

October 30, 2022

Nothing But The Truth: Hold Fast – One Human Race

Acts 17: 24-31

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro – Nothing But the Truth

Over the past several weeks we have been covering issues that we face in our culture and how we, as Christians, are to think through them and be able to speak truth to each issue in love. Whatever the topic is, we must be grounded in the truth of God's word and speak from it as our foundation. Notice where all of these cultural issues come from. We have an enemy that has been, and still is, trying to tear apart the very fabric of God's created order. Ephesians 6:12 says, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Recall that the Bible tells us that God created them Male and Female, two distinct genders each with roles and responsibilities that each fit in with the whole design of creation. Satan has been successful in promoting the lie that gender is fluid and we can decide for ourselves what we want to identify as based on our feelings. The Bible tells us that God instituted marriage and defined it as being between one man and one woman for the benefit and enjoyment of both and for the procreation of the earth. The deceiver would have us believe the lie that "love is love" and we are free to enter in to any relationship we want regardless of God's clear commands in his word. And today we are going to discuss the issue of race. Sadly, our country is still divided along racial lines although much of it is caused by those in power so that they can remain there. We live in a world where everything is "racist." They problem with this is that muddies the water and makes it more difficult to identify actual racism. How are we as Christians supposed to respond to constant shifts in our culture. More specifically, how are we to deal with the issue of race in a world that is so divided by it? I realize this is a hot button topic and my goal is not to get lost in the weeds of trying to argue what is racist and what is not like so many in the media try to do in order to get more clicks or views on their websites. Nor am I trying to score political points like many of our politicians on both sides of the aisle do, who don't really care about the issue, they only care about your vote. My goal this morning is to speak about race from a biblical point of view so that we can be grounded in God's truth, so that we can see through the enemy's schemes and speak the truth in love to a culture that is being deceived giving us a platform to share the Gospel of Jesus.

Our Text this morning comes from Acts 17:24-31 and is part of the Apostle Paul's discussion with the Athenian people on top of the Areopagus in Athens. And while this passage doesn't speak to the issue of race directly, we do find in Paul's argument truths that will help us as we think through the issue of race in our culture today. If you are able, please stand with me as I read God's word to us from Acts 17:24-31. [Read Passage]

During Paul's second missionary journey, the Lord led him to Athens, Greece which, even though its glory days were behind it after being defeated by the Romans, it was still known as the intellectual capital of the world. As Paul arrived, like any tourist in a new city, he walked around, taking in all the sites, but instead of being awed by the beauty of all the architecture and sculptures, he was grieved because none of it was done to honor God as vs. 16 tells us [Read]. Kathleen and I had the opportunity to travel while in college to Athens and take in the sites as Paul did, only a few thousand years later. We had the opportunity to read this passage of

scripture on the site of the Areopagus overlooking the city. It happened to be a Sunday morning and the church bells from all the Greek Orthodox Churches down below us were ringing and it was a reminder that the Word of God that was preached by Paul was still true for us today. Paul was given the opportunity to speak to the philosophers and leading men and women of Athens and he takes the opportunity to share with them about the God whom they do not know which brings us to the passage that we read this morning. And in the middle of this discussion Paul makes an argument that will become the basis for purposes today. We read in vs. 26 [Read]

I'd like to point out two things from this verse alone. First Paul points out God is the creator or maker of every nation. This takes us back to the story of creation where we read Gen 1:26, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" And again in Gen. 2:7, "Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." So God made "from one man" every nation on the earth. Our differences in appearance and cultures are not because of random changes in genetic code but by intentional design by our creator.

The second point, is that the word used here for nations is the Greek word "ethnos" which is the root for our word ethnicity. What we would define as race is really ethnicity. Why does this matter? Are we just splitting words here? I think it matters because the underlying truth to Paul's statement here is that there is only one race. One human race. And our very DNA backs this up. In an article from 2018 on their website entitled: "Genetics vs Genomics Fact Sheet" the NIH's National Human Genome Research Institute made this statement, "All human beings are 99.9 percent identical in their genetic makeup." Now we know that the other .1 percent makes a lot of difference but everyone human being is made in the image of God and is "precious in his sight" as the children's song tells us. The truth is, we are more united in our humanity than we are divided by our ethnicity. John Piper said it this way, "No matter what the skin color or facial features or hair texture or other genetic traits, every human being in every ethnic group has [been created] in the image of God: a mind with unique, God-like reasoning powers, a heart with capacities for moral judgments and spiritual affections, and a potential for relationship with God that sets every person utterly apart from all the animals which God has made. Every human being, whatever color, shape, age, gender, intelligence, health, or social class, is made in the image of God."

This idea would have flown in the face of the Greek way of thinking and Paul decides to confront it head on. The ancient Greeks believed that they did not share a common ancestor with all the other peoples of the earth but they sprang from their own native soil. This belief, in their minds, gave them the right to look down on other people groups mentioned in scripture like the Barbarians and the Scythians. And this is common among all forms of racism. The belief that one race is superior to another. But Paul's point is that God created both the Athenian and the Barbarian from the same common ancestor. And in God's providence, he "determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek him." Everything was by his design, all with the purpose of working out his plan of redemption. How is it then that we would get the idea that one people group is superior to another?

So if we are all one human race with, albeit, different ethnicities, tastes and cultures, where did the idea of race, and therefore, racism come from? Race like any other sin is a direct result of the fall. And let me emphatically state it here. Racism, in all its forms, is sin, and should not be tolerated by the Christian or in the church. God indeed created humans in his own

image and gave them dominion over his creation. And when God was finished creating, he said that everything that he had made was “very good.” (Gen. 1:31) Creation was perfect and complete. However, God also created mankind with the ability to choose and gave them the free will to choose whether to obey him or not. And we know that Adam and Eve used their free will to disobey God, by believing the lie of the serpent and by eating the forbidden fruit and thus subjected the world to the effects of sin and separation from God. After being banned from paradise, Adam and Eve and their descendants spiraled deeper into their sin farther away from God until God destroyed the earth in judgment by flood only saving Noah and his family. But things didn’t get any better after the flood and when we reach Gen. 11 and the Tower of Babel, God separates the people by language, again in judgment of their disobedience, and the nations as we know them were born.

From the time of the Fall to the moment Christ appeared in the flesh, Paul refers to as the “Times of ignorance” in vs. 30 of or text today. More generally, Paul is speaking of sin, but for our purposes, racism would fit into this category. For what is racism really? At its most basic level, isn’t it ignorance of the truth? That, as scripture makes clear and as I have hopefully made clear this morning, that every person, no matter where they come from or what they look like, is made in God’s image. That every person comes from the same original parents, sharing 99.9% of the same DNA, making us all part of the human race. That, because of this fact, there is no foundation to any thoughts or claims that one “race” is more superior to any other. And that the differences that do separate us ought not to. For they were intentional by our loving creator and ought to be viewed as beautiful. We New Englanders should know this better than anyone else as we have a real life picture of this beauty all around us. Although much of it has passed, consider the beauty in all the colors of fall that we have been blessed with over the last several weeks. The reds, yellows, oranges and even browns mixed in with the evergreens to make one harmonious beautiful picture. Different species of trees and different colors all coming together to sing in glorious praise of their creator. This should be the same for us and we should see it reflected in the church.

In the story of Pentecost in Acts 2, we see a reversal of Gen. 11 and the Tower of Babel. Instead of people being separated by their tribes and languages we see people of all languages coming together under the Gospel of Christ and the church is born. If it is true that our identity as human beings created in the image of God is greater than all ethnic differences, then our identity as born-again children of God is even greater still. In other words, if it is true that we are more united by our humanity than separated by our ethnicity, it is an even greater truth that in Christ we have a unity that far surpasses human comprehension. On top of sharing in the image of God as human beings, we have been re-born together in the image of Christ. So how much less are we to be divided by our ethnic differences! Paul says in Colossians 3:11 "In Christ, there is no Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all."

In fact, that last phrase is key. The only distinction that matters is not a person’s ethnicity but whether they are in Christ or not. Again, the Apostle Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:21-22: “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” The difference is life and death. Well, technically, death and resurrection. For death awaits us all, but those who are in Christ have the hope of the resurrection. The only distinctive that separates people is not physical but spiritual. Every person who has ever lived or who will ever live until the return of Christ is either dead in Adam and destined for judgment or alive in Christ and destined for glory. That is it. That is the only

division that matters. And if anyone is in Christ, no matter what color they are or what language they speak, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ and part of the family of God.

And this should be reflected in the church. Remember my analogy of the fall colors from before. The church should reflect the distinctive beauty of God's creation. However the church has not always gotten it right. To its shame, people who have claimed to follow Christ have used the Word of God incorrectly to justify their sin of racist actions toward other people groups. In 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said this famous quote, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning," and sadly this is still true today. According to findings from the most recent (2012) National Congregations Study, as cited by the Pew Research Center, about 8-in-10 American churchgoers still attend services at a place where a single racial or ethnic group comprises at least 80 percent of the congregation. What this study doesn't take into account is churches like ours that, according to a demographic study we had done about 5 years ago showed that of all the people who live within a 5 mile radius of our church, 97% of them are white. So we should see that reflected in our church, which we do. But on the whole the premise is the same. God set up the church to reflect his beautiful diversity in creation. But it has been an imperfect reflection at best because the church is full of imperfect people who don't always get it right all the time. 1 Cor. 13:12 says, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." Again, Paul is speaking here and he is talking about this poor reflection of the world we currently live in. In Paul's day, they didn't have mirrors as we do. They would use shiny metals or other polished items in order to see their reflection. But they couldn't see themselves clearly, not like we can with our modern mirrors. But Paul saw a day coming when everything would be seen clearly and then we would see the beauty of God's Kingdom, unhindered, in all of it's glory.

Our passage spoke of this day that Paul references in 1 Cor. 13, when it says in vs. 31 [Read] This day speaks about the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. On that day, he will come to restore all things and make all things right. Every injustice in the world, including every racial injustice, will be dealt with and he will rule upon the earth with all power and dominion and authority. God allowed John, one of Jesus' disciples, to see this day in a vision and he described it for us in Rev. 7:9-10. "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" John uses this same description "nation, tribe, people and tongue/language," 7 times in Revelation to describe for us the multitude of people that he sees. It is a beautiful depiction of what will be the reality of those who know Christ. We will be part of this great crowd of people made up of all the nations and tribes of the earth signing praises to our God for the salvation that he so freely gave to us all through Jesus. There won't be any prejudice there. There won't be any racial division there. There won't be any horrific hate crimes there. For the old things will be no more and we will be together in unity perfectly reflecting God's beautiful design of his creation.

So how do we as Christians deal with the issue of race in a world so divided by it? Well, we must confront it head on as the Apostle Paul did. We must call it out for what it is when we experience or see it, using the truth of God's word as our guide. And we must realize the truth of who is really behind every racist thought and action, the deceiver of the whole world, Satan. The truth of the matter is that there is only one human race. From one man God made every nation and every person is made in the image of God deserving to be treated with respect and dignity.

Because of this fact, we have much more that unites us than what divides us. How much more is this true for those of us who are brothers and sisters in Christ. There is no “white church” or “black church” but Christ’s church under his Lordship tasked with the same mission to make disciples of all nations. As I mentioned earlier, the church has not always gotten it right, and sadly, has failed many times. But the church is but an imperfect reflection of what we have in store for us when Jesus comes again. When we see the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations fulfilled and we join the multitude described for us today; people from every nation, tribe, and language gathered around the throne of God praising him for his salvation. What a day that will be! This is the truth and nothing but the truth.