

SERMON IDEAS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

The sermon ideas below, which can be used to celebrate the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, are based on the lectionary readings for March 21, 2010 (Lent 5). They were contributed by Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, Director of *Communitas—Contextual Theology and Mission Programme*, United Theological College, Sydney, Uniting Church in Australia.

Lectionary

Psalm 126; Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4-14; John 12:1-8

A short psalm that reminds the people again of how God has been continually faithful so that those who “go out weeping” can yet “come home with shouts of joy.” Even so, God’s goodness can sometimes seem like a dream to such people, and they must be reminded again and again that there is hope to be found in the faithfulness of God. As you explore the theme of racial justice, what can be celebrated—of what can you say “the Lord has done great things”? Remember and share stories of progress made and victories won. Take heart that those who sow in tears “shall come home with shouts of joy”; that the present struggles can still have a hopeful conclusion, for God remains constant and faithful.

Overwhelmed with the realities of their struggles in exile—their suffering, rejection, marginalization, and persecution—the people of Israel found it difficult to experience the presence of God. They needed reassurance that Yahweh was still with them. Isaiah reminds them that the Yahweh whose mighty hand saved their ancestors by bringing them through the Red Sea is the same Yahweh who is about to do “a new thing” in their lives. It is the same Yahweh who will give them water in the wilderness so that they may sing Yahweh’s praise. Some today would describe the experience of the Western church of the 21st century as being in exile in the cultural wilderness of postmodernism; as being the alienated “other” in contemporary postmodern societies. What “new thing” might God be doing in the church today? What is this rich new gift God might be offering to the church of the 21st century? What may be the signs of God’s new gift for the church today? Indeed, who might be living the exile experience in our contemporary churches and societies? And if Yahweh continues to provide water for us in the desert wilderness, what does that mean for our calling to praise? How can we praise and worship God and in the same breath reject or seek to silence and marginalize “others” in our churches and communities?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul contrasts starkly the ways of the law and the ways of Christ Jesus. The law sets unhealthy boundaries and Christ dismantles them. Paul reminds us that the value of knowing Christ Jesus is what matters the most, and it supersedes any other goal or aspirations we might have. How many of us can tick the right boxes in the laws and traditions of righteousness, but fail miserably in the life-giving ways of Jesus Christ? What are the kinds of boundaries we set in our churches and communities? Who decides or defines those boundaries? Who do we silence or exclude by those boundaries? What are the implications of following the ways of Christ for our call to serve?

The family in Bethany, of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, was loved by Jesus and had a significant role in his ministry. The story of Jesus’ anointing takes place in different locations in the different gospels. Matthew and Mark locate the story in Bethany also, but at the house of Simon the *leper*. Luke does not mention Bethany at all, and the story takes place at the house of Simon the *Pharisee*. Mark, Matthew, and John seem to emphasize the waste of the costly ointment and the synoptics stress Jesus’ response to the disciples to leave the woman alone for she has done what she could. Luke stresses how forgiveness has touched the woman and shows how Simon the Pharisee has failed to offer the most basic hospitality to a guest. Where would you locate Jesus if you were telling the story? In the house of a leader who does not behave well? In the house of an outcast? In the house of a friend? Have you experienced enough forgiveness in your life that Jesus could say of you, *Leave her alone, she has done what she could*? Will it be said of our churches that we have done what we can to address the issue of overcoming racism? When Jesus says “you always have the poor with you,” he was not launching a political campaign, but simply telling it like it is. Who are the poor in our communities today? They are the ones that Jesus is calling us to serve.

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Additional passages:

Psalm 89:1–14; Exodus 3:7–11; Philemon 1:1–21; Luke 14: 25–33

David reminds us in this psalm that justice is at the top of God's agenda. How are we living and witnessing faithfully to that agenda? It reminds us also that heaven and earth and all that is in it belong to God: "the north and the south—you created them." For David that would have meant the two parts of the kingdom; for us, perhaps, we can see it in global terms and know that God loves both the global North and South. How then are we working to establish God's justice in the world? How easily can people move between the North and the South today? Consider Canada's immigration policy. Does it reflect God's concern for all and not favour some over others because of their racial-ethnic backgrounds?

In Exodus, God is about to liberate Israel from their oppressors, Egypt. At the same time God is promising the Israelites a "land flowing with milk and honey," but a land that is already occupied by others. The story is a powerful foundation for a liberation theology, for people who are struggling to be free from an oppressive burden. But it also comes at a cost for the original inhabitants of the land. The text asks us to explore the themes of conquest and how we deal with the First Peoples of our lands. There is another biblical tradition in which the theme is not so much conquest, but creative interaction with the original inhabitants—there is intermarriage, and some outsiders are key people in Israel's story (e.g., Ruth the Moabite). How do we celebrate God giving a land of milk and honey without slipping into the triumphalism of conquest? Do we still have that Statue of Liberty sentiment as we think about people moving between borders today? "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me"?

Philemon is a short book that packs a lot in to 25 verses. Clearly not all relationships in the Bible are between equals. As today, there are power differentials at work that make it hard for some to have a mutual relationship. While much of Biblical society was stratified and there were clear role expectations according to class and gender, we see this perhaps most clearly in the relationship of slave to master. The story of Onesimus, the runaway slave, is the story of how a victim of the brutal system of slavery entered into a Christ-centred relationship with Paul and, as a consequence, embarked on a journey of liberation that had the potency to include his oppressor. Onesimus took what must have been the only credible form of resistance open to him in the face of his unjust context. He ran away and sought to put as much distance as possible between himself and his oppressor. Paul in his counsel to Philemon is seeking an outcome that has as its goal the liberation of both slave and master. For this reason, the means of the liberation is inextricably bound to the end. Therefore Paul encourages Onesimus to return, even though this could lead him to his death.

The transatlantic slave trade was a shameful part of human history where millions of Africans were enslaved simply because their black skin was deemed to signify their subhuman status and therefore made it acceptable to treat them so. The church as an institution at the time was largely silent in the face of such unchristian and inhuman abuse, and even colluded in the whole racist exploiting enterprise. What kind of enslavement is the church in collusion in today? What situations could possibly make it OK to encourage a victim of racist enslavement to return to their oppressor? Do we see the liberation of slave and master as inextricably tied together, and if so, who does the liberating? How equal or unequal are relationships in your church today, and what role does one's racial-ethnic background play in that? Consider the distinction between "equal respect" and "equal treatment" in a multicultural reality where there is no level playing field. What would a Christ-centred relationship look like in such situation?

The gospel passage is maybe the hardest and most uncompromising in the New Testament. Does Jesus really say we are to hate our family and our own life? Matthew softens this harsh saying considerably, but Luke seems unequivocal and uses the phrase that without this hate of family and carrying of the cross one “cannot be my disciple.” Luke is completely uncompromising on the cost of discipleship—“none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” For Luke, those who would become disciples of Jesus must be committed exclusively to him. They cannot give their allegiance to anyone else or anything else. Following Jesus is an invitation to put aside all that gets in our way or holds us back from being able to respond to Jesus’ call. The two parables further ask us to count the cost. The person building a tower, probably a farm building of considerable size, calculates the cost in order not to end up the object of ridicule. The king contemplating a battle takes counsel to make sure that he does not underestimate the enemy’s strength, prematurely declare war, and end up seeking terms of surrender. The Gospel of Thomas has a rather gruesome parallel: “The kingdom of the Father is like a man who wished to kill a powerful man. He drew his sword and stuck it into a wall, in order to know whether his hand would carry through; then he slew the powerful man” (Thomas 98). If you choose a dangerous and difficult job, first make sure you can carry it through! Do we have the will, the energy, the singleness of purpose to continue the struggle against racism in all its forms, or will we give up because the going is hard and change seems so slow?