



It's Not About You. It's About Us.

TEXT
John 4:1–26

May 26, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This past March, I heard Corey Greaves speak at NEXT. He is of the Blackfeet Tribe. Among other things, Corey has formed the largest Presbyterian ministry among Native American youth. He put up a slide of the United States that showed where his people lived before we came to this land. They, of course, lived sea to shining sea. The second one showed the dotted places where they live now. He then said, “The church has seldom been a good thing for my people.”

Do you think that could change?

Jesus speaks to a woman, which nobody could believe he was doing in public at mid-day. She was also a Samaritan, one whose racial identity is not purely Jewish. But here they are, at the well at noonday talking about the Messiah, of all things. It's a surprise because those two words — *Samaritan* and *woman* — define how he encountered the structures of her culture. Those two words determined her role and place in society.

The Messiah, you know, was the promised one of Judaism, the long-awaited king. The Messiah would make things right. If

you worshipped the promised one of Judaism, the faith you were practicing was Judaism.

But the surprise of Jesus is that he did not limit his ministry to Jews. And the surprise of the early church is that people of every race were showing up: Jews and Gentiles — and even this Samaritan woman. Jesus crosses the cultural boundary and speaks to her, and he sees her as a Samaritan woman who is also a child of God.

Without question, the most significant social issue in the early church was race: How can Jews and Gentiles, children of Abraham and this Samaritan woman, all be in the same church? From the very beginning, following Jesus required that we pay attention to race.

Debby Irving, in her book *Waking Up White*, says, as a white person, “I didn't think I had race. ... Race was for other people, brown and black-skinned people. ... I thought white was a raceless race ... just plain, normal, the one against which all others were measured.”¹

I think the church becoming a good thing for all people means, like Jesus, we need to pay attention to race — to ours and to the race of others — and

admit that in America we are not all treated the same.

Now if you are a bit nervous about this topic, I understand. I got an email, and someone very honestly said, “I'm tired of all this racism talk.” Well, me too. And nothing makes us feel defensive more quickly than being called racist.

It's a tender topic, but I want to ask you to sit with the discomfort for a while. And I promise you this: I will not to make you sob about a little boy leaving his dog behind. I mean I do have compassion. I'm just talking about racism, so this should be easier than last week.

W.E.B. Du Bois once said, “The problem of the 20th century in America is the color line.” But so much has changed since Du Bois wrote this.

Jon Meacham, in his book *The Soul of America*, notes, “After King, after Rosa Parks, after John Lewis, after the watershed legislative work of Lyndon B. Johnson in passing the civil rights bills ... many Americans are less than eager to acknowledge that our national greatness was built on explicit and implicit apartheid.”²

Well, even if our past was racist, haven't we fixed this? We are not the nation that we were.

When we think of racism, many think of the vicious beatings on the Pettus Bridge in Selma. We think of slaveholders in the antebellum south. We think of separate schools and separate drinking fountains. We think of Ku Klux Klan members who engaged in mob violence.

In recent years, we have seen such ugliness again as we watched the Alt Right march in Charlottesville, Virginia, standing up against what they call oppression of white people. Dylann Roof sat in a Bible study in the Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, before opening fire. John Earnest shoots up a synagogue in Poway, California. According to *The Washington Post*, there are as many as 22 million people in this country who believe it is acceptable to hold neo-Nazi or white-supremacist views.³

But we aren't those folks. We don't talk like that. We don't act like that. We find that kind of behavior unacceptable. The truth is, we have not only cast aside those attitudes, but many in this church work in ministries of care and justice for people of color in this town and have been doing so for as long as Village has been Village. After all, it was Dr. Bob who told you the housing covenants on the deeds to the homes we hold are sinful. When the Sewing family moved into Fairway, Dr. Bob knocked on their door to welcome them. He wanted the church to be good for everyone.

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr., a professor of religion and African American studies at Princeton,

wrote: "White people's expressed racial attitudes, by most measure, have become progressively better. Most Americans don't hold the views of Strom Thurmond in 1948 or George Wallace in 1968 or Pat Buchanan in 1992. They believe in integrated schools and reject segregated public transportation."⁴

There may be 22 million Americans who are white supremacists, but we aren't those people. And if someone implies that we are racist, we respond, "Wait a minute. I'm not like that. You don't know me. I'm not racist."

I think that's right, but I also think it's incomplete. In the real matters of race, it's not about you; it's about us, all of us. I'm not sure we as white folks should be leading the conversation on defining what racism is. I don't think it's wrong, but I do think it is incomplete.

I think we need to pay attention to race, ours and others. We need to not assume the system works for all the way it works for us. We need to hear from folks who don't experience America the same way we do.

We think of racism as bias. Rodger and I want to talk about bias next Sunday.

But today, I want to explore a more significant reality of racism. Racism is not just bias. It's not limited to language and bad jokes. Racism occurs when bias is connected to power. In this sense, the issue is not "Am I racist?" The issue is that America is racist. While the consequences are not equally shared, the truth

is, all of us are caught in the structural realities of racism.

This is what I know: You believe that every person is a child of God. You believe that every person is created in the image of God. You believe, theologically, we are all the same. We are all the same. But not all of God's children experience America the same. Racism is more than an attitude, and it is more than an event; it is a structure.

Read Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow* about the criminal justice system, for example. We could talk about banking or real estate or business — even healthcare. We could talk about racism in church. But let me just hold up this one example. Dr. Alexander says, "Race plays a major role in the [criminal justice] system, but not because of what is commonly understood as old-fashioned, hostile bigotry. The problem is more *racial indifference*."⁵ Not paying attention! She sounds like Dr. King when he said the greatest threat was not the deeds of evil people, but the apathy of people of good will.

I was driving home one night and had the opportunity to meet one of the officers that works the area. He invited me to have a little roadside chat. Turns out having your tag renewal sticker in the glove box doesn't count. He very politely explained this to me, and then gave me the opportunity to sit in my car while his lights flashed. There I am, on the side of the road, all of Village Church driving by. I'm trying to squeeze into the headrest. I wanted to say, "Remember the

apostle Paul was in jail often.” After what seemed like a long weekend, he finally came back and said, “I’m letting you off with a warning,” for not having my renewal tags.

I was grateful that he chose to give me a warning. I guess he has that discretion. Michelle Alexander says that discretion in the criminal justice system often works against people of color. The data supports her claim.

The Kansas City Star reported that of the traffic tickets given in 2017, 60 percent were given to African Americans, while they make up 30 percent of the population.⁶ Do you think white folks are just better drivers?

NPR reported several years ago that national data reveals a young black man is 20 times more likely to be shot by a police officer than a young white man [20 to 1].⁷

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released data in 2000 that indicated 6.4 percent of white households engaged in illegal drug use. Do you know what the percentage of illegal drug use was in African American households? 6.4 percent — the same.⁸ I was surprised because I know that there are far more African Americans in prison.

The United States holds the highest incarceration rate of all developed countries.⁹ As early as the late 1980s, a study revealed that in the state of Georgia, in cases involving a black defendant and a white victim, 70 percent of cases sought the death penalty. But when the races were reversed, and the defendant was

white and the victim was black, only 19 percent sought the death penalty.¹⁰

Laws are laws. But the prosecution of our laws allows discretion, and not all citizens experience the system the same. This is what is meant when they say racism is not an attitude or an event; it’s a structure.

Paul said, “Keep your hands visible all the times. No fast movements. Tell the officer that you are reaching for your license. Never raise your voice. Whatever you are feeling, stuff it.” Paul was telling his boys how to interact when they are stopped by the police.

I was invited by the Prairie Village police to be a volunteer chaplain, and I immediately agreed because, like you, I appreciate what the police do and the risks that they take. I have never met an officer, man or woman, whom I didn’t admire. But the truth is, my friend Paul, who is black, felt it necessary to tell his boys how to respond — because Paul worries.

I never once thought about having that conversation with my children. It’s not because I assumed they would never be pulled over; it’s because I never worried about what might happen if they were. Paul worries.

Do you see that this is not just about you or me? That’s too small. It’s not just about individuals. America is racist, and we are all caught in the consequences of this.

In 1850, infant mortality among African Americans was 1.5 times the rate among white children. Today the actual num-

ber of infant deaths among African Americans has dropped significantly, but it is still twice the rate of infant mortality among white children. The percentage is worse than it was in 1850.

Folks assumed that poverty was the likely cause, or disparity in education. But the *New England Journal of Medicine* revealed that infants born to college-educated black parents were twice as likely to die as those born to college-educated white parents. Why? They think it’s stress — the daily stress of battling a system stacked against you. As a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* states, “For black women, something about growing up in America seems to be bad for your baby’s birth weight.”¹¹

Now I know some will say this is ridiculous. Anyone can succeed in this country. They only have to want to succeed. They will suggest the system is perfect; it is only individuals who fail. Anyone who acts responsibly will succeed in this country.

I’m a fan of responsibility. You have heard me preach about responsibility. I think one of our Christian responsibilities is to pay attention to the realities of race — ours and others — and to believe folks when they tell us the experience is not the same for all.

Corey Greaves said, “The church has not been good news for my people.” I was ashamed. And I also thought, I know some people who would want the church to be good for you and for all. I think we can get there.

Jesus talked to a Samaritan woman whose whole life was shaped by the fact that she was a Samaritan and that she was a woman. On both counts, she had no expectation to have a conversation with the Messiah. But her life changed because he addressed her not as a Samaritan woman, but as a child of God.

The system wasn't set up that way. But Jesus saw her and talked to her, and his followers noticed. We know they noticed because the early church was not made up simply of Jews, but of disciples from every race, including Samaritans. Something magical happened there.

There may be 22 million people in America who celebrate white supremacy. That's not us, but as followers of Christ, we have responsibilities, even if we aren't guilty.

We need to pay attention to race — ours and others. Have some conversations. Read some books. Do some study. Don't assume our experience is everyone's experience.

After generations of slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration and more, I honestly don't know if we will get past this. The truth is, while the consequences are not equal, we are all caught in this system of race. I don't know if we will get past it, but we can pay attention, and the church can be good for us and for all.

It's happened with a Samaritan woman. It can happen again.

I know you, and I know you aren't satisfied that things are better than they were. You want things to be the way God wants things to be. So we will try. And

if we fail, we will try again. And if we fail again, we will at least fail better. And I know there is a Samaritan woman in glory who is cheering for us, for she is among the millions of God's children who understand the difference it makes when the church is attentive to race.

¹Debby Irving, *Waking Up White* (2014), p. 11

²Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America* (2018), p. 15

³The WP Survey is cited in "State of Denial," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 11, 2018.

⁴"Don't Just Let the Loud Bigots Distract You," *Time*, September 17, 2018

⁵Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (2010), p. 203

⁶"Ticket Trauma," *The Kansas City Star*, May 20, 2018

⁷Morning Edition, "ProPublica Analyzes Three Decades of Deadly Police Shootings," October 14, 2014

⁸Alexander, p. 7, footnote 10 & 11

⁹Alexander, p. 6

¹⁰Alexander, p. 111. The case was McCleskey v. Kemp.

¹¹"The Hidden Toll," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 15, 2018

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.