



“Are We There Yet?”

October 10, 2021

Genesis 1:27; Revelation 7:9-10

Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

2537 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-4136
Telephone: 216-321-8880
Website: www.COTSumc.org

On July 12, 2020, Church of the Saviour made a covenant commitment to be an intentionally anti-racist congregation. That’s not to say that weren’t against racism before that. Church of the Saviour has long been a place of inclusion and reconciliation for people of every race seeking to encounter the grace of God in Christ. What changed for us fourteen months ago was a commitment not simply to oppose racism, but to commit ourselves to resisting and dismantling racism wherever we encounter it, inside and outside our own faith community. We launched a campaign called “Holding Up Our Corner” based on the story of the paralyzed man and his four companions from Mark 2:1-5. We were guided in that work by Rev. Dr. F. Willis Johnson, who challenged us to acknowledge, affirm, and act in response to our commitment. We’ve continued that work through individual study and prayer, small group book studies, and cross-congregational conversations. Today we begin a four-week sermon series that builds on our early work and renews our focus in this season of our life together.

There are some who may ask, *why are we still talking about this? We’re an integrated church with people of multiple racial and ethnic identities. We have a modestly diverse staff. We have a Gospel Choir and Black worship leaders in our 9:30 service. And everybody is welcome here. Haven’t we done enough?*

Have we done enough? Are you satisfied with our progress? Now, be aware: how you identify racially may directly affect your perception of how we’re doing. Ask yourself how would you feel if you had a different racial identity. Better yet, you might try asking someone of a different race or ethnicity how they feel about where we are as a church and as a society.

I recognize that this may be an uncomfortable topic, whether you are Black or White or identify with another race. As followers of Jesus, we don’t shy away from difficult conversations, because he didn’t, either. We can’t be a witness for racial reconciliation to the world if we don’t model it in our own house. And that’s where I want to start today.

At Church of the Saviour, we are and strive to be a multiracial congregation, which is defined as a church where no single racial group makes up more than 80% of the congregation. It’s not easy to be a truly multiracial church. We need to acknowledge that because what we’re doing is hard. There is no point of arrival—there is always more work to do. That work requires a lot of give-and-take; sometimes more *give* than *take*, especially when some are asked to give more than others. It’s not enough for us just to share the same space. Wanting more diverse people to come and be just like everyone else *isn’t* diversity – it’s indoctrination. As Chip Freed puts it, we can’t be a church that says, “We want your color, not your culture.” That means that not everything is going to speak to you, personally. Our goal is for 70% of what we do to be something you can relate to: the music or the style of preaching or prayer and worship. That means the other 30% isn’t your thing; it may even drive you nuts. But know that what’s in your 30% is someone else’s 70%, and what’s in your 70% is in someone’s 30%. The give-and-take of being a multiracial congregation requires that we make room for each other to relate to God, knowing that God can and does relate to each of us in infinite ways.

Because we know from experience how hard this is, it’s important to encourage each other and remember why we do it. There are both practical and theological reasons for us to remain committed to being a truly multiracial community of faith.

From a practical perspective, the world is becoming more diverse. That’s especially true in the United States. While non-Hispanic Whites make up approximately 60% of the population today, by 2045, that number will be less than half.¹ In fact, many projections expect that to happen sooner because of an accelerated net population loss among non-Hispanic Whites, the only racial group with negative population change over the last decade.²

¹ <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/visualizing-u-s-population-by-race/>

² <https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-2020-census-results-show-increased-diversity-countering-decade-long-declines-in-americas-white-and-youth-populations/>

Despite this, churches remain largely segregated. Only one in four American churchgoers attends a multiracial church.³ That's higher than in previous generations, but it's far from the norm. One of the reasons the percentage of multiracial congregations is still so low is that some churches are located in an area without much racial diversity. If your community isn't diverse, you're not likely to have a very diverse congregation. But census data indicates that rural communities are growing in diversity, too, and rural congregations need to be prepared. That's why congregations like us who are growing into this work are so important – not only for who God is calling us to be, but to help point the way for others who will follow.

A Baylor University study published in March of this year tracked 20,000 United Methodist churches over a 20-year span. They paired that information with census data for the communities in which those churches are situated. The churches with the highest growth were racially diverse – even those situated in 100% White neighborhoods.⁴ *Diverse churches grow.*

So, from a practical point of view, embracing racial diversity is important for responding to changes in our communities and it is an effective strategy for church growth. But there are also very important theological reasons for the church to be more diverse.

At the very beginning of the Bible, in the very first chapter, we learn that God created humanity in God's own image. Not *some* of us, but *all* of us. None of us on our own completely reflects the image of God; each of us reflects a piece of it. Hence, the more of us that gather in community, the more closely we'll come to reflecting the full image of God. When we withdraw into communities of sameness, we deny the fullness of God's image imparted in our diversity.

In the final book of the Bible, Revelation, John is given a vision of the end times and the kingdom of heaven. In chapter seven, he described to us what he saw: "After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. *They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language.*" (Revelation 7:9 CEB, emphasis mine) The Greek is even clearer, where the word translated as "nation" here is *ethnos*, from which we derive the word *ethnicity*. John's witness is clear: heaven will have people of every ethnicity and race. Now, the Church is called to be the earthly reflection of God's heavenly realm. If we're not diverse, we are *not* reflecting the kingdom. It's one thing if we don't have the diversity around us from which to draw. But if we do, and we're not, then we're not only missing our calling; we're being disobedient to it.

I recognize that, for many people, the shifting racial makeup of our nation is a hard pill to swallow. Cultural assumptions change. Standards of conduct and speech change. Things that used to be socially acceptable are no longer. And it can be difficult to adapt. When we pair that with the unprecedented access we now have to each other's experiences and ideas and feelings through the internet and social media, it feels like the ground is constantly shifting under our feet. We're bound to make lots of mistakes along the way, some of which can be hurtful to ourselves and to others. But when we *know* better, we *do* better. That's why it's so important that we keep learning *and* that we grow in our capacity for grace.

Diversity is God's design – in a perfect garden at the dawn of creation, in a perfect garden at the completion of it. In between is where we go wrong. When we privilege one racial group over another, we turn our backs on God's intent for us. Friends, that's sin. Sometimes, that happens through conscious, individual actions. But we also live within systems and structures that are designed to benefit some and inhibit others. Those are the powers and principalities Paul talks about in Romans 8. As followers of Jesus, we need to address both individual and systemic racism – to root out evil and to do justice.

Let's take another look at a scripture I preached on just a few weeks ago from the Beatitudes. Matthew 5:4 reads, "Blessed/Happy (*Makarios*) are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." We looked at mourning in the context of the way we typically use that word, to describe the experience of loss or death. The Greek word *pathēō* translated as mourn *can* mean that kind of mourning, but it also is used to refer to mourning over the injustice of the world – natural, moral, and systemic evil. Jesus said that those who grieve over evil will be comforted. That doesn't mean we'll feel better about the way things are. The word translated as "comforted" includes the word *paraclete*, which is the word that means an advocate in a dispute or a court of law. It's the same word Jesus used in John 14 when he promised the disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit – the *paraclete*, the *advocate* – to be with us and sustain us forever. In this context, Jesus is saying that those who mourn systemic evil will have an advocate. Sometimes the

³ <https://multiethnic.church/released-new-2020-statistics-on-multiracial-churches/>

⁴ <https://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=222716>

advocate Jesus sends to address systemic evil is us – or rather, us empowered by the *true* advocate, the Holy Spirit, who gives us strength and courage to work for justice in this world God so loves. The Spirit *compels* us to advocate for the cause of justice.

If this is our work, our calling, how can we become more effective in our advocacy for racial justice? One of the most compelling witnesses we can make for the kingdom of God is to reflect it in the Church.

You've likely heard the letters DEI used in this work, which stand for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. DEI has become a buzzword in organizational leadership. Communities, corporations, educational institutions, churches, and others work to be more diverse places committed to equal treatment and an environment that is safe and welcoming for racial and ethnic minorities. Those are all good things. Church of the Saviour is committed to them, too. But I want to introduce a fourth letter to that commitment – B for Belonging. There is a difference between inclusion and belonging. Being included means people make space for you; belonging is when that space becomes yours. DEIB is increasingly becoming part of the vocabulary of racial justice. It is consistent with the witness of scripture, as well. This fall, I am directing our ministry leaders and staff to take careful inventory of how we are doing not only when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but also to belonging. Then I'm asking our leaders to develop practices that will foster a greater sense of belonging.

We don't always realize how our attitudes, words, and actions are shaped by the systems in which we live. I don't think there's anyone here who would consciously choose to treat people as less than because of their skin color. Sometimes, regardless of intent, we cause harm because of underlying assumptions and inherited attitudes, what we call *unconscious* or *implicit bias*. So I want to invite you this week to learn more about bias and how to talk about race. The National Museum of African American History and Culture has a fantastic website filled with accessible and helpful resources. You'll find a QR code in your worship bulletin this morning (on the screen at 9:30), and you'll receive a link in your email later today. Take some time today and throughout the week to explore the information and resources you'll find there. One resource in particular I want to challenge you to utilize is an Implicit Awareness Test you'll find under the "I Want to Know" topic on bias. It can be surprising and even disorienting to discover how much bias is embedded in our unconscious, affecting the way we see and relate to others. It's completely anonymous to take the test. No one will know how you scored unless you tell them. Though I encourage you to discuss your results with a trusted friend or small group so you can share what you discovered and help each other along the way.

Church of the Saviour is committed to being an intentionally anti-racist congregation. And we're going to continue that commitment because we believe that is what God expects of us as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. You can be anti-racist without being a Christian, but you can't be a Christian and allow racism to be acceptable. As we take that charge seriously, let's make sure we have our own house in order – as individual disciples and as a church community. It will take humility, courage, and faith. But by the grace of God, we can become more loving in our hearts and more faithful in our witness. Thanks be to God. Amen.