

March 14, 2021

Build A Bridge: God At Work

Matthew 9:35-38

Paul Gauche

There are some events that happen during our lifetimes that we never forget; events that confront us, challenge our behavior, change the way we think. When these events take place, it's rare that we forget where we were and what we were doing when the events occurred, who told us, and how we felt when it happened. Let me give you a handful of examples:

- November 22, 1963, the assassination of John F. Kennedy
- January 28, 1986, the Challenger explosion
- September 11, 2001, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon
- August 1, 2007, the collapse of the I-35 Mississippi River Bridge
- July 6, 2016, the death of Philando Castile in St. Paul
- January 6, 2021, the storming of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C

I'll never forget where I was and what I was doing when I first heard the news of a death that would echo around the world. It was Memorial Day, Monday, May 25, 2020. Nancy Lee and I had just dropped our granddaughters off at their home in St. Paul and we were driving back to Burnsville. We turned on the radio and Mike Max – of all people, the sportscaster for WCCO Radio – was breaking the news of the death of George Floyd at the intersection of 38th and Chicago. Nancy Lee and I drove home in disbelief at what we were hearing. And I'll never forget how Mike Max ended his report. After describing what he knew to that point, he asked a couple of questions, "How do we tell our children about something so horrible?" and "What do we have to do to put an end to this violence against people of color?"

The season of Lent give us an opportunity to slow way down and take a good, long look at ourselves. It's a time to look inward and come to grips with all that is out of alignment in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ and children of God. It's also a season to look outward toward our society and reconcile all that does

not reflect Jesus' proclamation that the Kingdom of God, the Realm, the Commonwealth of God, is right here at hand. While there is certainly a great deal that we could focus on in both arenas, racial injustice in our nation rises to the top. In this Lenten series we're being challenged to do the hard work of responding to the biblical mandate to "do justice" by joining God in the work of racial reconciliation. This week I want to peel back some more layers as we see more of how God is already at work in us and through us, and calling us into new work.

Over the past year as our eyes have been opened to the magnitude of racial injustice in our nation, we've had to face a really perplexing question: "Why isn't God doing anything about it?" I know I have. There have been so many times in the face of some of life's hardest issues, I've wondered why doesn't God just "step in and fix stuff." And I'm reminded again and again that that's not how God works. That's when I begin to ask some other questions: What if God does step in, but does so in a different way? What if God does indeed have an intention to do something about racial injustice, and we are God's intention? What if the solution that God has in mind isn't making racism magically disappear, but instead calls on us to do the hard work of ending injustice on God's behalf? What if we are the response of God to all the injustice that God cares about so deeply?

Personally, for me, and I want to challenge you to consider this with me: What if the way all of this begins to turn in a new direction is really about us becoming more like Jesus in the world? What if it really is about asking ourselves how we actually, physically, practically, honestly become Jesus's hands and feet, Jesus's heart in our own neighborhoods and in our own communities? Friends, the more I come to terms with my own defensiveness, my attempts to justify my own thinking and behavior, and my action and my inaction, the more I'm learning that God is doing something about injustice through us. We're it! That's the biblical story from beginning to end... that God is at work making all things new through us. And just so we're clear: this isn't a political agenda. This is a spiritual agenda. This is the call of the Gospel, it's a Gospel mandate. So the real question is whether we'll participate in what God is already doing. Will we, like God, be anti-racist?

Those questions are deeply rooted in an ancient story

that Matthew tells about Jesus calling for more hands, more hearts, and more feet in the kingdom work.

[Matthew 9:35-38 – The Passion Translation]

Jesus walked throughout the region with the joyful message of God's kingdom realm. He taught in their meeting houses, and wherever he went he demonstrated God's power by healing every kind of disease and illness. When he saw the vast crowds of people, Jesus' heart was deeply moved with compassion, because they seemed weary and helpless, like wandering sheep without a shepherd. He turned to his disciples and said, "The harvest is huge and ripe! But there are not enough harvesters to bring it all in. As you go, plead with the Owner of the Harvest to thrust out many more reapers to harvest his grain!"

This is the Word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Friends, Jesus is proclaiming a joyful message that God is always creating a world where everyone has what they need to thrive in life, where in every community "justice rolls on like a river, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," where the people of God in every community work together to seek healing for every kind of disease and illness, especially racism. This is God's good news for all people – no exceptions. But when the message that some people experience on a daily basis is that their lives don't matter as much as someone else's life because of the color of their skin, or where they live or go to school, or who they love, or who their friends are, or how they vote, or that their lives don't matter at all because they are somehow less of a human being, made in the image of God, than another human being, that bears the image of God, we have to ask ourselves, is that really the message of the kingdom of God? Are we being the people that God is calling us to be? Let's make no mistake: God is at work in us and through us. And the work we are called to do is to partner with God by stepping into that work together. And if you want to know where to start or continue your partnership with God on this, I want to give you some clear next steps for working toward that this week.

Latasha Morrison is the founder of **Be The Bridge**, a non-profit organization that is equipping thousands of people around the world to serve as ambassadors of racial reconciliation. Morrison's book, *Be The Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation* is a national best seller and is the companion book for our Lenten series here at Prince of Peace. Morrison identifies several key areas for doing the reconciling

work of the kingdom of God: learning to tell the truth, living with humility, developing respect, the power of confession, to name a few. The book details a host of "next steps" that are essential and practical for the work of seeking racial reconciliation. You can visit www.popmn.org/justice to tap into any of the small group opportunities. There's a POP for Justice Facebook group, there's a Be the Bridge Facebook group, there's a link to all kinds of resources that we've created for you to be part of the momentum or racial reconciliation. Today I want to give you two insights for taking just one step forward.

First, God is challenging us to look inward. This is about doing the hard work of self-reflection when it comes to seeing and honoring the differences between ourselves and others. When we do that, we're opening ourselves up to new ways of seeing how God is calling us to be the bridge to a new way of living together. Looking inward challenges us to be wise, discerning and courageous about the things that need to change. Looking inward is challenging because it demands that we tell the truth about what we think and say and do in our lives. When we pause to ask ourselves why we're feeling defensive, or when we take some time to ask ourselves if it's possible that we might have gotten some things wrong, then we open ourselves up to learning and rediscovering who God is creating us to be in this big, wide, diverse, creative world. When we trade defensiveness and pride for the posture of humility, we listen differently and we're able to acknowledge mistakes.

The only way that I know to enter into this hard work is to begin by praying for help. Perhaps the single best prayer in all of scripture for this comes from Psalm 139:23-24:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; put me to the test, try me and see if there is any offensive way in me... point out anything in me that offends you and lead me along the path of everlasting life."

The only way that I know to enter into this hard work of acknowledging the work ahead of us is to ask for God's help to look at ourselves differently. So let's just pause here and do that. Let's pray this together:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; put me to the test, try me and see if there is any offensive way in me... point out anything in me that offends you and lead me along the path of everlasting life. Amen.

Second, God is challenging us to look outward. To help with this, I want to invite my friend, Kari Davis, to join us. Kari and I go back quite a ways. She's been a

disciple at Prince of Peace for over 19 years. Our kids went to school together. We've been on staff together. And we've invested in these really important issues at Prince of Peace together. I've asked Kari to help continue this conversation together by helping us to understand what it means to look outward.

Kari: You know as we talk about stepping outside of our comfort zones, it's really about learning a new experience. And as we experience new people with different backgrounds than ours, we want to go in with understanding that we don't know everything. Well, frankly, the person you're talking to doesn't know everything either. They can only speak from where they came. So you want to go and you want to listen. You want to ask questions. And remember that no question is a silly one. Because we don't know what we don't know. And everyone is on that different part of the continuum. So, at the very beginning, give yourself some grace. Don't be afraid to ask silly questions. But you're trying to learn these experiences, of different backgrounds and different cultures, that are new and unfamiliar to you. When people are asked questions, they are more than willing to share, so come in with an open heart, open mind, and be willing to have a conversation. Be deliberate about it, and because it is external, you want to think about planting those seeds of building a relationship, so it's not just a one and done. You want to be able to create a new opportunity for a friendship, to create a new piece of your community. And by walking with someone, you will learn about their journey and they will learn about yours.

Thanks, Kari. Those were some powerful words and steps for us. Friends, this is about becoming aware of the things that we can change and taking even small steps in that direction. By doing this we join a movement away from racial injustice toward the momentum of racial reconciliation. And friends, we don't have to fix the whole thing today, or even tomorrow, or even this week, that's impossible. That would be great, but it's not going to happen that way. But by looking outward and making decisions that bring life and aliveness to others is a good start. The joyful kingdom of God comes more into view. To finish this, I'd like to lead us in what I'm calling: "A Litany of Momentum." I'll speak the first line... and then you respond with the second line. For instance, I'll say "No more apathy," and you respond, "more empathy."

No more walls [response] ...more bridges.

No more violence [response] ...more peace.

No more standing alone [response] ...more standing together.

No more exclusion [response] ...more inclusion.

No more disunity [response] ...more community.

No more ignorance [response] ...more learning.

No more divided [response] ...more united.

No more death [response] ...more life.

No more hate [response] ...more love.

No more alienation [response] ...more reconciliation.