

The Power of the Gospel to Change Hearts and Minds:  
Bringing Reconciliation, Renewal and Revival to St. Louis

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David asked me to speak on the power of the gospel to change hearts and minds, especially around the topic of race. And that got me thinking about a question that I would pose to you tonight. The question is:

If the gospel has the power to change hearts and minds around the topic of race, why hasn't it done so already? Why are our churches still overwhelmingly segregated? Why, in 2018 are we still experiencing racism, racial tension and racial animus in our city and around our country? Why is it that in the two thousand years since Jesus proclaimed all of us to be brothers and sisters in him that we are as divided now as ever?

In 1903, W.E.B. Dubois wrote that: The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line. Why is that quote still true 115 years later?

If the gospel has the power to change our hearts and minds around the topic of race, why hasn't it already done so for the vast majority of Christians worldwide?

I believe the answer to that question lies in a little soul food restaurant in Nashville, Tennessee.

Many years ago, when my wife and I were just dating, I went to visit her in Nashville where she was living at the time. She knew that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, so she took me to a "meat and three" restaurant. I had never heard of a meat and three restaurant, but if you go down to Nashville, you can find them everywhere. A meat and three is exactly what it sounds like. It's a soul food restaurant where you go in, you pick out your meat, which is your main dish, and then you pick out three sides. For your main dish, you can choose from pork chops, pork steaks, fried chicken, chicken fried steak, ham or meatloaf. After you pick out your main dish, you get three sides. Your side options are fried potatoes, red potatoes, green beans, lima beans, creamed spinach, creamed corn or mac and cheese. And of course, you also get a side of corn bread and some sweet tea to wash it down.

Now everybody loves the sides. And everybody loves the sweet tea. And everybody loves the cornbread. But the *meat* is the main attraction. The sides are just there to make you feel a little less guilty about the pleasure you are deriving from the copious amounts of fried meat you are eating.

At this point, it would be fair of you to wonder, "what in the heck does a meat and three have to do with the gospel and racial reconciliation?"

And the answer is simply this: The reason the gospel has not changed our hearts and minds around the issue of race for the last two thousand years is because we have been serving the *meat* of the gospel as if it were a side dish and we've been serving up side dishes as if they were the meat of the gospel!

You see, Jesus serves up the meat of the gospel in unequivocal terms when he is being tested by the religious leaders of his day. They ask him, "what is the greatest commandment of all?" In other words, what is the *meat* of God's truth? What is the main dish of our faith?

And without hesitation, Jesus says the main dish is two-fold: 1) love the Lord thy God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and 2) love your neighbor as yourself.

And in case you're tempted to relegate these truths to side dishes, he says: "all of the law and all of the prophets hang on these two commands."

That means everything Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Samuel, Daniel, David, Amos and Obadiah had to say --- all of the great truths that they expounded --- are *side dishes* to the core truth of "Love For God and Neighbor."

This is a radical statement, especially for religious folk, because Jesus is fundamentally challenging their and our religious practice and belief. He's saying, personal piety isn't the main dish. Holiness isn't the main dish. Faith isn't the main dish. Hope isn't the main dish. Baptism isn't the main dish. Spiritual gifts aren't the main dish. Generosity isn't the main dish. Martyrdom isn't the main dish. The *meat* of the gospel is complete love for God and unconditional love for neighbor.

However, because this answer offends our religious sensibility, the religious leader who asked the question tried to justify himself by saying, "then who is my neighbor?"

And Jesus then tells the most famous parable in the Bible, which describes "neighbor" as someone of a different ethnicity, culture, race and religion than you. You see the meat of the gospel is the complete reconciliation of all humanity to God and to one another through the power of divine love.

That's why the longest recorded conversation in the Bible between Jesus and anyone else was with a woman of a different culture and ethnicity than Jesus. That's why, the most famous parable in the scripture involves a Samaritan who reached across the color line to help a man in need. That's why, before Jesus' death, he prayed to the Father that the world would be one, united in perfect unity. That's why, an African was chosen to carry Jesus' cross to calvary. That's why, the veil in the holiest of holies was torn in two at the moment of Jesus' death. That's why, the great commission calls for the gospel to go into *all* the world. That's why, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on day of Pentecost empowered the disciples to speak in the diverse languages of people from all over the planet. That's why, the Holy Spirit sent Philip from a revival in Samaria to share the gospel with an Ethiopian on his way to his home country. That's why, God sent Peter an anti-bigotry vision in Acts 10, and sent him to preach to the Italians. That's why, John's vision of heaven includes a great multitude that no one could count, from *every nation, tribe, people and language*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

You see the meat of the gospel is that the entire world might be reconciled to God and each other by the power of divine love. That truth has been right in front of us the whole time,

but we've treated it like a side dish. We've served it up like an afterthought, and we wonder why it has no power to change us.

The Apostle Paul understood the meat of the gospel, when he said:

"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

The reason we are not seeing the gospel change our hearts and minds around the issue of race is because we continually forget that at the heart of the gospel, Jesus calls us to love one another as much as we love ourselves. But Christians have never --- not once since the time of Jesus --- ever served up that command as the meat of the gospel. And until we acknowledge the fact that we have entirely missed the mark as Jesus followers --- and that we have been serving up side dishes as the main course --- and until we reverse course and begin pressing into what Jesus really taught us, the gospel will have no effect on the issue of race and racial reconciliation.

So, how do we change course?

I believe that what Dave and Pastor Brandon and their team are doing here tonight is part of the church's course correction.

Simply by being here, we're recognizing the wrong. And recognition of the wrong is the first step toward the right.

Tonight we are recognizing the central problem in the heart of man that the gospel is designed to correct. The central problem in the heart of man is the elevation of self above God and above others. It's the denigration of others for the sake of self. From the dawn of time, brother has pitted himself against brother, tribe against tribe, people against people, nation against nation. The Bible describes this problem in the fourth chapter of the Book of Genesis, where it gives an account of Cain and Abel -- two brothers from the same father who had every reason to live in peace and harmony with one another, but whose relationship ended in fratricide - the killing of one brother by another. And throughout all time and across all geographical reaches of the globe men have disregarded and dishonored the lives of other men who were made in the image of God.

Our nation --- which some emphatically insist is a Christian nation --- is no different in that regard than every other nation on the planet. The founders of our nation, at its inception, carried the same corruption in their heart as the evil in the hearts of all of us. And at the inception of our country, our founders committed a grave and harrowing sin. For all of their brilliance and talent and abilities, all of their genius, and in some instances, their real greatness, they somehow carried within their hearts the false belief of their superiority over other men, other races, other people groups.

And so, on one hand, our country was founded on the high-minded ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and on the other hand on the deplorable reality of slavery, racism, bigotry, oppression and injustice. For 400 years, that injustice continued, until 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation brought a glimmer of hope. But the hope was short lived, because for the next 100 years, African Americans and other minorities in our nation were subjected to legalized discrimination, segregation, denial of housing rights, denial of voting rights, denial of employment rights, and the list goes on. Until finally, just over 50 years ago, in 1964, under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, the Civil Rights Amendment was passed, and it became illegal to discriminate, oppress and segregate on the basis of race.

To give you a sense of how recent that was, there are people in this room today who personally remember the passage of the Civil Rights Act. There are people here today who personally remember what it felt like to drink from separate drinking fountains, and go to separate schools, and live in separate neighborhoods, who remember personally what it was like to be denied a meal because of their race, who remember personally what it was like to require a special Green Book in order to travel by car in the United States, a handbook for black motorists to inform them of which hotels and restaurants would serve them. There are people in this room today who remember personally what that was like. For those of us who don't remember, our parents do, or at least our grandparents do.

And those 500 years of bigotry, racism, injustice and oppression inflicted a deep wound through the very soul of our nation, through the soul of our city, through the soul of our churches, through the soul of our families, and the wound lingers today. It lingers in the hearts of mothers and fathers every time they send their black and brown sons out of the house with the unspoken anxiety that if their son comes across the wrong person they may be seen as a threat and treated as such. The wound lingers in our neighborhoods, our education system, our poverty rates, our incarceration rates, our churches and our government.

And because the wound is something that none of us want to look at, we try to cover it up with slogans and phrases of equality, with songs and festivals, with programs and policies. But when an Anthony Lamar Smith dies or a Trayvon Martin or an Eric Garner or a Michael Brown, the bandage is ripped off of the wound, and we are all forced to face it again.

And while recognition is a necessary step, it is not a sufficient step. Recognition must be followed by *repentance*.

By repentance, I don't mean weepy guilt or maudlin sentimentality. I mean a paradigm shift, a transmutation of the heart and mind, a radical re-discovery of the core of our faith, a personal transformation that reveals the true nature of our relationship with one another, the relationship of blood kin, of spiritual unity, of true oneness. It's only after wide-eyed recognition and soul-transforming repentance can we begin to experience the hope of reconciliation.

When Jesus came to the earth, he had one main purpose --- one main guiding vision for his life: that every single person on the planet would become ONE. Just before he died, he prayed for this vision of reality to come to pass. He cried out to God, and said, "I pray . . .

for those who will believe in me . . . that all of them may be one, Father . . . that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. . . so that the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Jesus’ sole mission, his express aim in life, was to bring people from every race and culture, every ethnicity and tribe together as one family -- because it is through our ONENESS that the world will learn that they are loved.

That’s why “multi-ethnicity” cannot be a side dish of our gospel. It must be at the very heart of our message, not because it’s neat or cool or hip or fashionable, but because it *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ. It’s why he came. It’s the meat.

But if history has taught us anything, it has taught us that all of us are entirely incapable of that kind of compassion, that kind of intimacy, that kind of self-sacrifice. It’s taught us that our hearts are always seeking our own ends, rather than the good of our fellow man. It’s taught us that war and strife, violence and lust for power are the basic realities of our world, and no matter how hard we try, we can’t seem to overcome our overwhelming inclination to do harm to ourselves and others.

And so tonight, we look to the author of our faith, and we ask, “how can we possibly live out the commandment to truly love our neighbor as our self? How can we possibly heal the wounds that cut so deeply through the fabric of our world?”

And in a divine twist of irony, Jesus doesn’t answer our question with us with words --- he answers us it with *wounds*. He knew we wouldn’t be able to heal ourselves, and so he chose to heal our wounds by taking them on himself.

*He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him. And by his stripes, we are healed.*

You see, it turns out, God reconciles all of us to himself so that we can be agents of reconciliation in the world. If you are a Christian, you are an ambassador of reconciliation. You’re an agent of divine love. You’re an emissary of racial healing. You’re an envoy of justice. You’re a minister of peace.

And here’s the really good news: when we pursue Christ’s true vision for our world, his true mission for our planet, his true message of reconciliation through divine love, when we commit our lives to serving up the *meat* of the gospel instead of the side dishes, we can do it with the confidence and assurance of knowing that our victory is a foregone conclusion. We can rest assured that the vision Christ imagined for our world will indeed come to pass, that one day he will gather his people from every corner of the globe, every tribe, every tongue, every nation, and his prayer to the Father will become a reality. Because one day we will indeed be one.

So until that day, let us serve with passion. Let us serve with joy. And let us serve with hope as we serve up the main dish of the gospel: the reconciliation of the entire planet through *us* by the power of God’s relentless love.