

## On Earth, As It Is In Heaven

1. Warm-up question: We just celebrated July 4 and, before that, Juneteenth. What's something about America that you're thankful for? What's something that concerns you?
2. On Sunday, we wrapped up our sermon series on the Bible & Justice by focusing on racism. For context and perspective, we began by reminding ourselves of the big-picture story of the Bible – what theologians call the meta-narrative. The big-picture story unfolds in three parts, beginning with The Fall. God placed us humans on this gardenlike earth, giving us the gift of freewill, trusting us to take care of our planet and each other. But before long, we began to rebel and run amok.
  - a. Some believers take the story of Adam and Eve literally; other believers take it as parable. Whichever way you see it, the spiritual point of the story is that we humans rebelled against God and began using our freewill in destructive ways. Does it matter to you whether the story of Adam and Eve is literal or parable? Why or why not?
  - b. The basic idea of The Fall is that early in history we humans lost our way and departed from what God hoped. Does that ring true to you? If you were making the case that humanity has fallen, what evidence would you cite?
3. Part 2 of the big picture story is The Descent. In Genesis 4, Cain kills his brother Abel. Cain was a farmer; Able was a herdsman. In ancient times, these two factions were often at odds. From there humanity went into freefall, as fear, hate, greed, violence, tribalism, my-people-versus-your-people escalated with each generation, creating ever greater atrocities, reaching the nadir with the Roman Empire. Jeff gave the example of Rome's genocidal slaughter of the Carthaginians in B.C. 146. As best you understand, what fuels tribalism? Psychologically, where does that my-people-versus-your-people impulse come from and why is it so strong?
4. Part 3 of the big picture story is the Rising. Galatians 4:4 tells us, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son." It was a big gamble, but desperate times call for desperate action. So God came to us in the form of Jesus. We killed him too, but on the third day he arose. In his resurrection appearances, Jesus commissioned his disciples to spread out across the globe to carry forward his mission. Defining that mission is critical. So let's look at how the Bible defines it.
  - a. Ephesians 1:7 says, "With all wisdom and insight, Jesus has made known to us the mystery of his will . . . , as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." What does it mean to "gather up all things in him"?
  - b. Ephesians 2:14 says, "Jesus is our peace. In his flesh he has made both [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility

between us . . . , so that he might create in himself one new humanity . . . , thus making peace.” What does this tell us about Jesus’ plan and our role in it?

- c. II Corinthians 5:16 says, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view. . . , so if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us **the ministry of reconciliation**. . . . So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” What does that phrase “ministry of reconciliation” mean to you? What does it tell us about Jesus’ plan and our role in it?
  - d. Revelation 7:9 says, “After this, I looked, and there was a great multitude [in heaven] that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands [worshiping God].” What does this tell us about Jesus' plan? Do you find it compelling? Do you want to be part of it?
5. Jeff said, “Understanding the big picture story of the Bible is critical because it makes clear that putting an end to the hostilities that divide us – putting an end to racism and all the other isms – goes to the very heart of what Jesus calls us to do. A church that isn’t fighting racism isn’t doing its job! We come together in Jesus community to reconcile and heal within our walls, so we can then go out and change the world beyond our walls.” All of which means, we’ve got to figure out how to do that well.
- a. The first step in the “ministry of reconciliation” is to heal ourselves of racial prejudices that have become embedded within us. What kind of racial prejudices built up inside you during your formative years? Deeply embedded prejudices are hard to eradicate. How far along do you feel you are in that detoxing process? What can help us detox?
  - b. Most people think their battle against racism is finished once they detox from their own internal racism and become “colorblind.” But Jeff argued that’s only half the process, at best. Imagine if you were in Nazi Germany during World War II. Would it have been enough for you to simply abstain from prejudice against Jews? Why or why not?
  - c. Jeff said, “It’s not enough for me to say, ‘I’m not a racist, so my work here is done,’ when we live in a culture where profound racism was baked into the fabric of our society during 400 years of slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, segregation, redlining, “literacy tests,” voter restrictions, employment discrimination, etc., etc. The Bible teaches that the sins of one generation usually reverberate “to the third and fourth generation” of their offspring. Exodus 20:5. How long do you think it will take for us to heal the harm caused by 400 years of racism in America? Why does it take so long?

d. Here is some important factual data:

- ✓ The median income for white households in the United States is almost \$78,000; for black households it's only \$48,297.
- ✓ 10% of white people live in poverty in America; 20% of blacks.
- ✓ 38% of whites have a bachelor's degree; only 25% of blacks.
- ✓ Average life expectancy whites is 76.4 years; for blacks only 70.8.
- ✓ White men who commit the same crime as black men receive, on average, a 20% shorter prison sentence.

We live in a nation that has outlawed discrimination, yet huge real-life disparities linger. What should we make of that? What does that tell us?

- e. Jeff offered a hypothetical: Suppose I cut off your leg. Then say, "Let's have a race. We'll both start at the same place and see who wins? May the best runner win!" Is that a fair race? Why or why not? What has to happen for the race to be fair? How does this story relate to racism?
- f. If you're a person of color, what has been your most painful experience of racism? If you're not a person of color, what is the most painful experience of racism you've ever witnessed?
- g. Jeff concluded Sunday's sermon by saying, "Jesus doesn't want us to simply be race neutral as individuals or as a church. Jesus wants us to be proactively anti-racist. As a diverse church, we may not all agree on the precise policies that will best heal the harm caused by racism, but this much is clear – it's not enough to be race neutral in a culture that has been steeped in racism for hundreds of years. We all have a responsibility to identify and proactively support policies and programs and initiatives design to proactively heal the harm caused by centuries of racism. My prayer is that LifeJourney will become a strong anti-racist church." Your thoughts? How can we do better?