

DINNER WITH STRANGERS

Reclaiming the Community of the Cross

Texts: Luke 14:4-14; Ephesians 2:11-22; Revelation 7:9-10; 19:6-7

Why Wade Into This Subject?

I want to reflect with you today and the next two weekends about how we bring the grace of God to the complex subject of race relations in our time. Just that word "race" is a bit inflammatory, isn't it? It kicks up feelings of anger or pain, of defensiveness or weariness or hopelessness. The race card gets associated with so many controversial events in our nation's history and current news cycles. It so easily polarizes people along partisan lines. Few topics are more fraught with feeling and more likely to tick every one off at some point than this one. So, why am I tackling it?

One reason is because **America can't fully flourish without building better race relations**. Like you, I love this country and want her to thrive in the years to come. We're a nation God has blessed in remarkable ways. But I know that our history is also stained with RACISM – with a pattern I'll delve into further next week of treating those of a different color, class, or culture as less than fully human and dealing with them as we would never want to be treated ourselves.

We've tried to change this, of course. In recent decades, we've made some important strides to redress the injustices and bridge the divides and create more opportunity for all. I know that many of you have given yourself in a variety of ways to this effort. It's hard to agree with those who suggest we've made NO real progress toward the dream of Dr. King that there would come a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

But we've also not arrived yet. The violence on our streets... the many African American and Latino people stuck in a cycle of poverty or incarceration... the fear and ignorance separating racial groups... the responsibility, productivity and prosperity not being unleashed... these are clues that something's still broken. And, if we don't do something creative, it will get worse. Even if we locked down our borders, mere birth rates mean that by 2044 no single racial group will hold a majority in American life, with the prospect of further cultural conflict and fragmentation. If we want the future of America to be one of hope and not horror, there is an urgent need now to do the hard work of building more understanding and better partnership between people of different races.

That's where you and I come in. The SECOND reason why I feel led to talk with you about this volatile topic is because, **as Christians, we are uniquely**

positioned to be of help in this arena. We have been unusually equipped by our history and theology for such a time as this. Even when we have failed to live up to this vision, we are the community whose scriptures teach that all people are fearfully and wonderfully made by God (Psa 139:14). We're the community that knows that whatever our color on the outside, all of us are tainted by sin on the inside and desperately in need of help from beyond ourselves (Rom 3:23). We're the people that understand that whether our skin is black, brown, white, or yellow, God so loved the whole world that he covered us all in RED – blood red -- to show how much everyone matters to him (Jhn 3:16).

Christians are the community God formed at Pentecost out of Medes and Parthians and Cappadocians and Elamites, to show how serious he was about reaching and redeeming everyone (Acts 2). We're the people who know that God's creations – the Body of Christ, for example -- are made up of many diverse members and that the differences between these many parts can be a great gift (2 Cor 12). Amidst a culture that is increasingly fearful of strangers... that is stirred to anxiety by a relentless media that makes its money by keeping us all on edge, **"God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline."** (2 Tim 1:7)

I guess what I'm trying to say is that if any people ought to be able to be the courageous, creative agents needed at this moment in history, it is the Christian community as Jesus founded and envisioned it. Were we and churches all across our country truly successful at being such agents, it would not just help forge a more unified nation. It might well help bring about the restoration of fascination with the Christian gospel and spiritual revival and that is America's deepest need.

Practice Some Basic Gracist Behaviors

So here's what I want to do with this series. Each week, I want to offer you a few creative actions that I think might move us forward on this journey. I'm going to call these actions "GRACIST BEHAVIORS." I'm borrowing from the term GRACISM that David Anderson coins in his wonderful book of the same name – because they are where God's grace meets the subject of race. Anderson says: "Gracism, unlike racism, doesn't focus on race for negative purposes such as discrimination [or recrimination]. Gracism focuses on race for the purpose of positive ministry and service." It aims at building redemptive relationships.

So here's the first racist behavior I want to recommend: **BE HONEST**. Admit it to yourself and anyone else you talk with -- this is hard work. Several years ago, I was one of a bunch of Christ Church people who went on a week-long bus trip through the most famous civil rights sites of the Old South. The journey paired white people and black people as seatmates and roommates and challenged these strangers to talk in a sincere and sustained way about issues

of race and justice.

It was excruciating, at first. All of us felt uncomfortable even discussing this topic. We felt like if we say what we've experienced, others won't believe us. Or if we say what we think, others will brand us as racist or our friends will reject us for not thinking like them. We're not even sure what words to use or what phrases might get us in trouble. In our current day, just look at how differently and passionately many White Christians and African American Christians have responded to the statement "Black Lives Matter" versus "Police Lives Matter."

Let me say as a sidebar that I don't mean to suggest that race challenges are confined to the black-white relationship or that everyone in each of those communities thinks the same way about them. Because the relationship between African Americans and Whites is in the news a lot right now, and those are the two largest segments at Christ Church, I will reference them more often, but only as a pointer to the wider context. As David Anderson observes: "Racism is not reserved for one color or culture of people. [It] is an equal opportunity destroyer."

So dare to BE HONEST – at least with yourself -- about where you're starting from. We all bring to the subject of race a variety of experiences and mental models and a whole set of passions. Be willing to confess what yours are right now and that even talking about this stuff feels risky.

Then, secondly, **LISTEN DEEPLY**. A good rule of thumb in all areas of life is to listen versus speak on at least a two-to-one ratio. It's the two ears-to-one mouth principle! But that's especially important in building better race relations. Find somebody of a different race than you and ask them to tell you their story. What have been your experiences around the subject of race?

I listened recently to a young African American man describe playing with his daughter in a local park and suddenly being converged upon by a phalanx of officers. He was a well-educated, successful businessman. His lip trembled as he talked about the humiliation he felt at being treated as he was in front of his daughter and the look of fear and questioning in her eyes. I'd never had an experience like that. He and others I've spoken with have had lots of them. I've also asked people in law enforcement about their experiences. What does it feel like to be you, trying to do right, in the midst of all this tension? It has expanded my mind and heart.

Opinions have a way of bouncing off ears. Sharing stories, however, is life-changing. Believe the stories you hear. They aren't made up. Recognize that those who tell you the truth are being very vulnerable. Don't try to talk people out of their feelings when what they say makes you uncomfortable. If you want to begin to change the current climate and build a different level of relationship, really listen to people.

Thirdly, **LEARN MORE**. The story of race in America is too deep and complex to be explained by any one person. As important as it is to listen to the people we meet, it's probably not reasonable or respectful to expect the few people we may talk to to be our sole educators about this whole huge area. Those of us in the racial majority especially need to go on our own learning journey about this.

When I moved to Northern Ireland years ago and really began to learn about the history and circumstances of the conflict there, I was stunned by how much more there was to the story there than what I'd picked up by watching the evening news or reading the one book I'd read on the subject. I feel the same way having now having digested the contents of a lot of books, films, and museums focused on the subject of civil rights and the African American experience. I still have questions I want to ask and things I'd like to see some of my sisters and brothers do differently; but my perspective on what is going on today in our inner cities... my respect for what black and brown people there endure with courage and faith... and my grasp of why they all can't simply bootstrap themselves (like Ben Carson)... is utterly different.

Go further on a learning journey of your own. We're going to put in our Bookstore some really helpful books and provide in print and on our website a list of other resources you can access to learn more. Don't be content with what you already think you know. This subject is too central to the Gospel and too crucial for America's future.

Finally, Gracism requires that we **BE HUMBLE**: When you're honest with others and truly listen and start to learn more than you did before, you will be confronted with some things that make you very defensive. That make you want to deny or argue to protect your existing worldview or sense of status. Resist that impulse. Just sit with it. Think how many times people of color have had to take correction from white folks without speaking back.

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus." (Phil 2:3-5) Jesus put it this way: "When you are invited [into the kind of encounters I am suggesting] take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luk 14:10-11)

Come to the Table

To sum it all up, I guess what I'm saying is, have dinner with some strangers in

the days ahead. Make a commitment to really gathering at some table with another race, another story, that you really may not know as well as you may think. See what God does with that feast. **"Give a banquet, says Jesus, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, -- and who of us isn't in some way -- and you will be blessed"** (Luk 14:13-14). You will be doing something creative to change the course of race relations in America. You will be witnessing to the character of the Kingdom of God. And you will be preparing for the day when **"a great multitude that no one [can] count, from every nation, tribe, people and language"** (Rev 7:9) will gather at the Banquet Table of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.

Make This Part of the Introduction to Communion

As we gather at this Table today, here is the good news the Bible holds out and White Christians and Christians of Every Color stand on together...

"In Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross... Consequently, you are no longer... strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household." (Eph 2:13-19)

Come then to the Banquet Table. Find here the grace you need. And being filled afresh, go forth to offer that grace to others.

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