

How to Begin Healing

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on First Corinthians 9: 19-23

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I count that I have now preached over 500 sermons in my career as a pastor, and in all that time, I don't believe I have ever stood up behind the pulpit to announce that I did not want to preach today. I don't want to preach today because I am in pain. I am in pain because like you, I am someone who loves his country and I hate to see it torn apart at the seams. I am in pain because black people whom I love are hurting. I am in pain because I have seen people who are black and white hurt by things that have been said in a war of vitriolic words that have been exchanged in this past week. I am in pain because I am disappointed in the way some people whom I thought more of have responded to the events of this week, and most of all I am in pain because I am disappointed in myself for the way I have lived most of my life, even though I prayerfully hope I can get things right this time around.

I don't want to preach this week, but I am preaching because I know that being a pastor means that I have a responsibility to lead in times like this, and these times call for leadership because it is not easy knowing what we in the church should say in times like this. What do we say about who God is, who Jesus is? How do we represent the gospel in times like these? These aren't easy questions to answer. But if you are interested in my humble opinion, because you think I may have some wisdom to offer in these times, then I would start by saying that what we say depends on who were talking to.

To people who are black what should people in the church who look like me say? Well, I wouldn't say much. I would say that I believe the murder of George Floyd and some weeks ago, Ahmaud Arbery and countless other innocent African Americans is wrong. It is deeply wrong.

And then I would listen. And here's why I would listen. When I was growing up in the white suburbs of Atlanta and Columbia, SC, mostly in the 1980s, I came to form a picture of American history that I was pretty sure was the picture of American history. And that was a picture where racial injustice was basically a thing of the past. I learned that in the 19th century, this nation fought a war to end slavery, and that just before my lifetime we had gone through a civil rights movement mostly led by people like Martin Luther King to end segregation, and that because of these events, racial injustice in this country had been defeated for all intents and purposes.

Now, I didn't pretend that this country didn't still have its racists, I was aware of the existence of the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi skinheads and people like that. But these people were crazy. They were sort of like those isolated islands in the Pacific that were controlled by Japanese soldiers who decades after the end of World War II hadn't heard that the war is over. Well, it is only through listening to people in the black community over the years, that I have come to find out that in general, and I don't ever like to speak in generalizations, but in general, my perception of the American story is not the way people in the black community see the American story. They would agree with me that great progress had been made in righting the wrongs of racial injustice through the civil war and the civil rights movement, but in their eyes, this progress was less like the end of World War II and more like the battle of Midway. Yes, racial injustice was in retreat, and yes they could now see the day when all men would be equal to use Jefferson's words, but there is still a very long road ahead until that day comes. And that road is paved with as much suffering and cruelty and indignity as the road in the rearview mirror. Now maybe you think the first picture I painted is completely right, and the second one is completely wrong. I won't debate this point. It doesn't matter who is right and wrong. What

matters is that the way we see things is usually not the way that people in the black community see things regardless of who is right and wrong, and that's why this is a time to listen. I am not suggesting that if you are white that means you had anything to do with the murder of George Floyd, or Ahmaud Arbery, or that you are responsible for centuries of injustices that have been committed against people in the black community. But even if we are not responsible for racial injustice, remember that we in the church can sin not just by what we do but by what we fail to do. The Good Samaritan may not have been the one who robbed and beat the man going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, but he was the only one who was a neighbor to him. He didn't pass by like the priest and the Levite and say "I didn't do it, so I'm not going to help." He stopped to help. When Jesus said whatever you did to the least of these you did for me, he didn't say you were the cause of someone's hunger, or you were the cause of someone's thirst, or you were the cause of someone's imprisonment, but he said if you did not help them, you did not help me. So to those in the black community I would start by listening, and I would say that racial injustice is always wrong.

But what about those who are the victims of looting and rioting? What can the church say to them? Well, I would also say to them that what they suffered was wrong. I am disappointed that some people in the church who are colleagues of mine do not want to say that. They are willing to extend their sympathy to those who have suffered as a result of the rioting and looting and violence. They are willing to say it is a tragedy, but they are unwilling to say that what they suffered was wrong, because they see the rioting and looting and general violence which we have seen across the country this week as a form of self-defense. I can understand people wanting to defend themselves. But the problem with calling looting and rioting self-

defense is that most of the people who are victims of rioting and looting have nothing to do with George Floyd or Derek Chauvin. Suppose you are a middle class American who has taken out a loan to run a small business in an urban or suburban community who has worked hard all his life to run this business, you have always treated your customers and your employees in that community fairly and honestly. Suppose you are white or black or Asian or Latino, and yet you come home one day to find your business burned to the ground and all your merchandise looted. Now tell me, what do you have to do with Ahmaud Arbery or George Floyd? What do you have to do with Derek Chauvin, or Rodney King or Emmitt Till? There is nothing wrong with becoming angry at injustice. If you saw the video of George Floyd dying and you didn't get angry then I would suggest you might want to have your heart checked. But there is something wrong with directing your anger toward things that have nothing to do with your anger. If you get in a dispute with a hotel manager over some unfair charges to your room, you can get angry and say you will never use his hotel again or that you will take your case to the corporate office, but you don't have a right to mock the manager's accent or to say something cruel about his appearance, because these things have nothing to do with what you're angry about. If you loan somebody money and they refuse to pay you back, you can refuse to loan them money anymore, you can tell everyone they know how untrustworthy they are, you can even take legal action against them, if you are so inclined. But you don't go over to their house and grab their child and twist his arm to the point of almost breaking until they agree to pay you. Because the child has nothing to do with it. So to those who have suffered at the hands of rioters and looters I would say that I feel their pain, and that what they suffered was a tragedy. With that much I agree, but more than that, I would say that what they suffered was wrong. Now you

may say to me, Rich, I agree that these business owners and other innocent bystanders were wronged, but why would you only say that to them, why would you not say that to people in the black community. Why? Because of this history I've talked about this morning, and the painful memories of that history. Because for far too long the black community has heard the white church condemn their expressions of rage without any understanding of what caused their rage. Martin Luther King condemned violence among African Americans fighting for civil rights, but his understanding of the pain and suffering of his community gave him the right to do that. Mahatma Gandhi condemned violence among Indians but his understanding of the pain and suffering of the Indian experience gave him the right to do that. I am not suggesting that all the violence we have seen in the past week has been caused by people in the black community. It has not. Nor am I suggesting that all those in the black community would agree with the acts of violence that have been committed in their name. They would not. If you are a part of the black community I am not assuming you believe the violence of this past week was justified. I am not assuming you believe it was unjustified. I am not assuming anything. I am only here to listen and to say that racial injustice is always wrong. But I would also say to those innocent bystanders who have suffered from violence this week that what they suffered was also wrong.

Today for my New Testament lesson, I have read Paul's words where he says "to the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law so that I might win those under the law. To the weak, I became weak. I have become all things to all people." If you are someone who believes that the gospel is one identical message for all people and all time, then Paul will sound to you like someone who doesn't have a shred of

integrity. Saying I have become all things to all people, well that sounds about like a politician who makes one speech to the business leaders and says he's going to stand up to the unions and then turns around to talk to labor and says he's a friend of the unions, and then goes out and talks to the farmers and says he's for higher food prices and then turns around to talk to consumers and says he's for lower food prices. That's probably how Paul sounds to you if you think the gospel is one identical message for all people and all time. But you see, it isn't. It simply isn't. Jesus said man does not live by bread alone but he never said that to anyone who was starving. And the way Jesus talked to the Pharisees and scribes was very different from the way he talked to prostitutes and tax collectors. The gospel isn't one identical message for all people and all time for the obvious and simple reason that people's lives are not the same, and their experiences are not the same. So how do we be the church in this time, how do we heal this land? We begin by listening. We begin by understanding the differences in people's experiences.

In these difficult times, there have been some intelligent proposals for how to reform relations between law enforcement and the black community in this country. There have been proposals that all police departments should end choke holds, that they should all use body cameras, and that they should have de-escalation training among other things. These are all probably good ideas. But even at its best, legislation alone will not heal this nation. Legislation can reduce incidents of injustice, but legislation cannot soothe anger, or calm rage, or heal wounds. The only thing that will heal our land is love and understanding and listening. May it be so. With God's help, may it be so.