

The Idolatry of White Supremacy

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Caldwell Presbyterian Church

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Text: Galatians 1:6-11

I had thought I might begin today in a different way. But sometimes, some weeks, issues press through and insist they must be dealt with. And this is one of those weeks.

I also know that taking a full eight weeks to deal with heavy topics rooted in social justice is heavy lifting. I want to acknowledge there are many other types of sermons to be preached through the year – sermons that feed the soul and the mind in many other ways. Gail and I will always keep that balance in mind.

But this morning, God's heart is hurting. We have seen a lot in the news in the last few days about our U.S. Attorney General, a man named for two heroes of the confederacy. Quoting the Apostle Paul, he absurdly said in a press conference that the Bible justifies – and God would want – immigrant children to be taken from their mothers, all in the name of the law. He was talking about immigration law.

Time doesn't permit me to get into all that was wrong with his statement and its supporting ideology. But his words do give us a timely opportunity to engage together in a close look at just who the Apostle Paul was, what he really meant and what the book of Romans is really about.

In fact, you may want to join the ACE class on Sunday mornings, as they spend the next several weeks looking at Paul and his letter to the Romans, which Sessions misused. As we have seen this week, scripture and God's servants can be used for wrong and for evil. So, we need to know what to believe and what not to believe.

So let's start with a basic story.

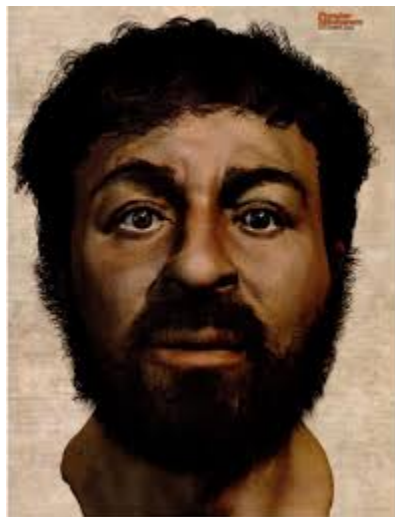
There once was a boy born of privilege. His daddy was powerful, an exalted citizen of the state and a powerful man in his house of faith.

As the boy became a man, he turned his privilege into his own brand of power – and he abused that power. He became known not just for his oppression of those with differing views – but a vicious persecution. He was feared across the land – all permitted by his social status and the power granted him by his religion.

One day, the man was struck blind – and after that, his eyes never worked the same again. Not just his eyes but his heart, his soul and his faith. He used the rest of his life in response to God's grace.

He atoned for his sins by traveling widely to tell his story and build bridges across cultures. He didn't always get it right. He still ruffled some peoples' feathers and made a few enemies. He kept a modest side job to make ends meet. He died doing the work to which he felt so strongly called.

Perhaps some of you recognize that story. The man was Saul turned Paul - the strident Jewish Pharisee who persecuted followers of Jesus before his transformation into one of the early church's most pivotal architects.



The man he credited with his healing from blindness and his salvation is the one pictured on the cover of your bulletin – Jesus the Christ. No, that is not Euro-Jesus with a square jaw, blue eyes and flowing light brown hair.

But that is Jesus – or at least a very close approximation, based on actual projections of what a first-century Jew in Palestine most likely looked like. Dark skin. Dark, thick, curly hair.

Take a good, long look at that man

Now ask yourself. How would our President and Attorney General be inclined to treat that man? How would that man be seen in 21st century Charlotte from the window of a police cruiser as he walked down the sidewalk or in the check-out line at the Myers Park Harris-Teeter or in the TSA line at the airport? What emotions or instincts might he stir in you, your friends or your family members?

Today, we turn the page in our series on social justice issues as we track the work and the study of our summer interns. Last week, we looked at the tale of the two Charlottes, the one of haves and the one of the have-nots. This week, we focus on race.

We place race early in our series because of its unmatched prevalence in the American narrative today. We must deal with race – or at least understand its influence in American dysfunction – before turning to all the other issues that shape our relationship with God and each other.

The story of Saul who became Paul is our story in America, isn't it, or at least the story of the dominant America? We are a nation shaped by men, like Saul, privilege and power who have abused that power. And that abuse has wrought the malicious ideology of white supremacy, the insidious notion that one race deserves priority and the no-holds-barred fight to keep things that way.

Yes, it's true – many have been awakened. Many now see the truth that to be black in America is to be forced to live less freely, less abundantly, less prosperously and less joyfully. But white supremacy still rules the day – and the heart and minds of too many Americans, whether they know it or not. It robs us as a nation of the ability to see things as they are. It has made us as a nation blind to the truth.

There is one major difference. Paul's blindness lasted only a short time. But in America, too many have been blind for far too long. America's blindness was there at the beginning, 400 years ago when the first ships landed here. After western European nations colonized and subdued so many other nations and their peoples, they discovered America. Our nation's founders envisioned a land of liberty ... but first they wiped out the dark-skinned native Americans. Then they built an economy and a way of life dependent on the slave trade, which set the course we still travel.

America got a second shot at living up to its ideals after Appomattox and emancipation. Here in Charlotte, as historian Dr. Tom Hanchett told our interns this week, things started out hopefully. Whites and blacks lived, worked and worshipped side by side during reconstruction.

But within thirty years, Charlotte and the rest of the south were swept up in the first White Supremacy movement. Rich whites feared that free blacks were making too much progress and might couple their increasing stature with working-class whites to gain a voice in how things would be run. So powerful white southerners, from newspapers to business to churches, stirred fears and terror with a narrative that African-Americans were dangerous, lesser beings to be held down at all costs.

Over the decades, America's blindness deepened as federal and local laws instituted prejudice. Local governments outlawed blacks from living in certain neighborhoods. The Federal government locked blacks out of receiving guarantees like the GI Bill for education and long-term mortgages to buy and own homes. So-called separate but equal schools advanced the myth of equality. Beyond government, people too matters into their own hands to keep the black man down through lynchings and church burnings.

Generations later, black household wealth equals one dollar for every ten dollars in white household wealth – a result of barring generations of African-Americans from the American dream.

None of this is God's way or will for us. Again and again, scripture points to a God who forbids bigotry, prejudice and partiality among peoples, just as God welcomes and loves all.

We hear it as God instructed his servant Samuel with these words: “the Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

We hear it in the book of First John when the author says: “Anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.”

We hear it in the apostle Paul’s opening words to his letter the Galatians that we heard read before the sermon. A gospel of division, a gospel that others who are different, a gospel that prioritizes and prejudices one people over another is, as Paul says, no gospel at all, but heresy.

And we at Caldwell know well the passage in Galatians that we hold at the center of our mission here: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

We use that last passage to consider God’s compassion for a range of people who have been “othered.” We seek to come together across our differences and different forms of oppression and woundedness. We strive here to come alongside the LGBTQ community WHILE ALSO coming alongside the poor WHILE ALSO coming alongside African-Americans.

But on this day when our topic is race, I should make something clear, at least for what I think. The mean-spirit that has taken hold of our nation requires us to stand in the gap alongside all those who are oppressed. But we must realize how race is of prime importance. Race simply shapes every other issue that concerns us as God’s people.

That truth is as vivid here in Charlotte as anywhere. African-Americans here clearly live in a different city than the rest of us. From education to the economy to the environment, African-Americans suffer disproportionate impact from the many problems we face. Pick a topic:

Homelessness: Nine out of 10 homeless people in Charlotte are black.

Poverty: 39% of black kids in Charlotte are in poverty compared to 5% of white kids (and the numbers are about the same for adults).

Education: 77% of black students attend schools where most students face poverty compared to 23% of white students. No wonder, perhaps, that white students in our schools are 2.3 grades ahead of the national average while black students are one grade behind.

Housing costs: While the target for all families is to spend no more than 30% of household income on housing, black and Hispanic Charlotteans spend an average of 57% of their incomes on housing.

Environment: African-Americans in Charlotte live disproportionately in neighborhoods plagued with heavy-traffic and industrial complexes and other producers of unhealthy air and chemicals.

These truths didn't take shape overnight. No wonder, then, that many African-Americans distrust the powers that be. The suspicion many in our city have – even of well-intended efforts to make things better – is backed up by decades of lived reality.

Things won't get better here in Charlotte – until we have a different narrative, until our blindness to the disastrous effects of white supremacy – for all in our city – is healed, until, as with Paul, not just our eyes work better, but our hearts and our souls, our hands and our feet.

After Paul recovered from his blindness, he warned Christ's followers that there was something even worse than being blind – idolatry. Idolatry is a devotion to what is not of God. Idolatry is to cast an object, an ideology, a worldview that diverts our attention from God's will and God's way. Idolatry is to put something between us and God, something that separates and alienates us from our Creator, something that signals one believes God's kingdom is secondary to what makes us comfortable.

I don't pretend to have all the answers to how to reverse centuries of systemic sin. But I wonder if this language of idolatry can awaken us and humble us enough to move toward healing. I wonder if our deeply imbedded devotion to a way of life that elevates whites and suppresses all others isn't, in fact, the most dangerous kind of idolatry in how it puts us all in opposition to God.

The Christian essayist Frederick Buechner says that the risk of any idol is that we make it our master. How ironic – that those who would be modern-day masters are themselves mastered by an evil ideology and way of life, one that separates them from the love of God, one that, as Paul said in today's reading, is no gospel at all.

Amen.