

The Opposite of Racism

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Starting on Dec. 31 and continuing through this month of January, we are engaged in a series of messages on transformation. So, it is especially appropriate at this time of year, when we remember one of our country's most transformational leaders, that we apply this principle of transformation to his greatest passion. For no one before or since Martin Luther King, Jr. has expounded so clearly what America would and could and should look like if we were to turn the bright lights of righteousness on the sin of racism.

Martin Luther King understood the principle of transformation, but he did not invent it. Much of it he learned from Jesus himself. You see, the ministry of Jesus was characterized by notable and undeniable transformations. You remember when he healed a man who was blind since birth. That presented a huge PR problem for the Pharisees. They went to the formerly blind man and said, "Give glory to God. This man is a sinner." To which he replied, "I don't know whether he's a sinner or not; all I know is that once I was blind but now I can see." Touché. There was no explaining away that transformation, because he had become the opposite of what he had been.

Jesus invited himself to the home of a diminutive and dishonest tax collector named Zacchaeus. But Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus and became his disciple. Then he repaid everyone four times what he had cheated them out of, and, in addition, he gave half his goods to the poor. Prompting Jesus to comment that on that day salvation had come to the house of Zacchaeus. And who could deny it? The tax collector had become the opposite of what he had been.

There was once a committed religious zealot named Saul, whose passion was that of persecuting Christians, putting them in jail and even seeing them executed. But one day Jesus met him on the Damascus road, and everything changed. He changed from persecutor to promoter, becoming arguably the greatest missionary who ever lived. He even changed his name. A Christian-hater named Saul became the Apostle Paul—and in the process became the opposite of what he had been.

Times have changed. Centuries have come and gone. But God is still in the transforming business. Romans 12:2 urges us not to be conformed to this world, which would be the

path of least resistance, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Some transformations are instantaneous, while others, like this one, involve a process. But what makes the experience transformational is not how fast it is but how complete it is. In fact, the Greek verb used to describe this transformation in Romans 12:2 is *metamorphoō*. God is out to accomplish a metamorphosis in us, to transform us from sinners to saints.

This transformational dynamic is part and parcel of the Christian life. Eph. 4:28 says, “Those who have been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.”

But just when has this thief been transformed? When he doesn’t steal for a week or month or a year? No. Transformation occurs when the thief becomes the opposite of what he used to be. Not only is he no longer stealing, but he’s working hard and contributing to the welfare of others. We are truly transformed only when we become the opposite of what we used to be, replacing one set of attitudes and behaviors with another.

The God who desires to transform us also desires to use us—his people, his Church, his transformed humanity—to transform the world around us. As we saw last week, Christ has been exalted to the throne of the universe, and we are called to bring every individual under his rule. The Lordship of Christ, however, also extends over humanity in its societal relationships. And we must be God’s transformational tool in this arena as well.

So, just how does God use us to prophetically proclaim his justice to a wider world? Well, we have both an individual and collective voice. So, we can tell people about God’s moral standards. But we also speak powerfully to issues of societal righteousness through the example of our redeemed community. As we model God’s message in our congregational life, we become a living witness to God’s goodness and a precursor of Christ’s eternal kingdom to come. My mind often goes back to the acceptance the Nickel Mines Amish community extended to the family of the man who murdered their daughters. It spoke far more powerfully than any sermon ever could.

We are, therefore, a transformational community, called to be transformed and then to transform—to turn people and communities of people into something very different than what they used to be. But, bringing the focus back to today’s topic in particular, what would a transformed community look like when it comes to race relations? What is the opposite of racism?

“Oh, that’s an easy one,” you say. The opposite of racism is anti-racism, and we’ve got it. This congregation is an official affiliate of the Damascus Road Anti-Racism do-gooders society. We done denounced that devilish deed.

But watch out. As Shakespeare said, “Methinks thou dost denounce too much.” Or something like that. We are reminded from time to time by the unfortunate failings of Christian leaders, that the most vehement denouncers of evil can at one and the same time be the most active perpetrators of that same evil. Denouncing racism has its place, but denouncing racism is not the opposite of engaging in racism; it is merely the opposite of affirming racism.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m overjoyed about our Damascus Road emphasis. And you should know that our group is way out ahead of almost everyone else involved in this program. But my point is just this: if talk is cheap, anti-racism talk is after-Christmas sale cheap. Since almost everyone decries racism but few do anything about it, the law of supply and demand makes meaningful action a valuable commodity.

Do you know what the opposite of *esculent* is? Probably not, but that’s okay. It’s a rather rare word, and if you’ve never even heard the word, then it’s hard to come up with an antonym. If I told you that *esculent* meant *edible*, then it would be easy to come up with its opposite, which would be, of course, anything I cook that hasn’t been prepared ahead of time by someone else.

In the same way, in order to answer the question, “What is the opposite of racism?” we must have some notion of what *racism* means. *Racism* is a problematic term, not because it doesn’t mean anything, but because its connotation overwhelms its denotation. As you probably know, words have both a denotation and connotation. The denotation is dictionary definition, the reality the word points to. But the connotation includes the nuances, the emotional baggage associated with the word.

Even though *slender* and *skinny* could both legitimately describe the same person’s form, the connotation of one is obviously much more positive than the other. An inexpensive product could be the same as a cheap one, but inexpensive goods are, nevertheless, more desirable than cheap ones. Almost all the four-letter words that make people blush have a more acceptable alternative that actually denotes the same thing. But the alternatives do not have the same connotation.

Because the word *racism* suggests images of cone-hatted, white-sheeted, cross-burning, blood-drooling, epithet-spewing, lynch mobsters; quite understandably not a lot of people are going to identify with that image. And, so, as terms go, *racism* is kind of a stink bomb. Still, you notice that I have used the term *racism* thirteen times already today. That's because we don't have another word that covers the exact same semantic range. So, having at least acknowledged the power of this connotation, let's pretend that we can lay it aside momentarily and talk for a moment about what *racism* denotes.

I'm not going to offer a definition of racism *per se*. In my experience, people do not use definitions of racism to understand racism better. They use definitions of racism to engage in semantic arguments about how racism should be defined. And I'm not interested in getting stuck in that infinite loop this morning. But I did look at more than twenty definitions of racism in preparation for this message, and while some of them were obviously wrong, because I didn't agree with them at all, there were two themes that appeared in the vast majority of those definitions.

The first is that racism assigns values of superiority and inferiority to people based on racial identification. And the second is that these values support a social system of stigmatization and oppression. So, there is both an attitudinal aspect and an institutional aspect to racism. It has to do with the way we feel about people, and it has to do with the systemic ways we treat them. You can wordsmith it in any number of ways, but most definitions recognize these two principle elements. And, since that's what most often comes to most people's minds when we use the term, that's how I'm going to use it today.

Before we can answer the question, "What is the opposite of racism?" a couple of foundational observations about the state of racism in America today. First, we need to recognize that this country has a legacy of racism. Much of our early economy was based on slave labor, and we have a long history of both racial ill-will and institutionalized forms of discrimination. However our individual or cultural lenses may nuance that historical fact, there is no way to responsibly deny that a legacy of racism does exist.

The second point is this: important but incomplete progress has been made in combating racism. There are those axe grinders who would have us believe that hardly anything has changed. Well, that message may serve their agenda, but it does not serve the truth. And then there are those who feel that we have put this problem behind us, that racism is no longer a systemic problem but resides merely the personal prejudices of certain cultural

Neanderthals. People on the receiving end of racism don't typically hold this view, because they are forced to deal with a reality that others can conveniently relegate to history.

So, we still have a problem in both our attitudes and in our institutions. We cannot ignore this problem into oblivion. To admit that its legacy lingers is a threat to our sense of self-decency. And, yet, admit it we must. No society can embrace an evil such as racism without paying a price, and no society can excise such an evil without paying a price. That price begins with facing both the past and the present of the problem.

Racism does not disappear just because of the passage of time. Racism does not disappear just because we are sorry. Racism does not disappear just because we're "workin' hard." Racism doesn't disappear just because we denounce it. Racism doesn't disappear just because we change our laws. Racism doesn't disappear just because we compensate for its consequences. Racism doesn't disappear just because we build a memorial to Martin Luther King. Racism, like any other sinful condition that God desires to transform, will disappear when, and only when, it is replaced by its opposite.

But what is the opposite of racism? Well, racism involves an assumption of superiority and a projection of inferiority. Transformation, then, means replacing those attitudes with equality and love and meekness and affirmation. And racism involves social systems characterized by stigmatization and oppression of those we perceive as different. A just society, then, must create a community defined by mutual submission and solidarity, protection and opportunity.

In order for transformation to occur, what *is* must be replaced by what *ought* to be. Which sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Maybe simple, but certainly not easy. In fact, before we can change America, we must begin by creating a template for transformation on a smaller scale, demonstrating the legitimacy and value of God's way. And that transformation must begin with the household of God, with the Church.

The Church (big C) is where the transforming power resides. That's where we should find a sensitivity to God's righteousness. That's where we find people indwelt with the Holy Spirit. And if the Church can live out the opposite of racism, three things will happen. First, God will be glorified. Second, we will offer a practical illustration to others of what it means to live as God intended. And, last but certainly not least, we will gain

prophetic credibility.

Frankly, we don't have that much credibility right now. Why would anybody listen to the Church about race, until we're at least as transformational on this subject as the US military? And to get there we'd have some catching up to do. "Ah, but the military has an advantage, you might say. They can make rules and impose those standards." True. But we have the Holy Spirit, for crying out loud! And if that's not more powerful than rules, then we ought to just chuck this New Covenant thing and go back to the law.

Historically, despite some noble exceptions, the Church has alternatively prostituted its theology to the institution of slavery, looked the other way during decades of discrimination, dragged its feet through the civil rights movement, ignored the problem once the external stimulus was removed, and finally settled for something resembling "separate but equal" in church life. It's pretty hard to be part of the problem and part of the solution to the problem at the same time. And, yet, God still desires to display his transforming power through the Church. But how?

I believe the impetus will not come initially from the Church (big C) but from a (small c) church or churches. Perhaps a church that is younger than much of this history. Perhaps a church with a truly anti-racist identity. Perhaps a church that has already made some hard-won progress on this issue. Perhaps a church that is unafraid to swim against the current. Perhaps a church like ours.

At this juncture in the history of our nation God is looking for a model home for his transforming kingdom values—a staging ground for the opposite of racism. To prove that such a transformation is possible and to show what it looks like.

Obviously, these lofty goals are more easily recognized than realized. As we have noted, such a transformation will be a process, not an immediate healing. And, yet, even to be in that process is transformational, as long as we are seriously and realistically pursuing the opposite of racism.

One of my biggest pet peeves when I watch football, which I frequently do, is third-down strategy. Could be any team, but we'll call them the Minnesota Mennonites just to make it interesting. The ball is on their own 30 yard-line. It's third and seven, a passing situation. They come up to the line, a determined bunch united by eerily similar last names. The quarterback takes the snap, and with his patented buggy-whip delivery, zings

the ball to a wide-open receiver—four yards down the field. He is tackled immediately. So, the punting unit comes on.

This scenario, minus the Mennonite-isms, is repeated every weekend on umpteen occasions. But if you need seven yards for a first down, why throw it to somebody who's only four yards downfield and is going to be tackled immediately? And if you are that receiver, why are you only four yards downfield? The pass attempt makes sense, even if you don't always complete it, if you are at least trying to make a first down. But why expend the effort in a designed failure?

When it comes to confronting racism, nothing less than transformation will do. Nothing less than transformation will inspire us. Nothing less than transformation will spark a movement. Nothing less than transformation will prove God's point. Nothing less than transformation is really worth doing. If we can be satisfied with a merely marginal improvement that doesn't amount to transformation, then just bring on the punting team.

To be such a church requires a commitment, not just to God and to his ideals, but to one another and to those whom God will add to our number. To a self-sacrificing love that mimics Christ's example. To the hard work of listening and learning. To the sharing of both influence and responsibility. We have not yet achieved this transformation, but the opposite of racism is within our grasp, if we believe that it is our calling and continue undaunted toward the goal.

Turn with me if you will to Acts chapter 3. Let's read verses 1-10: "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. ² Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. ⁴ Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" ⁵ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

⁶ Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." ⁷ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. ⁹ When all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

In next chapter, Acts chapter four, the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, is assembled, still doing damage control on the fallout from this miracle. Notice the impact it made. In verse 16 they comment that everybody knows that Peter and John have done an “outstanding miracle” and that they “cannot deny it.”

I regret to inform you that when you called me as pastor you didn’t get much of a miracle worker. It’s not that I don’t believe in miracles. I do. It’s not that I don’t pray for miracles. I do. It’s just that I’ve been in ministry long enough to know that’s not the way God typically works through me.

But I do believe that God has called me to work at least one miracle. To show what the opposite of racism means in the context of a local church. It seems kind of lame to say that I need your help to do a miracle, but as I said, I’m not very good at them.

But because of our expressed ideals, because of our history, because of the head start we already have, because of our location, because of my own calling, but ultimately because of the power and the expressed will of God, I believe that we can be a flagship for God’s transforming power—to show the Church and to show the world the opposite of racism. Not even if Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King rose from the dead on the same day could there be a more outstanding, more undeniable miracle. Not in this America. We can be the opposite of racism.

(Scott singing) We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday.
Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.