

Radical Jesus: God's Heart for Racial Justice

Sarah Siders | November 7, 2021 | Tallgrass at The Well

We are nearing the end of our series called Radical Jesus and so far, we've heard from all our pastors on a variety of high heat topics with the goal of engaging a divided culture and a divided church with wisdom and compassion while holding to historic orthodoxies.

We've been reading this verse together to set the stage each week, so join me as we read this together.

SLIDE: Isaiah 40:8 (ESV): The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Today we are approaching one of the most painful, divisive and sensitive and important topics in our world today: God's heart for racial justice.

As we step into this space together, know that I along with you do not take this lightly.

Although race is a social construct, it is a powerful one. It is part of our identity and our lived experience.

What it feels to be you and me.

But today, I hope to make something that can feel scary or overwhelming more relational and approachable.

As long as something remains complex, we will stay away from it so today, I am prayerfully leading us forward to clearly see God's vision for us individually and also our role as members of the body of Christ.

The fact that I am up here today is only evidence of how this topic is a journey in itself, and I am on that journey, just like you. The fact that I am preaching this message today is also evidence that we can grow, change and transform. We can become gracious people.

Because the last time I preached a message on racial justice and equality was December 14, 2014, and it did not go well.

I was new to the conversation on race. I was self-righteous. I wanted to prove myself. I angered a lot of people and some of them left the church.

After that, Josh and I decided that he would take the racial justice messages because it was too much for me and I didn't communicate it well.

God has taken me on quite a journey of humility to help me become a more gracious and patient person.

I hope you hear that in my heart today.

But before we dive into what's wrong with the world, I want us to keep God's vision of humanity in front of us.

With that in mind, today I am speaking to Christians in the body of Christ, and primarily white Christians since that is what I am, so if you're here today and you're not sure where you land theologically or you're just learning about Christianity, you're welcome in this dialogue but know that the responsibility I discuss today to live out God's vision for the world is uniquely a Christian worldview and Christians are responsible to wrestle with it and move toward it in their best understanding.

So what IS God's vision for humans, the people he created?

This is actually something we see in the Bible at the very beginning of Genesis, woven throughout the text and shows up in the last book of Revelation.

Let's start in Genesis, in the beginning:

SLIDE: Genesis 1:26-27

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, ^[a]and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

So here we have God making a distinction in creation, saying that humans, men and women, are uniquely made in the image of God.

In Genesis 3, it is said that the woman was named Eve because she would be the Mother of all the living.

So here we know that "all the living" are made in the image of God.

After the Fall, God begins to articulate a vision to bless and restore the people of the earth to himself, starting with Abraham. He says in Genesis 12:

SLIDE:

12 The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

²“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.^[a]

³I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;

**and *all peoples on earth*
will be blessed through you.”**

Throughout the Psalms, we see the psalmists encourage the praise of God from "all nations".

In Isaiah 2, Isaiah prophecies:

SLIDE: In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;

it will be exalted above the hills, and ***all nations will stream to it.***

**Jesus' final commission to his disciples brings God's heart for the restoration of
all nations into focus again:**

SLIDE:

**Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the
Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

Matthew 28:19

And finally, the grand finale, God gets what he came for:

In Revelation 7:9, John gets to see what God has been talking about the whole time:

SLIDE: 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.

God's heart is for the gathering, the restoration of *all the nations*.

- Why? Because we are all made in his image and likeness.
- ***He wants all his children to come home and be with him.***

**When you picture heaven, is this what you see? A multitude of people, skin
colors, cultures and languages, celebrating God together? That's how God sees
heaven.**

**And this picture of heaven is also the body of Christ that Paul refers to in Romans
12**

SLIDE:

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,

⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and **each member belongs to all the others....**

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

This is the body of Christ: ALL of us made in God's image, people from every culture and background:

- ***The body is designed that when one of us is in pain, hurting, oppressed, we all feel that pain.***
- And it is the responsibility of all of us to move toward that part of the body with compassion, truth and love to bring healing.
- As a Christian, we are compelled to move towards pain, not away from it, not avoiding it or denying it.
- When one hurts, we all hurt.
- **When parts of a body reject other parts of the body, that is called an autoimmune disorder.**

Sadly, in the United States, we have not seen ourselves as one body, in the church or as fellow citizens, people required to love and serve one another. Instead, we invented the idea of separate races to justify slavery, servitude and injustice of entire groups of people, specifically those of African ancestry who had been sold into slavery in the US.

In the Constitution, our founding fathers who identified themselves as Christians wrote that "all men are created equal, with certain unalienable rights"

And yet in the same document, slaves were referenced by the 3/5th rule, saying that a person who was not free counted as [3/5th of a person](#) for the purpose of state representation in government.

Even after slavery ended as a legal institution, this view persisted.

In 1900, Charles Carroll wrote a book with a very gruesome title, which attempts to make a pseudo-scientific case for race, saying that white people were the ones descendant from Adam and Eve while people of African descent were descendant from animals.

This is very disturbing but it was a widely accepted belief that influenced not just interpersonal interactions but political policies and practices.

In this way, even people who claimed Christianity became the primary purveyors of the lie of the hierarchies of race and the belief that some humans were made in the image of God, and others were not.

The belief that some people are human and made in God's image while others are not human at all justified all forms of racial discrimination, injustice and violence.

Today in the United States, these beliefs have been widely discredited and to say them aloud is appalling in most settings. This is progress.

Our challenge today as US Citizens and members of the body of Christ is the residue of this deeply held belief that we are different from each other in some deep and irreconcilable way,

Even if we don't necessarily think of other cultures in a negative light, we see them as altogether different or "other".

For those in the church who are white, we often ask,

- "Why *are* we still talking about race?"
- "I hate getting lumped in with really racist people. I am not a racist."
- "Wouldn't it be better if we focused on what we have in common, creating unity?"
- "I don't see color. I think of all people the same. So why are People of Color always talking about it?"
- "Talking about race and differences is divisive."
- "We need to focus less on race issues and more on Gospel issues."

I believe that these statements are made by people with good intent who genuinely want unity, understanding and to put the past in the past.

These are the exact questions I asked for a long time on my journey.

And yet we have people of color in our churches, in our body of Christ saying, "Hey, listen, I want unity too, but I also want to tell you my story. I want you to know what it's like to be me. I do see color because other people see color in me and treat me differently. I want to know that you care what that's like."

For those in the body of Christ who have been mistreated because of their skin color, racial identity or culture, the race issue is a Gospel issue. They are not separate.

In his book, [How to Fight Racism](#), author and historian, Jemar Tisby, points out key reasons why the Church is uniquely positioned to be the healing agent for racism in our country:

- "Christianity provides a transcendent narrative for why racial justice is important....We are God's crowning creation, and each person is precious simply because they are human.
- "Christianity has within it the moral and spiritual resources to rebel against racism and white supremacy.
- Theologian Soong-Chan Rah explains, 'Civil rights is often seen in social and political terms. We often fail to recognize this movement as one of the most significant faith-based campaigns in American history.'
- Ida B. Wells, Prathia Hall, Rosa Parks and many other foot soldiers of racial justice movements have counted on their Christian faith to give them courage to fight racism."

So we know now that God's vision is unity in his body, his family, and that all people are made in the image of God.

We know that racism and racist beliefs, policies and practices are directly at odds with God's vision, heart and even the future of heaven itself.

And because the job of the Christian is to bring heaven on earth and make wrong things right, we have a part to play in this Gospel work.

So what now? What is the response of the Christian in this time in history in the United States?

- **I want to suggest that the Christian response to racism is first and foremost relational.**
- It is through the "one anothers" that we live out our faith, and that is true in this instance.
- And it is because of the relationships in my life, people who were patient with me and helped me see their story, that I have the understanding that I do.
- I want to encourage you to approach this from a relational lens, not from just a cognitive, political or academic lens.

In other words, allow this topic and journey to engage your heart, not just your mind.

In Daniel White's book, [White Awake](#), he outlines the stages people move through in becoming aware of the cultural identity of others, as well as awareness of their own cultural identity.

Now these are not fixed or perfectly linear stages, but they are often states we find ourselves in as we meet people who are different than us and start to see the world around us in new ways.

You may see yourself at multiple places along the continuum simultaneously but the goal is always to grow, keeping in mind that justice is on God's heart.

SLIDE:

- Encounter
- Denial
- Disorientation
- Shame
- Self-righteousness
- Awakening
- Active participation

So here is the continuum, and I want to share my own journey as we move through these in order to be transparent with you about what this looks like and allow you to see which of these states you might have experienced.

Specifically, I want you to see how relational this process is.

Referencing the slide:

- **Encounter:**
 - **EXPLANATION: At this stage, we first recognize a racial or cultural difference or injustice.** It's the beginning of our awareness of ourselves and others as having a racial or cultural difference that plays out in society.
 - **For me, this was when my parents invited the Indian missionary, Paul, to stay at our home** when he visited from India. This was also growing up with friends who were Indian American in Oregon, and then after moving to Kansas, my first friend here was Asian American.
 - These were simply encounters, appreciated differences, but they were mostly me being aware of food, dress, language and other visible cultural nuances.
 - I would say that Encounter was the stage I was in most of my life until the last decade or so.
- **IMPORTANT NOTE: Because I always had friends and people in my church and workplace who were people of color, I really thought of myself as a cautious advocate for racial justice and tried to position myself that way during college and the early years of my career.**
- **So what has happened for me internally in the last decade were really a surprise to me because of how I saw myself up to that point.**

- **Denial:**

- **EXPLANATION: This is the stage where we encounter a racial injustice that does not fit our paradigm, that is shocking and disruptive, and we make efforts to make the scenario fit into our worldview.**
- This could be someone you respect who just made a really off-color joke, or maybe your family are all police officers and you are really proud of that but you just watched one of them bragging about giving a hard time to a group of Black teenagers.
- These instances don't fit your worldview of these friends or people in these careers so at this stage, you dismiss the inconsistency.
- **For me, when Trayvon Martin was killed by an Hispanic neighborhood watch person, I was conflicted.** George Zimmerman wasn't white so this wasn't a white on black crime thing. Trayvon didn't have a criminal record so he didn't fit the criminal profile. There must have been some provocation but why was a private citizen enforcing the law with a weapon?
- **I was really back and forth on what I thought** but I leaned toward giving George Zimmerman the benefit of the doubt. Why would he just kill someone unprovoked?
- **On social media, I saw outrage from my friends who were people of color. It was unanimous.** But from my friends who were white, we were all pretty standoffish and unwilling to make a statement one way or the other. We just could not believe that someone innocent was killed in broad daylight and that it could be perhaps purely racially motivated.

- **Disorientation**
 - **EXPLANATION: In this stage, you are confronted with a new perspective that challenges the old one, but this time, you don't dismiss it. Now you're confused.**
 - In 2014, I was working at Irwin Army Hospital, and every morning, I went to get breakfast in the cafeteria.
 - **And this is when I met Cynthia.** She was the employee who checked out the guests in the cafeteria after they got their food. She was Black and wanted to talk to me about her experiences in Junction City. She told me about times when she felt was being racially profiled by police and shared other experiences of injustice. I listened and asked questions but I really didn't think she was seeing it right. I felt like she was probably bringing it on herself with her attitude and clothes.

- But we talked almost daily for at least a year and eventually I had to wonder to myself, "**Either she is crazy or lying or she is having a totally different experience than me.**"
- **I decided that maybe she was experiencing racism that I wasn't because it wasn't ever targeted at me. Maybe she was having a different experience.**
- This was a turning point for me.

- **Shame**
 - **EXPLANATION: In this state, you are aware of the sinful and harmful impacts of racism around you. You see how you have been silent when you should have spoken up. You are aware of your complicity.**
 - It is very uncomfortable yet it's often a precursor to forgiveness and making a major shift.
 - **In August 2014, after Michael Brown and Eric Garner were killed, I wrote a blog called Growing Up White and Guilty in America.** I was at the breaking point. I used this post to share all my transgressions, to lay it out about how I had been silent when each of these young men had been killed, how I had tried to minimize their deaths or make sense of them. How I had not seen racism as a part of the current American fabric.
 - I felt helpless and embarrassed. I was overwhelmed with shame. But I was aware of the problem.

- **Self-righteousness**
 - **EXPLANATION: In this stage, you are starting to see many of the problems racism has created in the US. Maybe you're reading books or listening to podcasts. You have friends and family who are in a different stage on the journey and now you want to argue with them. You see the light and you want them to get on board.**
 - In this stage, we are often the least effective and the most dangerous because we are not working to be inquisitive anymore. We are learning less and defending and trying to prove ourselves more.
 - **And it was in this stage in December 2014, that I preached on Black Lives Matter Sunday.**
 - I was impatient and in my effort to correct my own wrongs toward my friends who were people of color, I created other wrongs against other

friends who might have been able to hear my heart had I approached the topic differently.

- **Instead, I saw it as evidence of my commitment to the cause that I was alienating people.**
- God has done a lot of work in me to correct self-righteousness and grow in patience but I do get stuck here from time to time.
- **IMPORTANT NOTE: Do not mistake self-righteousness for real advocacy. This stage is more about your ego than about justice work.**

- **Awakening**

- **EXPLANATION: the point at which we see alignment in God's heart for justice, belonging and equity for all people and for unity in his body.**
- **We start losing the defensiveness around terms or ideas that indicate that white people in the US have had less of a struggle than people of color.**
- **We can acknowledge that the struggles and challenges we've had in our lives were real and we can be proud we overcame them but these struggles were not the result of our skin color.**
- In this stage, we also see that **diversity of culture, people, ideas is an asset.** We understand our own diversities and how we are different and how that is an asset we bring to the table, and this allows us to appreciate the diversities and uniqueness of others.
- **In this stage, I made peace with the fact that I was going to make mistakes** in the work of justice but the end goal was worth it.
- **This stage is still ongoing for me.** There are always new ways I can be aware of racial injustice, new terms and ideas I have to grapple with. I am also learning how to name the different aspects of what makes me unique without lumping myself into the "white" category. There is more to me than that. It's a process.

- **Active participation**

- **EXPLANATION: In this final and ongoing stage, we actively work to make change and promote racial and cultural equity and justice wherever we are.**

- **Everyone has a role to play, and most people's roles are different.** But once our eyes are opened to see how the traces of racism have affected our country, we can begin to see the opportunity for each of us to play a part in seeking justice anywhere we are.
- **If you're an employer,** you are actively looking at how your hiring system might filter out qualified candidates who are people of color.
- **If you are in education,** you are paying attention to any disparities that might exist for kiddos in your classroom who are people of color and making sure their classmates treat them equitably.
- **If you are shopping for a product or service,** you are expanding your search to intentionally include new businesses run by people of color to support their work and help them create wealth for their families and communities.
- **For me today, this looks like aligning the organization I run with other community leaders who are People of Color,** building relationships and trust with them and aligning my organization with organizations run by people of color so that we can create shared goals and achieve them together.
- **This is translating into real-time opportunities for business owners of color** to get entrepreneurial education, resources and introductions that will help them build their businesses, which in turn benefits their families and our community and state benefits from their success through the offering of their product or service, the generated tax revenue and their development as business leaders.

So back to the question: What now?

As we close today, and you've spent some time thinking about your experiences and the stages and states you've been in on this journey of cultural awareness, **I want to invite you to join me in a few next steps. Choose the one that will be a challenge for you.**

SLIDE: Next steps:

- **Get to know your own diversities**
 - Knowing what makes you unique and appreciating that will help you value the diversity of others
- **Be curious and honest about what parts of your culture you have moralized**
 - Ways of speaking - loudly or quietly, clothing and style, use of time, political priorities
 - When we moralize cultural preferences, then someone who does not abide by these preferences is sinning

- We don't want to unconsciously conclude that our differences are sinful but we have to be aware that we may have done that
- When you notice this, you can say to yourself, "Well, that's different than I would do it, but it's good too."
- **Ask a trusted friend who is a person of color about their experiences as a POC in their city, life, job, church, etc.**
 - I found out my friends who were People of Color were protecting me from these stories because I never asked
 - When I asked, I learned a whole other side to my friends
 - Painful but valuable
- **Intentionally learn from, read, listen to, support and buy from the People of Color**
 - If we do an inventory, most of our friends, family, the authors we read, the mentors we have and other input into our lives is predominantly white.
 - It's not intentional - it's just automatic.
 - In order to make a change, we need to diversify our inputs so we get the value of multiple perspectives, not just the one we already have.
- **Ask God about your role in restoration and making wrong things right**
 - As Christians, we have been commissioned with the work of restoration
 - No matter what your place is in life, whether a junior high student, a parent, a real estate agent or retired person, there is room for you to do God's work of reconciliation.
 - Let him open the doors and show you where you are called.

As we close today, let's remind ourselves of our common beliefs in the core tenets of our faith.

APOSTLES' CREED:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
 creator of heaven and earth.
 I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died, and was buried;
 On the third day he rose again;
 he ascended into heaven,
 he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
 and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
 I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic Church,
 the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.