



PREACHING IN A PERIOD OF PANDEMIC AND PREJUDICE

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INTRODUCTION

It feels like we are living in an alternate universe. Is this really happening? When will we resume normal life as we knew it? When will churches regather without restrictions? When will we be able to enjoy Christian community such as fellowship meals again? When will we stop preaching to a faceless webcam? When will we stop wearing masks? Echoing the Psalmist, we ask, “How long, O Lord, how long?” These questions have played back over and over in my mind since the COVID-19 pandemic took over our lives in Spring of 2020.

This brief essay is not by any means an academic treatise. I will not be providing helpful sources in the endnotes. In fact, my writing style will be more conversational. Rather, the purpose of this article is to address candidly the hidden and overt prejudice that has been exacerbated as a byproduct of the COVID-19 crisis resulting in myriad forms of racism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, bigotry, hate crimes, murder, racial injustice, and more—in society and even in the church. We are a nation and world that is on edge. We are stressed and stretched out like never before. We are gratuitously paranoid of others. We have been conditioned by COVID-19 to distrust anyone and everyone. We have lost the ability to smile and exhibit social graces toward others. This has spawned heightened levels of fear, suspicion, anxiety, hatred, and even anger toward others erupting in explosive forms of prejudiced and racist behaviors.

How do we preach in this period of pandemic and prejudice? I would like to offer seven ways that preachers, pastors, and church leaders can respond to prejudice, xenophobia, racial injustice, and racism in our proclamation. While not exhaustive, my aim is to help us consider our own culpability, to lead us toward confession and repentance, and to demonstrate sermonic leadership for our congregations in combating racism and racial injustice. First, let me begin by defining some terms and then we will walk through some considerations and raise questions for how we can respond as pastors and preachers of God's Word to our present situation.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

In such a short article, we will not have space to unpack each of the terms mentioned above. However, we will focus on three primary terms: prejudice, xenophobia, and racism. These words are often used interchangeably in our culture even while their meanings and nuances reveal some marked differences. Here is a quick definition of terms as employed in this essay:

Prejudice—The etymology is clear that prejudice means judging a person or proceeding to make judgments (-judice) without prior knowledge (-pre) of the individual. This can take the form of assumptions made about him or her which are often based on stereotypes. For example, I will act as the case study. If you meet a person for the first time who is of Asian descent, like myself, what are your initial thoughts about me without prior knowledge? Perhaps you assume (pre-judice) that I don't speak English or that I was not born in the United States or make the determination that I should speak a language from an Asian culture based on my appearance. This is prejudice. You have predetermined certain aspects about my life without prior knowledge and background. This is a modest form of prejudice.

Xenophobia—Elsewhere, I have explained xenophobia in the following way: "*xenophobia* . . . is the Latin way of saying, literally,

‘the fear [*phobia*] of Others [*xeno-*].’ More precisely, a common definition of xenophobia is the ‘fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign.’”¹ In our dominant culture, the United States has historically marginalized those who sought immigration from other countries that were considered “strange,” “foreign,” or “different.” Such races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions include: Natives, Africans, Hispanics, Arabs, Mexicans, Asians (particularly Chinese, Filipinos, Indians, Japanese, and Koreans), European immigrants notably of Polish, Irish, Italian ancestry and others, as well as persons of religious faiths such as Jews and Muslims. Our current COVID-19 crisis has legitimized the hate crimes, toxic rhetoric, and xenophobic treatment of Americans of particularly Chinese and East Asian descent.

Racism—In *The Color of Compromise*, Jemar Tisby offers two different ways to view the concept of racism. Borrowing from Beverly Daniel Tatum, Tisby explains:

racism is a system of oppression based on race. Notice Tatum’s emphasis on system oppression. Racism can operate through impersonal systems and not simply through the malicious words and actions of individuals. Another definition explains racism as *prejudice plus power*. It is not only personal bigotry toward someone of a different race that constitutes racism; rather, racism includes the imposition of bigoted ideas on groups of people.²

Race is often described by sociologists as a social construct. It allowed members of the dominant culture to discriminate between who were the insiders and the outsiders. It predetermined the haves and the have nots. Tisby’s second definition of “prejudice plus power” addresses one of the chief concerns about racism which has prolonged the economic and racial inequities and injustices in society. We must remember that racism is both individual and systemic. While much more could be articulated by way of definitions, I will now move forward to

discuss seven steps for preachers to communicate in this period of pandemic and prejudice using the acronym RESPOND.

RECOGNIZE THAT RACISM, XENOPHOBIA, AND PREJUDICE ARE REAL (EVEN IN US)

The conversation we are engaging in is a difficult one. It makes people uncomfortable to talk about race and racism. It is easy to become defensive. We assume that Christians are exempt from racist, xenophobic, and prejudiced thoughts and behaviors. “I love my neighbor”; “I have black, brown, white, or Asian friends”; and “I’m not racist” are often the reactions when this topic arises. Therefore, allow me to initiate the conversation with these confessions: I am a racist. I have been prejudiced many times throughout various seasons of my life. And I have been fearful of others in my worst moments and even in some of my best moments.

May I encourage you to take a moment to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal moments in your past and present that showcase a racist, prejudiced, and xenophobic heart? Next, consider your church family. How have we treated those who don’t look like us? Do we even know? Maybe we have never thought to ask. In our preaching, have we ever spent time considering those who sit on the margins in terms of their worship style? Have we ever asked how they might interpret a Scripture text? Do we know what are the homiletical best practices for them in terms of illustrations and application?

EMPATHIZE WITH OTHERS (PUT YOURSELF IN THE SHOES OF OTHERS)

My memory persists and does not fail me when I think about how many times I have visited a church where I’m a visible minority and have been either given mean looks or completely ignored. Do we know what it’s like to be marginalized, ostracized, ignored, or made to feel unwelcome? Put yourself in the shoes of Others—those who don’t look like you, think like

you, dress like you, worship like you, theologize like you, etc. In our preaching, do we empathize with Others (consider all aspects of their lives, their joys and hardships) or do we expect them to assimilate and become like us in order to fit into our church's life and as listeners to our sermons? Take some time this week to put yourself in the shoes of one of your visible minorities (race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.). How would we feel if we never heard a sermon illustration or application that was relevant for our cultural context and crafted to speak into our culture? What if I was always expected to conform and assimilate and never have my cultural context acknowledged let alone celebrated?

**SIN TO CONFESS (IN OUR BEST AND WORST MOMENTS,
CONFESS TO GOD AND TO OTHERS THAT WE ARE RACISTS
AND SEEK TO TURN FROM OUR SIN**

As stated earlier, I am a racist and I struggle with racist thoughts and behaviors. How do I know? Ask yourself a series of questions: 1) Have I ever thought or spoken a racial slur against someone? 2) Have I ever looked down on someone and thought less of them because of their race or skin color? 3) Have I ever assumed the worst in someone based on their physical appearance or skin color? 4) Have I ever assumed that I should be in a position of authority/leadership over someone based on what they look like? 5) Have I ever be filled with pride in thinking I'm so glad God did not make me like him or her? The litmus test of racism reaches far wider than these five questions. I boldly make the assumption that we have all answered yes to one or all five of these questions. If so, we have sin to confess before God and before others. The sin of pride and the sin of prejudice run deep in our sinful nature. Even from the pulpit, we can preach a series on confessing the sin of racism in our congregations. Challenge your listeners to consider their sins and to confess them regularly.

PROTECT RECIPIENTS OF PREJUDICE (TALK ABOUT IT AND CREATE AN ACTION PLAN)

There may be members of your congregation or community who need your protection from racism, ethnocentrism, and prejudice. Do you know who these individuals and families are? As a congregation on a macro-level and in your leadership meetings and small group gatherings on a micro-level, find ways to share about the challenges of those who are experiencing prejudice in your midst. Bring them into the conversation and let them educate you on the various ways they have felt excluded, marginalized, and discriminated against in society and even in your church. If you open the discussion channels, do not be surprised when you hear the testimony of their experiences. They may be recent immigrants, refugees, black and brown folks, but also fourth generation Asian Americans who were born in this country but always assumed to be a “foreigner” and told to go back to China or some other assumed Asian country. *Time Magazine* recently featured an article from ten Asian American voices on the amped up discrimination toward Asian Americans particularly during the COVID crisis.³ Talk about the issues and then create an action plan on what can be done to protect the visible minorities in our congregations and communities.

OPEN YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS (TO OTHERS' PERSPECTIVES)

Currently, in our society, there is a lack of respect and empathy toward those who are different from us and those who hold different views. From the pulpit, one of the areas of wisdom that we can preach on more regularly is offering sage words on how to respect those who are different from us whether in personhood, beliefs, or actions. Show the congregation from the Scriptures how God calls his people to interact with those who are unlike ourselves and to open our hearts and minds to listen to their perspectives. Especially as it relates to topics such as racism, immigration, and justice, challenge your congregation to

read authors of varied skin colors. Encourage them to befriend someone of a different race and ethnicity. Advocate for a posture of listening rather than speaking. Allow those who are hurting to share their laments, frustrations, and anger.

NEEDS OF OTHERS REQUIRE OUR SERVICE (REFRAIN FROM INSULAR THINKING)

Especially in this season of COVID-19, we are living in a time of grave insularity. Isolated in our homes, we are increasingly numb to the pain and harsh realities of those around us. Rather than be externally-minded, we have become increasingly internally-focused thinking mainly of our needs, our health, and our safety. We want to remind our hearers of the importance to seek out the needs of others who may need our assistance in various aspects of life. Has our congregation lost sight of missions, evangelism, discipleship, and tangible care for the least of these?

DECLARE AND DEFEND THE GOSPEL (THE GOSPEL OF JESUS: HIS PERFECT, SACRIFICIAL LIFE, DEATH, BURIAL, RESURRECTION, ASCENSION, AND RETURN ARE WHAT ENABLE US TO RESPOND)

Last, but not least, declare the Gospel regularly and defend it. Over the last ten or so years, there has been a surplus of books attempting to define what the Gospel is.⁴ Well-intentioned as they are, many of these authors have argued that the Gospel is social justice, the Gospel is fighting racism, the Gospel is defending the rights of Dreamers, the Gospel is fighting abortion, the Gospel is immigration reform, the Gospel is Black Lives Matter, and more. I am sorry to write that these statements are erroneous. They are not the Gospel. They are simply implications and applications of the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God's plan of redeeming the world from sin through Jesus' perfect, sacrificial life, his death on the cross, his burial in a tomb, his resurrection from the dead, his ascension to Heaven and his

impending return. The Gospel of Jesus is found and fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. It should not be confused with the implications and applications of the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus is what enables us to pursue a love for humanity and for the Other.

CONCLUSION

In this brief essay, I have attempted merely to open our spiritual eyes to the delicate subjects of prejudice, racism, and ethnocentrism. The COVID-19 pandemic has not worsened these attitudes, behaviors, and structures. Rather, as others have observed, they have only brought them to wider consciousness. Preaching in a period of pandemic and prejudice has been exhausting for many. With empty church buildings and some professing Christians no longer attending worship services even online,⁵ we are eerily reminded of Jesus' words in Luke 18:8 when he asks, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

During this pandemic, it feels as if Christianity, the public worship of God, and gospel witness have been put on pause. It feels as if Satan is winning. It feels like we may never recover from COVID-19. One of the ways pastors and preachers can lead the charge is to repent and confess our sin of racism/prejudice to the Lord and to each other. We must seek to put an end to fear, discrimination, hatred, and violence toward the Other. I challenge you not to let this historic moment pass by. Do not avoid preaching and teaching on racism, prejudice, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia due to people-pleasing or the fear of listeners' responses. Listen to the sermons of other biblical preachers. Through trial and error, teach your students the best practices of preaching on race and racism. While we may not be able to curtail these sins throughout the entire world, we can seek to mitigate prejudice in our place and time—with God's help, grace, and mercy and for his glory.

NOTES

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1. See Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 47.
 2. Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 16.
 3. Anna Purna Kambhampaty, "'I Will Not Stand Silent.' 10 Asian Americans Reflect on Racism During the Pandemic and the Need for Equality," *Time Magazine*, June 25, 2020. <https://time.com/5858649/racism-coronavirus/>
 4. See, for example, Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel: What Does God Expect of Us?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).
 5. "One in Three Practicing Christians Has Stopped Attending Church During COVID-19," *Faith and Christianity in State of the Church* 2020, July 8, 2020. <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>