

It's Not About You. It's About Us.

(by Tom Are)

John 4: 1-26

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John," – although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized – he left Judea and started back to Galilee.

But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

The woman answered him, "I have no husband."

Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

I have heard a meaningful sermon on this text, and I want you to hear it today. It is written by Tom Are, a colleague of mine from Seminary. He is the senior pastor at Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, Kansas and one of the best preachers I know. He once preached at a Presbytery Meeting in Charleston, SC years ago. And actually, shaped my call to ministry. I can tell you that story another time.

The problem for me to preach about race – is that I can become judgmental of others and mostly myself – or whine because nothing changes. Anyway, I am grateful for his words and hope you find them as meaningful as I have. Sometimes you have to depend on someone else's words, when you have none. See what you think.

A friend of mine, when I explained that I was struggling with a sermon about race, said, "I'm growing weary with all this racism talk." Well, me too. And nothing makes us feel more defensive than being called racist. Now if you are a bit nervous about this topic, I understand. As Tom said: It's a tender topic, but I want to ask that you to sit with the discomfort for a while.

My previous church in St. Paul, MN cohosted a day with the Dakota (Dakota) Native American Tribe in Shakopee, MN. At the beginning of the day, the Tribal Chief put up a slide of the United States of America that showed where his people lived before, we came to this land. They of course, “lived from the sea to shining seas.”

The second slide showed the dotted places where they live now. He then said to us: **“The church has seldom been a good thing for my people.”** (pause)

Do you think that could change?

Jesus speaks to a woman, and nobody could believe he was doing it in public. She was also a Samaritan; one whose racial identity is not purely Jewish. But there they are at the well – in the middle of the day – talking about the Messiah of all things.

It’s a surprise because Jesus speaks to a woman, which nobody could believe he was doing in public at midday.

It’s a surprise because those two words – *Samaritan* and *woman* – define how Jesus encountered the structures of her culture. Those two words determined her role and place in society.

The Messiah, you know, was the promised one of Judaism, the long-awaited king. The Messiah would make things right. If you worshipped the promised one of Judaism, the faith you are practicing was Judaism. But what is surprising about Jesus is that he did not limit his ministry to Jews.

The surprise of the early church is that people of every race were showing up: Jews and Gentiles – and even – this Samaritan woman.

Jesus crosses the cultural boundary and speaks to her, and he sees her as a *Samaritan woman* who is also *a child of God*.

The most significant social issue in the early church was race: How can Jews and Gentiles, children of Abraham and this Samaritan woman, all be in the same church? From the very beginning, following Jesus required, that we pay attention to race.

Debby Irving, in her book *Waking Up White*, says, as a white person, “I didn’t think I had race. ... Race was for other people, brown and black

skinned people. ... I thought white was a raceless race ... just plain, normal, the one against which all others were measured.” (pause)

I think the church *becoming a good thing for all people* means, like Jesus, we need to pay attention to race – to ours and to the race of others – and admit that in America – we are not all treated the same.

W.E.B DuBois once said “the problem of the 20th century in America is the color line. But it’s different now, right?”

Jon Meacham, in his book The Soul of America, notes, “After King, after Rosa Parks, after John Lewis, after the watershed legislative work of Lyndon B. Johnson in passing the civil rights bills ... many Americans are less than eager to acknowledge that our national greatness was built on explicit and implicit apartheid.” (Pause)

Well, even if our past was racist, haven’t we fixed this? Certainly, we are not the nation that we were.

When we think of racism, we think of the vicious beatings on the Selma Bridge in AL. We think of slaveholders in the antebellum south. We think of separate schools and separate drinking fountains. We think of Ku Klux Klan members who engaged in mob violence.

In recent years, we have seen such ugliness again as we watched the Alt Right march in Charlottesville, Virginia, standing up against what they call oppression of white people. Dylann Roof sat in a Bible study in the Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, before opening fire. John Earnest shoots up a synagogue in Poway, California. Most recently, a man shoots 8 women and 6 are Asian American because he believed they were less human than he.

According to The Washington Post, there are as many as 22 million people in this country who believe it is *acceptable* to hold neo-Nazi or white-supremacist views. (22 million)

But we aren’t those folks. We don’t talk like that. We don’t act like that. We find that kind of behavior unacceptable.

The truth is, we have not only cast aside those attitudes, I know people in my church who do work for justice and equality.

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr., a professor of religion and African American studies at Princeton, wrote: “White people’s expressed racial attitudes, by most measure, have become progressively better. Most Americans don’t hold the views of Strom Thurmond in 1948 or George Wallace in 1968 or Pat Buchanan in 1992. They believe in integrated schools and reject segregated public transportation.”

There may be 22 million Americans who are white supremacists, but we aren’t those people. And if someone implies that we are racist, we respond: “Wait a minute. I’m not like that. You don’t know me. I’m not racist.”

I think that’s probably right, but I think it’s incomplete.

In the real matters of race, it’s not about you; it’s about us, all of us. I’m not sure we as white folks should be leading the conversation on defining what racism is.

I don’t think it’s wrong, but I do think it is incomplete. I think we have to pay attention to race, ours and others. We can’t assume the system works for all the way it works for us. We have to hear from folks who don’t experience America the same way we do.

But today, I want to explore a more significant reality of racism. That is – racism is not just bias. It’s not limited to language and bad jokes. Racism occurs when bias is connected to power.

So, the real issue is not “Am I racist?” The issue is that America is racist. While we don’t experience the same consequences – the truth is, all of us are caught in the structural realities of racism.

Here is what I believe that I expect most of you do too – that every person is a child of God. And that every person is created in the image of God. And theologically, we are pretty close to the same. We are all the same.

But not all of God’s children experience America the same. Racism is more than an attitude, and it is more than an event; it is a structure.

Michelle Alexander’s book The New Jim Crow is about the criminal justice system, for example. We could talk about banking or real estate or business – even healthcare.

We could talk about racism in church.

But Dr. Alexander says, “Race plays a major role in the [criminal justice] system, but not because of what is commonly understood as old-fashioned, hostile bigotry. The problem, she says, is more about racial indifference.” Not paying attention! She sounds like Dr. King when he said the greatest threat was not the deeds of evil people, but the apathy of people of good will.

I was driving home one night not here in Alma, but a different small town. And had the opportunity to meet one of the officers that worked the area. He invited me to have a little roadside chat. Turns out blinking yellow lights mean stop – not slow down. He very politely explained this to me, and then gave me a warning to drive home safely.

I was grateful that he chose to give me a warning. I guess he has that discretion. Michelle Alexander says that discretion in the criminal justice system often works against people of color. The data supports her claim.

It has been reported that in 2017, 60 percent of traffic tickets were given to African Americans, while they make up 30 percent of the population.

Do you think white folks are just better drivers?

Laws are laws. But the prosecution of our laws allows discretion, and not all citizens experience the system the same. This is what is meant when they say racism is not an attitude or an event; it’s a structure.

Aleta said, “Keep your hands visible all the time. No fast movements. Tell the officer that you are reaching for your license. Never raise your voice. Whatever you are feeling, stuff it.” Aleta was telling her boys how to interact when they are stopped by the police.

Tom tells his experience that he was asked to be Prairie Village volunteer chaplain, and immediately agreed because, like many of us, appreciates what the police do and the risks that they take.

But the truth is, my friend Aleta who is black, felt it necessary to tell her boys how to respond – because she worries.

You see, I never once thought about having that conversation with my children. It’s not because I assumed they would never be pulled over; it’s because I never worried about what might happen if they were. Aleta

worries. Do you see that this is not just about you or me? That's too small. It's not just about individuals.

America is racist, and we are all caught in the consequences.

In 1850, infant mortality among African Americans was 1.5 times the rate among white children. Today the actual number of infant deaths among African Americans has dropped significantly

but it is still twice the rate of infant mortality among white children. The percentage is worse than it was in 1850.

Folks assumed that poverty was the likely cause, or disparity in education. But the New England Journal of Medicine revealed that infants born to college-educated black parents were twice as likely to die as those born to college-educated white parents.

Why? They think it's stress – the daily stress of battling a system stacked against you. As a study published in the American Journal of Public Health states, “For black women, something about growing up in America seems to be bad for your baby's birth weight.”

Now I know some will say this is ridiculous. Anyone can succeed in this country. They only have to want to succeed. They will suggest the system is perfect; it is only individuals who fail. Anyone who acts responsibly will succeed in this country.

I talk a lot about responsibility because we are followers of Jesus. One of our Christian responsibilities is to pay attention to the realities of race – ours and others – and to believe folks when they tell us – the experience is not the same for all.

The Dakota Tribal Chief said, “The church has not been good news for my people.”

I was ashamed. And I also thought, I know some people who would want the church to be good for you and for all. I think we can get there.

Jesus talked to a Samaritan woman whose whole life was shaped by the fact that she was a Samaritan and that she was a woman.

On both counts, she had no expectation to have a conversation with the Messiah. But her life changed because – he addressed her not as a Samaritan woman, but as a child of God.

But the system wasn't set up that way. But Jesus saw her and talked to her, and his followers noticed. But we know they noticed – because the early church was not made up simply of Jews, but of disciples from every race, including Samaritans. Something magical happened there.

There may be 22 million people in America who celebrate white supremacy. That's not us, but as followers of Christ, we have responsibilities, even if we aren't guilty.

We need to pay attention to race – ours and others. Have some conversations. Read some books. Do some study. Don't assume our experience is everyone's experience.

After generations of slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration and more, I honestly worry if we will ever get past this.

The truth is, while the consequences are not equal, we are all caught in this system of race. I don't know if we will get past it, but we can pay attention, and the church can be good for us and for all.

It's happened with a Samaritan woman. It can happen again.

I know you, and I know you aren't satisfied that things are better than they were. You want things to be the way God wants things to be. So, we will try. And if we fail, we will try again. And if we fail again, we will at least fail better.

And I know there is a Samaritan woman in glory who is cheering for us, for she is among the millions of God's children who understand the difference it makes when the church is attentive to race.

May it be so for us.

Amen.