happens, everyone will say, "He is our God! We have put our trust in him, and he has rescued us. He is the Lord! We have put our trust in him, and now we are happy and joyful because he has saved us."

The Lord Almighty will prepare a banquet. From what book of the Bible does this vision of a banquet prepared by the Lord come? It comes from Isaiah. This is Isaiah's vision of a great banquet on Mount Zion, a feast in Jerusalem, a grand table set with the richest food and finest wine.

It is a joyful banquet, because it celebrates the end of sorrow, the end of the power of death to hurt and destroy, the end of tears of grief, the end of the disgrace suffered throughout the world by God's people.

This is the joyful feast of God's people prepared in Jerusalem by the Lord for ... whom? For whom does the Lord prepare this banquet? For all the nations of the world. Isaiah makes it clear that this is God's intent -- to bring blessing to all the nations, all the peoples, all the races of this world.

This is that banquet! This is the feast prepared by the Lord, the table set with the richest food and the finest wine. The food is Christ's body, broken to put an end to our sorrow and our tears. The wine is his lifeblood, poured out to end our disgrace, poured out to exhaust death of its power to hurt and to destroy. This is the joyful feast prepared by God on a cross in Jerusalem, and because it has happened, because the vision of Isaiah has been realized, everyone can say:

He is our God! We have put our trust in him, and he has rescued us. He is the Lord! We have put our trust in him, and now we are happy and joyful because he has saved us.

Who says it? Who is invited to the feast? So tell me ... what color is the church?

In the book of Acts, Luke tells the stories of the beginning of the church, the stories of the progenitors of the church of which we are now a part. Who came first? Who were the first Christians? Who were the first men and women to embrace Jesus' message and Jesus' way of life?

They were Jews, Jews from the rural lake district and, later, Jews from the city of Jerusalem.

Who came next? From what group of people did the next Christians come?

From the Samaritans, children of Jewish fathers and Assyrian mothers, people considered Arabs by the Jews, and considered Jews by the Arabs. Some of the earliest members of the church came from this race of classic outsiders, disrespected by everybody but themselves, but still a people with a distinctive identity and a proud tradition, and a people who persist, living to this day alongside Jews and Muslims and Palestinians in Israel.

And then? What people were the first outside Palestine to become devoted followers of Jesus' way?

Africans, at least one African as Luke tells it, an Ethiopian, a government official, traveling back to Africa from Jerusalem. Why was he in Jerusalem? Not on official business, but for personal reasons, to offer worship to Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah told it, the Lord of all.

He was a seeker. He wanted to understand. He wanted to know. He wanted to know God. And so he came looking and praying and reading. He was reading from the prophet Isaiah when Philip found him. How appropriate!

Later Christian historians remember this man and give him a name, Simeon Bachos, and credit him with birthing the church in Africa, one of the strongest and most influential of the early churches.

These are our Christian progenitors, the foundation upon which the church of Jesus Christ has been built: Jews and half-Arabs and Africans. So tell me ... what color is the church? Olive and brown and black. At least that's what it was in the beginning. What it surely was not was white!

Be the church! Reject racism! If we understand our history at all, we will understand there is no place in the church for racism. The very heart of the good news, the key element of the new community formed in union with Christ, is that walls are torn down, barriers are removed, people are granted access alike to God, and people, races, are reconciled to each other.

It began among Jews, but quickly, breathtakingly quickly, the church embraced Arabs and Africans, and then Asians and Europeans. My ancestors, white Europeans, were latecomers to the church. Some might even call us interlopers, because once the Greeks and the Romans got hold of the gospel, they often changed the good news as much or more than it changed them.

As Greek philosophy imposed its vision of a body at war with the spirit, Jesus' message became increasingly intellectualized and spiritualized and individualized and otherworldly. In other words, not much of any good!

And as imperial Roman adopted and co-opted the Christian faith, the community of believers became increasingly stratified and hierarchical, and what was a way, became a system!

The Americanization of Christianity has not fared better. When missionary zeal is wed to a sense of manifest destiny, it's almost as if we believe this nation to be the culmination of God's plan for humanity, that God will save the world through the promulgation of American culture and hegemony.

It might have been different. Many of our spiritual ancestors came to this continent as persecuted minorities. They could have been, should have been, sensitized to the plight of other persecuted peoples. But instead, they -- we -- drove native Americans out of their homelands and into poverty, and imported black Africans to be the fodder to fuel our economic ambitions .

Be the church! Being the church means recognizing where we have come from and what we are for. For white Christians, it means acknowledging that we are latecomers, not originals. It means understanding that the church isn't white, that it never was and never will be.

For all Christians, whatever color, whatever race, being the church requires humility, recognizing that we are all brought into the church by adoption, by grace not by right, by generosity not by privilege. And each of us, whatever color, whatever race, embody Jesus' message in our own ways, with our own particular language and customs and ways of being church, but none of these ways are the way. Only together, with each other, in communion with each other, listening to each other and respecting each other, do we embody Jesus' way.

Be the church! Reject racism! I doubt any of us consider ourselves to be racists, but what I think we really mean by that is that we don't consider ourselves to be bigots. Bigotry is an overt expression of a racist mindset. It shows itself as a blatantly rude and callous and injurious disregard for another human being for no good reason.

But racism itself, the mindset itself, can be much more subtle and much more rational. Racism simply means regarding one's own race, my way of being and doing, as in some way superior, and another's race, your way of being and doing, as in some way inferior.

All of us have a natural bias, a natural preference, for our own cultures, but when natural bias becomes a value judgment, when I think there is nothing to be gained, nothing to be learned, from you, when I think I am whole without you, then I suffer and you suffer, because that is not what God intends.

Be the church! Reject racism!

The Lord Almighty has prepared a banquet for all the nations of the world -- a banquet of the richest food and the finest wine. The Lord has removed the cloud of sorrow that has been hanging over all the nations. The Lord has destroyed death's power to hurt and destroy! The Lord is wiping away the tears from everyone's eyes and is taking away our disgrace ...

May everyone say, "The Lord is our God! We have put our trust in him, and he has rescued us."