

God's Eternal, Multi-ethnic Kingdom
Revelation 5:9-10

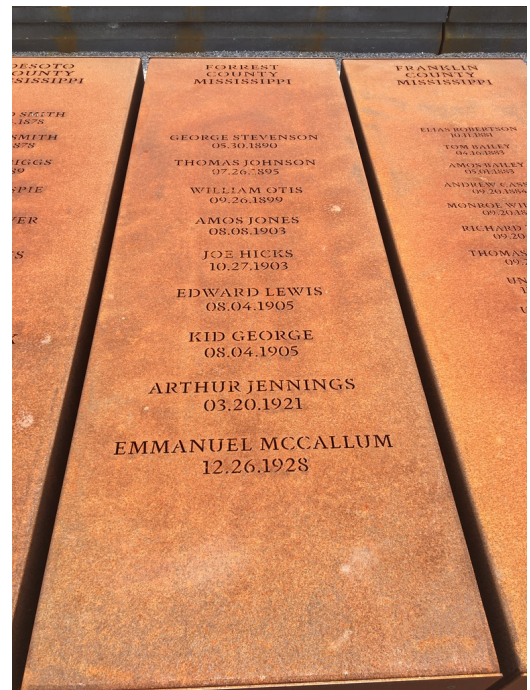
Each summer my three brothers and I take a trip. A couple of years ago we went to Atlanta for a few days. On the way back to visit our mom in south Mississippi, we stopped in Montgomery, Alabama at the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

The memorial is made of 800 six-foot tall steel monuments, one for each county in the United States in which a black person was lynched. The names of those who were lynched in that county are engraved on that specific monument. It was surreal and moving walking through that memorial. When you enter, the monuments are at ground level; you see them right beside you. But the walkway slopes downward so that you are eventually looking up at the monuments as if you were looking up at someone who had been lynched.



A duplicate of each of these 800 monuments has been laid side by side in the ground; they look like tombstones in a vast graveyard.

Here is the monument for the county in which I grew up: Forrest County, named after Nathan Bedford Forrest, the first grand wizard of the KKK. I have often wondered whether or not my black classmates realized the our county was named after a grand wizard of the KKK; I didn't realize that until early adulthood. You see the names of nine black men who were lynched in Forrest County.



Sadly, Kansas is represented. Here is the monument for Crawford County, Kansas.

The deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery (Georgia) and Breonna Taylor (Kentucky) and many, many others didn't happen in a vacuum. They happened in the context of our country's history of slavery, racial terror lynchings, and segregation.

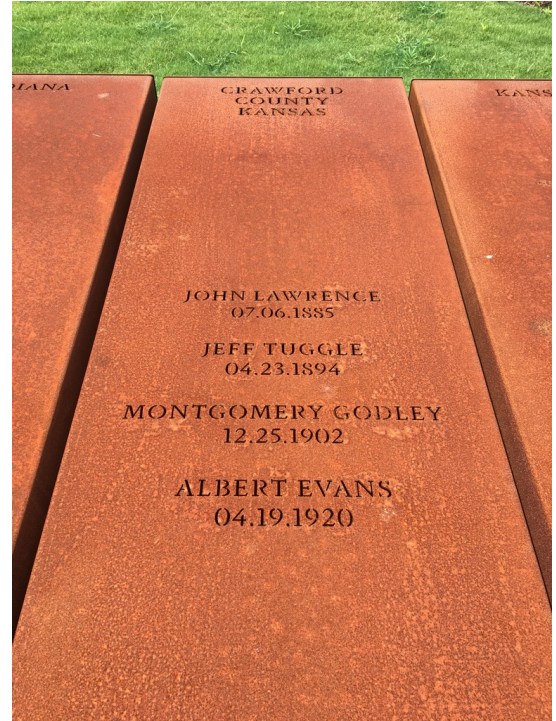
You probably remember your reaction when you watched the video of George Floyd on the ground with a police officer kneeling on his neck. I was in disbelief. About three minutes into the video I found myself yelling at my phone, "What?!?! No!" The reaction of our black friends and brothers and sisters in Christ must have been much deeper and much more visceral.

And so today we are beginning a conversation about racism and injustice. Although racism is manifested in many different ways and toward many different groups of people, given what is happening in our country now, I'm going to limit our focus today to racial injustice toward the black community. Having said that, the things we learn in this conversation will certainly apply more broadly to racism and injustice in other contexts.

Allow me to make a few clarifying comments that might help you "hear" what I'm trying to say today. **First**, please believe me when I say that my main objective is to urge us all (myself included) to engage the issue of racism **as followers of Christ**. We don't all need to end up in the same place when it comes to politics, policy, or narrative; the issues are too wide-ranging and complex for unanimity. I'm convinced that God wants us to go for something much, much deeper; namely, I believe God wants us to be so compassionate, so humble, and so teachable that it doesn't much matter that we don't agree on all the details.

Second, please know that I realize that I'm leaving many legitimate issues unaddressed this morning. I'm not going to talk about the rioting that's taking place. I'm not going to talk about how cops have an almost-impossible job in many cities (although I will say that I have great respect for the RCPD; I am one of three volunteer police chaplains and I am a friend to numerous cops and corrections officers). Please don't misinterpret my silence this morning on these issues.

Today I want to talk as a white pastor to a predominantly white church about our response to what is happening in our country today. I will first remind us all that God is establishing a kingdom that includes people from every ethnicity on earth. Then we will talk about how that reality should inform our response to the current turmoil in our country.



I. God's vision for an eternal, multi-ethnic kingdom. (Revelation 5:1-10)

Revelation 5 (the passage Olivia read earlier) records a fascinating vision in which John (the author of Revelation) sees a scroll which was sealed up with seven "seals" (think of wax seals). This scroll is God's plan for establishing His kingdom on earth; this plan involves defeating His enemies once and for all and then making all things new.

The problem was that no one in heaven or on earth was found worthy to open its seals; nobody was worthy to unfold God's plan for the ages. At this realization John wept and wept. John felt like we often feel - stuck in a time and place that is broken beyond repair. . . a time and place in which it looks like evil is winning . . . like Satan is more powerful than God. . . like injustice and death have the last word.

As John wept, it was revealed that there **is** One who is worthy to open the scroll: the Lamb who was slain, the risen Christ. In verses 9 and 10 we read that both the divine and human beings surrounding the throne declared in song why Jesus was worthy:

9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. 10 "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."

They sang to Jesus, "You are worthy to take the book and break its seals - to bring history to its God-ordained conclusion." Why is He worthy? Because He purchased (i.e., redeemed) for God with His blood men from every **tribe** and **tongue** (i.e., language) and **people** and **nation** (Gk., *ethnos*). These redeemed will reign upon the earth. All of human history is moving toward the day when **the redeemed will comprise the eternal, multi-ethnic kingdom of God**. Let that reality sink in: the redeemed will comprise an eternal, multi-ethnic kingdom of God. If you don't love people who don't look like you, you would not like heaven (the new heaven and earth) very much.

By all accounts, George Floyd was a follower of Christ and therefore part of God's kingdom (see [here](#)). This means that my relationship with him in God's eternal, multi-ethnic kingdom is as permanent and significant as any relationship I have.

The entire flow of Scripture is heading toward this kingdom. God's created humanity in His image. Through the Fall sin introduced selfishness and violence. God's judgment after the tower of Babel scattered the nations and confused their languages. God chose Abraham and the nation of Israel to be a light to the nations, but Israel failed miserably in this calling. In the supreme act of humility Jesus took on flesh and blood to redeem those from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. After the resurrection Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to empower the disciples to make disciples of every nation (every ethnicity).

[For a fuller description of this theme in the Bible's story line, see **NOTE** at the end of this document]

The book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament reveals how hard it was for the first disciples to understand that Gentiles really weren't culturally and racially inferior. The divide between Jew and Gentile wasn't only religious; it was also racial. I'll give just one example. Galatians 2 describes how Peter didn't want to be seen eating with Gentiles when Jewish Christians from Jerusalem visited. Paul confronted Peter and told him that his hypocrisy was out of step with the gospel (Galatians 2:11-14). Peter's hypocrisy is doubly shocking because we read in Acts 10 and 11 about God giving him a vision to convince him that he should no longer call any food or person unclean. He had a powerful, undeniably spiritual experience; but years later a not-so-subtle type of racism had crept in.

This seems to be the very challenge for the white church in America. We need to be open to the possibility that our lives aren't consistent with our theology. Our theology says that God is building an eternal, multi-ethnic kingdom; but the way we think and speak and act might be saying, ". . . but He's primarily interested in us."

The white church in America *has* made great strides. I grew up in South Mississippi where our schools were segregated and our churches were segregated. When a black college student from Nigeria (that our denomination's missionaries had led to Christ) began attending our 100% white church, that was okay. When he "walked the aisle" and wanted to join the church, that was not okay. I remember church meetings where people threw around racial slurs and yelled at each other. Eventually about a third of the people left the church and integrated churches became common.

I think you'll agree that the white church in America has made great strides. But if you listen to our black brothers and sisters in Christ, you will also have to agree that we have a long way to go. There is diversity among blacks in the body of Christ just as there is among whites. But the vast majority of the black voices I am hearing within the body of Christ are saying that ***our silence is complicity*** and that if we don't ***act differently*** we are part of the problem. [You can find an example [here](#).] That is a hard diagnosis to hear, isn't it. But what if they're right?

If your heart is anything like mine, you recoil at the idea that you are in any way complicit in racism. "I'm just living my life. I don't condone racism. I don't hate anybody. Get out of my face." Or maybe it's just too complex and emotional an issue for you to engage right now. I received a text this week that was striking. My friend was expressing how he and his wife are often overwhelmed with raising kids, with COVID, and with the aftermath of George Floyd:

We find ourselves shutting down more often than ever. Staring off into space, unable to engage our minds because we're swamped with it all. It's all too big...too much...too many things to solve and figure out. And, we feel incredibly guilty when we say "let's just focus on raising our family" because everyone on social media tells us that if we don't march or do something, we're part of the problem and racist ourselves. Ugh.

That may be you. Or perhaps the terminology and the categories and the movements associated with the racial tension in our country send you to a bad place. Here are some terms that might trigger you:

- * Black Lives Matter
- * White privilege
- * Institutional racism
- * Police brutality
- * Racial profiling
- * Woke
- * Mass incarceration of people of color

I have had enough conversations to know that the things I just mentioned resonate deeply with some of you; they represent and express deeply-held convictions about the racism that exists in our country. For others of you, the mention of these things provokes strong negative emotions. Perhaps others of you don't know what you think about them.

I mention these issues NOT to suggest that if you're a "good Christian" you'll agree with the proponents of everything I just mentioned. What I am suggesting is that our commitment to an eternal, multi-ethnic kingdom should make us humble and teachable about such issues. What if there is such a thing as "white privilege" that makes me blind to the things I say and do? Or to the things that I don't say or don't do? In this country, I've rarely been in a room where I'm in the minority, so I don't know what I don't know.

If I want to represent Jesus well in this world, I should want to know the answer to those questions. If I pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," I should want to know if I've got blindspots that hinder God's kingdom and God's will.

Here's my plea to us as a church:

A challenge to cultivate these essential virtues (in relation to the issue of racism): humility, empathy, and teachability.

Honestly, if the Holy Spirit fills us full to overflowing to the point where these virtues ooze out of our lives, God could do in us and through us more than we could ask or imagine in relation to racial reconciliation. I'm convinced that if we are actively cultivating these virtues God will lead us where we need to go as a church; we can actually have honest, difficult conversations with each other about complex issues like racism.

If we aren't cultivating these virtues, we would be better off remaining silent. Seriously, if you are unwilling to cultivate these virtues, please do not engage this issue; you will only cause chaos and disunity.

Humility. (1 Peter 5:5 NIV)

5 In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

There is a type of pride that is pervasive in the world, and sadly in the church. It's a type of pride that says, "If I don't agree with you I have a right to insult you and slander you." By contrast, humility says, "Even though we disagree, you are created in the image of God and therefore infinitely valuable."

Therefore, humility will change the way we engage the issue of racism. Peter writes, "**all of you** clothe yourselves with humility toward one another." If you're conservative in your politics, clothe yourself in humility toward your progressive brothers and sisters in Christ. If you are progressive in your politics, clothe yourselves in humility toward your conservative brothers and sisters in Christ.

I'm not saying that you should keep the peace by not talking honestly. I'm saying that when you do speak, you make it very clear to the other person that you're not merely trying to win an argument; you actually care about the other person. There's no way you can fake that type of humility.

God's eternal, multi-ethnic kingdom is not in jeopardy; the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of our God and Christ. What's in jeopardy is whether or not God can use us in extending that kingdom.

Empathy. (Romans 12:15 NASB)

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Paul is advocating that we enter into both the joys and the sorrows of the people around us. We can't do that with everybody all the time. And we don't always know when others are weeping. But it's hard to miss the fact that our black brothers and sisters in Christ are weeping right now. Are we weeping with them (literally and figuratively)? Do we lament that there is so much heartache in the black community?

Five years ago a young white man named Dylann Roof attended a Bible study at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina (Emanuel is one of the oldest black churches in the country and has a rich history in relation to the civil rights movement). After about an hour, Roof stood up, pulled out a handgun and began shooting. Nine dead and three wounded.

The Sunday after that shooting, here at Faith we sang songs, prayed prayers, and I preached a message. But there was no mention of the shooting in Charleston. After the service Kimmerly Newsome (who gave me permission to mention all of this) came up and told me she was disappointed in me because there was no mention of the church shooting. I invited her to come talk with me. And she did. She explained how for many black Christians, the church is the one place where they feel safe; church is a place of refuge. That church shooting had shattered all of that.

We should have wept with her that Sunday. Of course there are tensions . . . we don't know everything that is troubling every person at Faith; and we can't pray for EVERY troubling current event. But I am struck by how clueless I was. And I am increasingly aware of how clueless I still am about many things that our black brothers and sisters go through.

If we're clueless we can't weep with those who weep. Which leads to the third virtue. . .

Teachability. (*James 1:19-20 NIV*)

19 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

James gives three simple commands to **everyone**, not merely to a few in the church. First, “. . .be quick to listen/hear.” The idea is that we should be eager to understand the message that others are trying to communicate. You lean in closer because you're eager to “get” what the other person is saying.

Second, “. . .be slow to speak.” Whereas we are to be **eager** to hear, we are to **pause** before we speak. Third, “. . . be slow to anger.” Of course there is a place for righteous indignation, justified anger. I think that our black brothers and sisters have legitimate reasons to be angry over things that happen. But when it comes to our discussions as a church family, generally speaking, our anger does not accomplish what God wants to accomplish. Anger will poison your soul and mute your voice (people will dismiss what you say).

The current political and social climate in the U.S. doesn't exactly encourage being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Why can't we be counter-cultural? Let us become teachable in relation to what our black brothers and sisters are experiencing. If we want to be available to God as He builds an eternal, multi-ethnic kingdom, we need to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger in this conversation. If we're teachable, we can learn and mature in many ways.

I have found that my black friends are very willing to share with me their experiences related to racism (probably because they're actually friends). Almost all of them have a story to tell about being profiled or being accused of shoplifting or of being pulled over time and time again for no particular reason. I've heard it too often to believe that it's somehow a coincidence.

As well, if we're teachable, there are many books, blogs, and teaching videos on the topic of racism, both by Christian authors and others. We are compiling a list of books and podcasts and YouTube videos that people have found helpful. We will make this list available. We won't endorse everything that is written or said in these resources, but they each have something to teach us if we're teachable. My encouragement and challenge to each of us is this: As an act of humility and teachability, read or view

something about racism you probably don't agree with. Pray, "God, show me my blindspots."

Also, learning about these issues can be something of a gift to our black friends. Just taking the time to become conversant with these issues will help us empathize and show humility to them.

We are discussing a number of ways to continue the conversation we've begun this morning. We will revisit this topic in messages on Sunday mornings and we're exploring ways to have discussion/reading groups. As well, various organizations offer day-long or weekend-long experiences that are designed to help us understand the dynamics of being part of the majority culture. We will be continuing this conversation with the goal of being used by God in our community and beyond.

Conclusion. Earlier this week I decided to message one of my black high school classmates, Ollie Kendrick. We became FB friends a few years ago. I asked him, "When we were growing up in Hattiesburg, did you realize that our county was named after Nathan Bedford Forrest, the first grand wizard of the KKK?" He said, "No, I found out in college at Alcorn State" (which is a historically black university). He said his history professor reminded him of that often to keep him in his place. I next asked Ollie if there was anything he wanted me to tell you (Faith E Free) in light of today's topic.

Here's Ollie's story. His wife grew up in West Virginia and attended a predominantly white pentecostal church. When they moved back there, his family was the only black family in the church. Eventually Ollie served on the elder board with a man named Bill Roff. After they served together and became really good friends, Bill felt the need to tell Ollie that before he came to Christ he was a member of the KKK; before he knew Christ he never would have had a black man for a friend. Ollie told me that one Sunday before communion, he and Bill washed each other's feet. And Ollie told me that when Bill died a few years ago, Bill's daughter asked Ollie to speak at his funeral.

Bill Roff was changed by the gospel. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greeks (i.e. every tribe, tongue, people and nation). As we celebrate the Lord's table this morning, praise God for the power of the gospel to turn a racist into someone who has compassion for all. Praise God that the gospel unites all who believe into God's eternal, multi-ethnic kingdom.

When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he had to confront them because their celebration of the Lord's Table magnified their disunity whereas it was supposed to express their unity. In their case, the wealthy were eating and drinking before the poor had even arrived. Consequently, they were eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. And so Paul said, "Examine yourself" when you eat the bread and drink the cup. Given today's topic, let us examine ourselves so that we don't eat and drink in an unworthy manner.

"Heavenly Father, we praise You for the power of the gospel. We put no confidence in ourselves to address the complex and far-reaching issues surrounding racism. We can

barely manage our own lives, much less fix issues that have simmered in our country for hundreds of years. But we believe that Jesus' death, resurrection, and enthronement are powerful and sufficient to change the human heart and ultimately to transform cities and nations. And so we come to the Lord's table.

Search our hearts, O God, and show us if there is anything there that is hurtful - to You first and foremost. . . and therefore hurtful to ourselves and to others. In Jesus' name, Amen."

In a moment the screen will change, giving you time for reflection and/or to gather elements for the Lord's table. When we gather here at Faith we use wafers and juice to represent the body and blood of Christ; use whatever you have; the symbols aren't the important thing, it's what they represent. When the screen changes back I will lead us in celebrating the Lord's Table together.

NOTE: The entire flow of Scripture is heading toward this kingdom. Do you know why God created humanity in His image? Because God wanted a family on earth. Because He wanted a loving family, God gave us a will and the freedom to reject Him. Without freedom there is no love. He could have created us as robots and programmed us to obey, but that wouldn't have been love. God wanted a loving family of humans on earth.

Due to the fall, humans became selfish and violent; Cain murdered his brother Abel out of jealousy and rage. God had warned Cain that "sin is crouching at the door" and that he needed to rule over it; but instead sin ruled over Cain. Watch the news and examine your own heart and you'll agree that sin is still crouching at the door and is still ruling over humanity.

Instead of carrying **God's** name throughout the earth (as commanded in Genesis 1:28 and 9:1), Genesis 11 tells us that humanity built a city and a tower (basically a temple) to "make a name for **ourselves**." In response to this "tower of Babel" incident, God scattered the nations and confused their languages lest there be no hope of redemption.

Instead of giving up on humanity, God chose a man named Abram (later Abraham) through whom "all the families of the earth would be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3). His descendants through Isaac became the Jewish nation of Israel. Their calling was to live in the Promised Land and be a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6). Their relationship with God was supposed to be so compelling that one day all the nations would come streaming into Jerusalem because they wanted the same type of relationship with the God of Israel. Israel failed miserably in that calling and was sent into exile for 70 years.

In the ultimate act of compassion and humility, Jesus took on flesh and blood to redeem not just the Jewish people, but people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Jesus came to reverse the scattering that took place after the tower of Babel. After the resurrection Jesus gave the church the mission of “making disciples of ***all the nations***. (*ethnos*)” On the day of Pentecost God sent the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. The Spirit caused the disciples in Jerusalem to speak in ***tongues*** - the actual tongues spoken by Jews from the nations that had been scattered (Acts 2:1-13). They heard the gospel in their own languages. The reversal of the judgment after the tower of Babel was underway.