

The Ministry of Racial Reconciliation

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer

Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN

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Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

On this Martin Luther King Weekend we are going to look together at one of the most relevant and significant actions we can do as Christians.

It is The Ministry of Racial Reconciliation.

So please turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 5 in your Bible and take out your message outline.

Like everything we do as Christians this work is rooted in God.

We value racial reconciliation in the world because we value God who created us all in his image.

We value racial harmony in the church because we value Christ who calls to himself a worldwide community of believers.

In this fifth chapter of 2nd Corinthians we find four tremendous truths about the Ministry of Spiritual Reconciliation, which is the foundation for our ministry of racial reconciliation.

First there is **OUR CALLING.**

Our calling from God is to **persuade men.**

Paul writes, **"Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men." (v 11)**

But what are we to persuade men about?

We persuade them to be reconciled.

That is the main thrust of this passage.

Paul writes, **"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.**

And he had committed to us the message of reconciliation." (v 18-19)

Reconciliation starts with us being right with God.

When we are reconciled to our creator we are then to encourage others to enjoy that same relationship. Once that has taken place we can then be reconciled to each other.

This is such an important calling that Paul gives us a brand new title. He announces, **"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (v 20)**

Now an ambassador represents their head of state in another country.

So our task is to represent the desires of our king here on earth. Our Lord desires us to be reconciled to God and to each other.

Racial reconciliation begins with spiritual reconciliation.

Martin Luther King understood that civil rights flow out of gospel responsibilities. That is not surprising as Rev. King was a Baptist minister who preached the gospel for 20 years.

He wasn't a perfect man. We may not agree with all of his theology or his politics. But he was a prophetic man and that is why we honor him as a great American.

Dr. King preached that spiritual reconciliation makes possible the work of racial reconciliation he pleaded, "So I say to you, seek God and discover him and make him a power in your life. Without him all of our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest nights. Without him life is a meaningless drama with the decisive scenes missing. But with him we are able to rise from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. With him we are able to rise from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy."

Now we must confess to our shame that the church of Jesus Christ has not always accepted her calling to this ministry of reconciliation. In the past there were Christians who defended slavery and who opposed civil rights.

If we had been gospel people, slavery would not have happened. Civil rights would not have been necessary.

It was the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa who provided a theological justification for apartheid.

Moody Bible Institute forbade mixed race dating as late as the 1950's. Bob Jones University only lifted their ban on inter-racial dating in 2000.

An article in *The Post-Bulletin* last weekend described how churches in Southeast Minnesota supported the Ku Klux Klan back in the 1920's. It was embarrassing and shameful to read. Listen to this.

"They marched up the church aisle to the strains of Onward Christian Soldiers, dressed in their trademark white robes and conical shaped hats. At the head was a man carrying the American flag. The robed men lined up in front of the church and once the singing had ended, the leader of the procession turned to the church's pastor and thanked him for his efforts in promoting real Americanism. The Klansmen then presented the pastor with a purse and token of the group's appreciation.

They kneeled and prayed."

That happened at the Old Concord Christian Church in Dodge County on September 12, 1924.

In his book "Slavery by Another Name" Douglas Blackman described how a form of slavery existed in our nation until 1940.

There was a so called convict leasing system in the south where poor black men were routinely snatched up and tried on false charges by compliant courts who assessed a fine they could not afford.

They were then sold for the cost of that fine to some mine or plantation with the money going back to the judges and the sheriffs.

When they had served their time they were sometimes promptly rearrested on flimsy charges such as stealing the jail clothes they walked out of prison in. The system was so elaborate that businesses could put in orders with local sheriffs to arrest the number of men they needed.

In our own day evangelical churches have been slow to embrace Martin Luther King Day and one Rochester pastor devoted an entire sermon on why we should not honor Dr. King. So we begin the task of racial reconciliation with repentance. Billy Graham said God will not bless any nation that does not confess their sins of racism.

Now I am aware of those who say, "I don't need to repent for the sins of others. I never owned slaves and neither did my family." But scripture shows there is a place for repenting of the sins of those who went before us. Daniel repents of the sins of his ancestors saying, "**We have done wrong.**" (Daniel 9:15)

He didn't say "they did wrong."

So our calling as Christians to the task of racial reconciliation begins with contrition.

Now we Christians are uniquely qualified for this work of reconciliation because we understand the cause and the cure of the racial problems in the world today. We know that racism is not just a matter of lack of education. It is a matter of human sin.

Now everything we do must be grounded in God's word. So here is a brief four part theology of racial reconciliation.

Point One: The human race is one race

Scripture tells us that God created humankind in his image (Genesis 1:27)

He made a world of abundance designed to be shared by all (Genesis 1:28)

From one man he made every nation (Acts 17:26)

We are created to love God and to care for one another (Matthew 22:37-8)

Sadly God's perfect world of Shalom was broken by sin.

The result was that enmity between people and nations entered the world (Genesis 3:15, 11:1-9). Prejudice, hatred and suspicion of those different from ourselves is the result of the Fall.

Point Two: Jesus taught that all people are equal in God's sight

Jesus came to save all who have faith in him without regard for their racial backgrounds. (John 3:16)

He came to bring good news to the poor and the oppressed. (Luke 4:18-9)

He rejected the racial and sexual prejudice of his day by speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well. (John 4:1-42)

He proclaimed the gospel to Gentiles and he healed them.

(Mark 7:31-37)

He commended the faith of non-Jews. (Luke 7:9)

He told the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrating that everyone is our neighbor. (Luke 10:29-37)

Jesus declared that all who do God's will are his brothers and sisters. (Mark 3:35)
He said "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations."

Jesus emphasized the kingdom of God is not restricted to people from one geographical area saying, **"People will come from the east and the west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God."**
(Luke 13:29)

Point Three: Jesus died to create a single new humanity

Through the cross we can be free from the power of sin that alienates us from one another. Through the cross God brings us into his new family. He forms a holy nation in which all peoples and cultures are found.

By the cross the dividing wall of hostility which separated us from God and one another has been broken down.

(Ephesians 2:11-16)

Because of this the church was multicultural and multilingual from the first moment of its existence on the day of Pentecost.

Human diversity and different cultures remain but they demand respect. (1 Corinthians 9:20)
The love of Christ must now characterize the relationship between the races, genders and classes.

As Paul puts it, **"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."** (Galatians 3:28)

So exploiting or despising others is incompatible with our status as part of God's new creation. James helps us see there is no place for either favoritism or prejudice in the church of Jesus Christ. (James 2:11-13, 5:1-6)

The way we receive others will have a bearing on the way God receives us. We cannot truly worship with prejudice in our hearts. (Isaiah 1:15-16, Zechariah 7:8-10 and Deuteronomy 15:1-18)

The gift of tongues on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12) can be seen as a reversal of the confusion between the nations that occurred at the Tower of Babel.

The same Holy Spirit now indwells all God's people enabling us to love one another and communicate with one another.

Point Four: Our future home is a place of racial harmony

The inhabitants of heaven will be drawn from people of every race. None will be excluded. John writes, **"I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."** (Revelation 7:9)

In the New Jerusalem, all God's children will be embraced.

The tears caused by racism will be wiped from their eyes and the pain caused by prejudice will be no more. And God will reign over a community of justice, fairness and equality for ever and ever. (Revelation 21:3-4)

Autumn Ridge's policy on racial harmony closes with these words, "We believe that the church is to be a light, witness and leader in the world on the issue of race relations by demonstrating in her unity the essence of true unity in Christ. We desire to be a church that reflects the power of the gospel in breaking down all barriers of race and culture that prevent fellowship by rejecting explicit or implicit beliefs or practices that prejudicially values one race over other races.

This requires individual and corporate action to take concrete steps to promote racial reconciliation and harmony."

The second great truth to support this ministry of racial reconciliation is **OUR MOTIVATION**. Our motivation for this transforming work is **Christ's love**. Martin Luther King said, "Only love can drive out hate."

Paul writes, **"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view." (14-16)**

The Messiah's love gives us new energy. It urges us on. It impels us forward. The gospel is the announcement of a love that has changed the world, a love that sends us off to live and work in a totally new way.

As recipients of the love of the Christ we are to love others. As those who have been forgiven by Christ we are to forgive others. It does not make sense to say that we love Christ and hate a person that he has made. It is a blasphemy.

But to love someone you must know them. It is our lack of knowledge of others that causes fear and suspicion and allows us to buy into racial stereotypes. Racial reconciliation will not take place by passing a resolution but when God's people make a special effort to get to know people of different racial and social backgrounds around them.

So let me suggest some small steps we can take to show the love of Christ. When a person of a different race moves into our neighborhood we can be the first to welcome them. Let us remember Dr. King's words when he said "Anyone can be great because anyone can be a servant."

If we see a person at Autumn Ridge who is a different color from us let us make them feel especially welcome. Let's go out of our way to greet them and get to know them.

According to the 2000 census the minority population of Rochester is 14 percent.

I believe that as a church we should we make it our goal that at least 14 percent of our congregation are minorities.

Now that won't happen unless we are intentional about it.

Our church will not be multi-racial until we have multi-racial friends. People of color will not just come.

Praying only takes us so far. We must work at racial harmony.

I am very pleased that our new Elder Board, if all the candidates are confirmed, will include two African-Americans and a Korean. There is also a chap who was born in England and those folk are about odd as you can get.

I am glad our first two bold initiatives with Compassion Evangelical Hospital and Next Chapter allow us to demonstrate the beauty that comes about when different countries and races work together.

The third grand truth that supports this ministry of racial reconciliation is **OUR ENABLING.**

We can do this difficult work because **we are a new creation.**

Paul writes, **"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come." (v 17)**

This is one of the greatest summaries of what Christianity is all about. This is what makes the task of racial harmony possible.

We have a new power and a new person living within us.

He is the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit.

The recent tragedy of the earthquake in Haiti provides us with an opportunity to demonstrate that we are a new creation.

If this earthquake had happened in the United States we would be digging deep to support the relief effort.

Well Haiti is just a two hour flight from Miami.

It is the poorest country in the western hemisphere.

Its infrastructure before the earthquake was minimal and now it is virtually non existent.

For years our church has supported the work of the Haiti Baptist Mission. They have been in Haiti for decades and they will remain long after the earthquake.

We are sending relief funds through them.

I have visited Haiti a number of times.

I led my first mission team there nearly 30 years ago.

Haiti was an important step in my own understanding of how we are all equal before God.

On my first visit I was appalled by the poverty.

On my second visit I saw a boy die as a result of a cut in his hand that became septic.

Minimal medical care would have kept him alive.

I found my heart breaking with the need of those people.

When our daughter Kirstie died Gretchen and I requested that people would not send flowers to her funeral.

Instead we asked them to contribute to a fund to build a clinic in Haiti. Amazingly \$20,000 came in.

We sent a team to build that clinic in the village of Lubin.

In one of the outbreaks of violence that are so common in Haiti, the clinic was ransacked and nearly destroyed.

So we rebuilt it.

I have not heard how it fared in the recent earthquake.

I do know that this earthquake provides an opportunity for us to demonstrate that we are a new creation in Christ.

Then as we look at this ministry of racial reconciliation we see **OUR URGENCY.**

We must stat now for this **is the time of God's favor.**

Paul writes, **"As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, in the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."** (6:1-2)

Paul is telling us, "You have accepted God's grace. Don't let it go for nothing. Make the most of it. This is the day of salvation."

The work of spiritual and racial reconciliation cannot wait.

Right now we have an opportunity to put this into practice.

Next month three Mongolian children are coming to Rochester with their mothers and a translator so the children can have lifesaving heart surgery.

We are looking for housing for them.

If you can help for a week or two, jot down your interest on your Welcome Card and drop it in the offering bag or call the church office.

I think that almost everybody acknowledges that racism is ugly but that racial harmony is truly beautiful.

Certainly the film makers recognize this.

There is a great movie showing now called *Invictus*.

It is particularly good because it shows a lot of rugby which is a magnificent game. But it also depicts how the all white South African Rugby team are reconciled to the black majority population who then support them in their bid to win the 1995 Rugby World Cup.

There is only one part of the film I object to and that is the title, *Invictus*.

"Invictus" is the name of an awful poem which concludes "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

That is the sort of attitude that created apartheid.

It is when we remember that, Christ is the master of our fate and the captain of our soul that we begin to see value in other people.

There is a story that comes out of the Civil Rights struggle in Mississippi. A white first grader went to her first day in a newly integrated school at the height of the segregation storm. Her anxious mother met her at the school gate at the end of the day.

"How did everything go, honey?" she asked.

Her daughter replied, "O mother, you know what, a little black girl sat next to me."

Knowing of all the harsh words spoken by the adults on both sides before the school was integrated, the mother feared the worst but she tried to ask calmly, "And what happened?"

Her daughter responded, "We were both so scared that we held hands all day."

So we as God's people are to hold on to him with the hand of faith. With our other hand we hold on to others with the hand of fellowship. God's love flows through us as his ambassadors and enables us to go about the divine work of spiritual and racial reconciliation.