

Critical Race Theory and Other Divine Offenses

Matthew 25:31-46 (CEB)

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Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

³¹ “Now when the Human One^[b] comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left.

³⁴ “Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. ³⁵ I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’

³⁷ “Then those who are righteous will reply to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸ When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

⁴⁰ “Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things. Go into the unending fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² I was hungry and you didn’t give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you didn’t give me anything to drink. ⁴³ I was a stranger and you didn’t welcome me. I was naked and you didn’t give me clothes to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’

⁴⁴ “Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn’t do anything to help you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer, ‘I assure you that when you haven’t done it for one of the least of these, you haven’t done it for me.’ ⁴⁶ And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life.”

(image: Matthew 25 graphic)

Just before the pandemic, in December of 2019—*was that in our lifetime?*—this congregation’s elders voted to become a Matthew 25 church, a designation created by our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA. I’ll say what that means in a second.

Many of you recognize that Matthew 25 is shorthand for this section we read in Matthew’s gospel in which Jesus tells a story about the Reign of God, how faithful disciples will be recognized in the age that Reign based on our compassion and caring acts. Jesus says when you care for those who are hurting the most, it is God’s own self that you are caring for.

This passage—and the life of service it describes—has been part of this congregation’s DNA for a long, long time. It shouldn’t shock you that our session signed on to be a Matthew 25 church. What is tricky is figuring out exactly how to live into this status.

(image: 3 marks of Matthew 25 churches)

According to the program, Matthew 25 congregations do 3 things: 1) pursue congregational vitality, 2) address systemic poverty, and 3) combat structural racism. That’s a lot for any church to try and do. Now, there’s life and energy and spirit at NDPC, so I think we’ve got congregational vitality. Our commitments to ending homelessness and making sure there is affordable housing for everyone, and our commitment to medical debt relief and to the

expansion of healthcare through our political advocacy in Presbyterians for a Better Georgia—surely all that counts on our ledger as addressing systemic poverty? I think we check that box.

But what about “combating structural racism?” Do we do that? It’s not easy to know exactly how a church like ours is supposed to engage in something so abstract.

One thing we can do it is learn. Learn how race continues to function as an organizing principle in our lives. Learning is important especially for those of us who are white. Many of us have lived with race as an invisible part of our lives because whiteness has always been “normal.” Last summer, many of you engaged in the 21-day Antiracism Challenge, 21 daily encounters with an article or video or movie that shows how racism works. Last fall, pastors Nibs Stroupe and Paul Smith engaged us in a conversation about what antiracism has looked like in their 80+ years of combined ministry. We welcomed Rev. Dr. Jen Harvey to talk about antiracist parenting. We’ve had Rev. Paul Roberts here to engage our church in conversation. We have lamented in worship over the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery.

All this learning and our deepening awareness of racism can be unsettling. Racial awareness can be “apocalyptic” in the sense that an apocalypse is an unveiling of our eyes. Once we see how racism is carved into all of our institutions and communities and even into the land itself, we never see our world the same again. Racism hasn’t just altered the world around us... it disfigures the world within us. Race gets inside of us. It skews our values and our judgment. Race changes the way we see each other and the way we see ourselves.

I have had what I consider to be the good fortune of a lot of opportunities to learn about race. One of the many things I can say I’ve learned is that as a white person, learning about race feels crappy. You’re better off for knowing, but the knowing doesn’t make you *feel* better. It can be hard, impossible even, to imagine how we might ever rid the effects of racism from our world. It’s harder to imagine how to eliminate racialized thinking from our conscience.

I know as a white person the feeling of frustration when we are confronted by the truth about racism. I also know that if you follow that frustration where it wants to lead, you will be tempted to deny the truth about race and racism—what it was and what it is.

(image: Critical Race Theory protest)

I’ve been paying attention this past year to the cultural backlash against what’s being called *Critical Race Theory*. “Critical Race Theory” has become a term used to describe *any and every* effort being made to bring attention to the role of race in our common life. Critical Race Theory is blamed for everything from Black Lives Matter protests, to racial sensitivity or diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in schools or corporations, to the dismantling of statues of Christopher Columbus and Robert E. Lee—it’s all the fault, critics say, of “Critical Race Theory.” In school boards and state legislatures across the country, people who want to ban any mention of race and racism. What the white people seem to object to the most is the discomfort of being implicated in racism. These efforts to ban Critical Race Theory are the latest expression of white supremacy. White people fighting to pull the veil back over our eyes; white people fighting to preserve white ignorance and white power.

You will certainly hear more about this as we move into the next Georgia legislative session in January. But this morning, I want you to know what Critical Race Theory actually is. Because it's wonderful. It's something I began to wrestle with in seminary at Union and have been engaging for 20 years. Critical Race Theory is a powerful and useful tool for us as a majority white congregation that is engaged in combating systemic racism. Allow me a few moments to describe it to you. I think you will see not only that Critical Race Theory is not something to be afraid of, but it harmonizes in remarkable ways with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(image: Prof. Derrick Bell)

What is Critical Race Theory? It's a way of thinking about the world. That's what a theory is. Critical Race Theory emerged from legal studies in the 70s & 80s when folks were trying to figure out why, after so many legal victories in the Civil Rights Movement, why was racism not going away? Why were things not getting better for Black folks? Those were the questions being asked by one of the originators of Critical Race Theory, law professor Derrick Bell.

Bell had been a civil rights lawyer, a colleague of Thurgood Marshall. Bell was asking provocative questions like, "was Brown vs. Board of Education—the great decision that desegregated school—bad for Black children?" Bell couldn't help but notice that every time Black people would experience progress—racism would come roaring back with a vengeance.

In the South, when school were desegregated, what happened? White people moved into their own communities and created their own private schools—"Christian academies" that still dot the landscape of the Atlanta suburbs. Public schools are as segregated now as they were in the 70s. Even after laws were changed, after legal segregation was outlawed, Black folks and white folks still experience profoundly unequal outcomes. Justice, Derrick Bell began to say, cannot be color-blind.

Bell wasn't saying that Brown v. Board was wrong. He wanted us to see what he saw: that racism is insidious. Nothing gets disentangled from race in America. No legal decision. No act of Congress or state house. No tax policy. No health care policy or housing policy. No sanctuary and no sermon can claim to be "neutral" or "unbiased." Racism is in it. Unless we intentionally invite the lens of race to explore the effects of what we say and do, we pulling that veil back over our eyes. There is a gap between America's ideals about justice and righteousness and the reality of the Black experience. Critical Race Theory focuses our eyes on that gap.

Here's one final, simple way to think about Critical Race Theory. It is a centering of Black people's experiences, words, and thoughts. It is aspiring for a world in which the centering of whiteness is no longer permissible.

(image: 2 portraits—Gainsborough and Wiley)

This image tells this same story. In the Huntington Museum of Art in Los Angeles, hangs one of the more famous portraits in the Western art tradition. Thomas Gainsborough's Blue Boy. It's been in the collection of that wealthy family for 100 years and everything about it represents

the centering of whiteness. The gentility, the fine fabric. Even the setting—an art gallery, a space for fine culture and good taste.

The Huntington has just hung another portrait. The second portrait, called *Portrait of a Young Gentleman* is also of a young man, its the same size as *Blue Boy*, the same pose, his hand on his left hip. But this young man was drawn this year, by Black artist Kehinde Wiley.

(image: *Portrait of a Young Gentleman, by Kehinde Wiley*)

Wiley's portrait hasn't replaced Gainsborough's. They're both still there. But they look at each other across the room. The presence of the second portrait changes the first, it changes the room itself. Whiteness has been de-centered. Blackness has a place of honor.

In our sacred calling to combat structural racism, the experiences, wisdom, and insights of Black people are essential. Not just so we can call ourselves diverse or inclusive. Black lives and Black voices are essential because Black truth is essential if there is to be truth at all. Some white folks don't like to hear this. "Why should Black perspectives be favored? Isn't Critical Race Theory a kind of "reverse racism? Shouldn't we all be equal?"

Yes, we should all be equal. But the equality that we are intended to have, the equality of dignity and value and worth that is our birthright as beings who bear the sacred image of our common Creator—that equality gets effaced by human sin. Sometimes—I don't know, maybe you think this is unfair—sometimes God steps in and says "for crying out loud, people, for the sake of the restoration of your belovedness I am taking sides!"

Which brings us back to the gospel. The harshest part of Matthew 25 is that God is not neutral. God takes sides and God identifies with those who are suffering.

Could it be that at this moment when the sin of white supremacy that has defaced our mutual belovedness for 400 years is being called out and exorcised, could it be that God is taking sides again?

Critical Race Theory is no more offensive than Jesus in Matthew 25.

What do you think? Do you think it's fair that God chooses to identify with those who suffer? Then asks the rest of us to act with care and compassion to the suffering? Or is that unfair? Don't respond too quickly. Take your time. Consider it. By the looks of this passage, there could be an awful lot riding on your answer.