



Some Things Are Hard to Talk About

SCRIPTURE:
Acts 15:1-7a

January 17, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Twenty-twenty was my teacher. That's the truth. COVID was hard enough, but then things got harder. One teachable moment was the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Now, this is not a sermon about racism. I have preached that before and no doubt will need to do so again. But today, I want to reflect on the conversations that we had around this topic. I have had many conversations about Black Lives Matter. Some of them very good. Some of them not.

I want to reflect on what gets in our way and keeps us from learning from one another. 2020 has taught me something about that.

One of my favorite teachers was Mrs. Hurst. She was my 11th grade history teacher and is fully responsible for my being a history major in college. She liked to pose a question for general discussion. The questions always seemed easy, at least at first. "Was Thomas Jefferson good for America?"

Well, that's easy. Of course, he's one of our heroes. Drafter of the Declaration of Independence. He was founder of University of Virginia, and John Adam's Vice President, and our third President. I would make my case and she would say, "Well, that's a very strong case, Tom. But what do you think about his owning slaves?" I forgot about that. "And he fathered children with his slave Sally Hemmings." Yeah, that's not good. "Did you know, he literally cut verses out of the Bible, removing all the parts he didn't like? It's called the Jefferson Bible." I didn't know that. About the time she had changed my mind, she would then take the side I had just abandoned. "You didn't mention that he drafted the state of Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom that lies behind the first amendment. Don't you think the

country is better off with that?"

Oh, I couldn't figure out what the right answer was. That was exactly her point.

She taught valuable lessons. She taught me that real life is complicated. Truth is never simple. In addition, because things that matter are often complicated, we should expect to have to change our minds along the way. And that is never easy.

Our passage this morning tells us of a time when truth wasn't simple and the conversation was hard. But the leaders of the church discussed it and changed their minds. It was not an easy meeting. There was deep disagreement as they debated what it meant to be Christian. They were debating who they understood themselves to be at their very core. When it was over, they changed their minds, and they changed their ways. It's an amazing moment in faith, maybe even a miracle.

Saul has a conversion on the Damascus road, you remember. He takes a new name, Paul, and asserts that God has appointed him to proclaim Christ to the Gentiles. That's an odd thing to say... proclaim Christ to the Gentiles.

You see "Christ" is a title. It's not a last name—Jesus Christ, son of Joe and Mary Christ. No, it's Jesus, the Christ. Christ is Greek for the Hebrew word "Messiah." To affirm that Jesus is the Christ is to affirm that he is the longed for, anticipated one of Jewish faith. So, to worship Jesus as the Christ is to practice Judaism.

But here Paul wants to welcome Gentiles. That had never happened before. Folks said, we can't do that. That would turn our faith upside down. That was the conversation.

Some things are hard to talk about. 2020 brought us a lot that was hard to talk about, but nothing was

as tender, it seems to me, as the conversation about race. Any talk about race today is loaded. I have had many conversations about race this year. Some of those conversations were really good. But some were not. I've been reflecting on what gets in our way when we disagree. What are the barriers that get in our way that keep us from learning, growing, maybe even changing our minds? I can lift up four barriers to growth. You, no doubt, may see others.

1 The first barrier that I see to progress is defensiveness. I don't think anything makes me more defensive than to feel I am being characterized as a racist. There is within me an immediate need to assert, "I'm not racist. I'm not like that."

But right away I'm on thin ice. Because what I have asserted is that I, as a white guy, get to decide what racism is. Now, what in my personal experience am I going to draw on to define what is and is not racist? No, I need to pause a moment. Take a breath and think about this.

See if this makes sense to you. I think when we meet someone who is not like us—the difference can be almost anything really, a different age or religion, a different economic status or political party—when I meet someone who is, in my judgment, different from me, it is harder for me to see the full humanity of that person. Not impossible, but harder. I have to work overtime to see that not-like-me-person as a child of God. And I might not even know that I have that work to do—because my view seems natural. As a result, my capacity to dismiss another person's ideas or experience or even worth, becomes more reasonable. I think this is a universal struggle for people and it paves the way for racism.

Ibram Kendi has helped me with this. He says that 'racist,' and what he calls 'anti-racist,' are not identities, but actions. They are less about who we are and more what we do. And if they are actions, they can change.¹ Rather than become defensive and assert our purity, maybe it's better to ask, "In what ways might I have been racist that I could change tomorrow?"

2 A second barrier is shame. When I speak of shame, what I am talking about is shaming.

Our Jerusalem Presbytery meeting could have gone south in a number of ways and shame is one of them. The problem is Jews knew that God had called them to be holy. And they were right. The Hebrew word holy literally means 'set apart,' not like them. They were not to mix with Gentiles; don't eat like them, don't pray like them. Keep kosher. Keep sabbath. Be different. Of course, the temptation is to assume difference means I'm better.

Paul is standing that on its head... let them in, he says. It would have been so easy for them to respond, "We can't worship with them. God has sent the Messiah to us, and us alone. Don't you see how righteous we are?" That would have been so easy. But they didn't go there.

There has been a lot of shaming this year. Sometimes we demonstrate just how "woke" we are by pointing to the blunders of those around us. We do what my friend Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin calls "virtue signaling." We become the self-appointed teacher of everyone around us and rehearse our anti-racist pedigree. It doesn't help. If you want to shut down conversation and movement, then shame. Shame is always a tool that destroys conversation.

3 There is a third reason that conversations like this are difficult. No matter what my position is, I can always spot the weakness, not necessarily in the other position, but in the other person. When I get pushed, I point out the impurity of my adversary.

The Jerusalem conversation could have gotten sidetracked this way. One of the elders might have said, "We know Paul. Paul persecuted the church. He claims to have had a conversion, but we know him. Paul is the reason my brother or my mother or my child is in jail. He can't be trusted."

They could have stopped the conversation by pointing out the impurity of the apostle. And impurity is always there—in every one of us. We so often shut down conversations by ignoring the position while attacking the person. We claim that they are biased, or un-American, or un-Christian. The conversation is over when we get there.

The way the church changed her mind and grew

¹ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be An Antiracist* (2019) p. 10

is not by focusing on what was wrong, but by looking for what was true and good. We need more of that.

4 There's one last thing. Conversations can be difficult when we benefit from the status quo, or at least we think we do. This is how it could have gone wrong in Jerusalem. "If we let them in, then we aren't who we have always been. If we let them in, it changes the very core of what it means to worship the Messiah. Let's keep separate; it's worked since the days of Abraham."

I don't know how they got past that. Maybe Paul reminded them that from the very beginning—God called Abraham. And when God called Abraham, God said you are to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. To the Gentiles.

Maybe they realized that something was lacking in the status quo, that God is always calling us to a new day, a promise day. We have yet to reach the promised day, so we should expect to change our minds and our ways if we are going to draw closer. We think we benefit in the status quo. But if we remember that God calls his followers to be a blessing to all, then we need some conversation about how to be better at that.

Years ago, I invited a guest preacher to preach for us. You loved him. "Get him back," you said. I did. That preacher was Rodger Nishioka. He's back.

After worship, we went to lunch and laughed and talked about what a great congregation you are. Then, somehow, the subject of race surfaced. Rodger said that at Seminary, often when race was discussed, it was presumed to be a black/white issue solely. As a Japanese American, it left him feeling a bit invisible.

I said, "Well, maybe that's because of history. After all, the WWII detention centers, they weren't in the South, they were out West." Rodger just smiled. You know that smile that I'm talking about. It's a smile that lets you know, and you don't know why, but you know you are sitting in the stupid chair. Rodger said, "Actually, Tom, there was one center for Japanese internment in the South. Do you know where it was? It was in Montreat, North Carolina." Montreat, as you know, is the conference center for the Presbyterian Church. When the nation decided to hold American citizens of Japanese descent, the Presbyterian Church said, "here, let us help."

And then I remembered Rodger preaching in Montreat. I remembered his staying in the same inn, sleeping in the same rooms where his ancestors were kept. I remembered how he had led youth in prayer on that mountain, knowing that his ancestors had prayed for liberation on that mountain.

It takes courage to live toward God's promised day. It takes courage to set aside some of the barriers that so easily get in our way to hearing one another, perhaps even hearing the whisper of God from one another. Rodger is one who has taught me that.

I don't know what will happen in 2021, but you can bet the farm it's going to bring some tender topics our way, things that are hard to talk about.

Maybe 2020 can teach us to be attentive to one another and to the Spirit, and maybe we won't stumble over the barriers that are so common. At least our conversations will be better. And maybe we will change our minds about a few things for the better. And who knows, maybe even something miraculous will occur.

This sermon was delivered by Rev. Tom Are, Jr., at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, Kansas, 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard, or watched on the church's website: www.villagepres.org/currentsermon-archives.html
