

# Racial Reconciliation and Unity

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PBCC Conversation on Race, episode 3

## 1. Banishing as Other

### 1.1 Cain & Abel

The Bible opens with God's creation of an ordered world. It is an idyllic picture of *shalom*, of a world poised to flourish in abundance under God's command to animals and humans alike, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." But things quickly went wrong. Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden into a newly-hostile world. In that world they did multiply. They birthed two brothers: Cain a farmer and Abel a shepherd. The narrative is careful to present these two side by side: Cain-Abel, Abel-Cain, Cain-Abel, Abel-Cain. Side by side, their labors were fruitful. Side by side, they brought their offerings to the Lord. Side by side, the Lord looked on them and their offerings. But here we have a dissonant note: the Lord was pleased with Abel and his offering, but displeased with Cain and his. The story has told us enough to know why: Abel brought the best of his flock, while Cain brought just some, a small tip. This suggests that Abel lived in a world of abundance, whereas Cain lived in a world of scarcity. Cain had a series of choices to make and repeatedly he chose the wrong path, the path that exacerbated the situation, not the path that brought healing.

Cain was very angry and sullen. The scene is captured so well in Annie Valloton's wonderful line drawing in the *Good News Bible*. Cain folded his arms and scowled. He turned in on himself: in the classic phrase, *incurvatus in se*, curved inward on oneself. He folded his arms against God, rejecting the Lord's offer to try again: "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" He folded his arms against his brother, killing him. "Where is Abel your brother?" asked the Lord. Cain kept his arms folded and denied all responsibility: "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" Cain was not a brother to Abel. Abel is always described as Cain's brother, but Cain is never described as Abel's brother.

Cain abdicated his responsibility to be a brother to Abel. He viewed him as a threat rather than an ally. He drew a boundary between himself and Abel. He banished Abel to the realm of the Other: not "us brothers" but "him" against "me." He was operating in a paradigm of scarcity. He stripped Abel of the status of being his brother, thereby dehumanizing him. Having banished him as Other, it was but a small step to use violence and dispose of him. But Abel did not depart so easily. His spilt blood remained, crying out to the Lord for justice. The Lord saw and heard, and did not forget, no matter how hard Cain tried to forget and move on. Cain kept his arms folded against the Lord, and exiled himself from the Lord's presence to wander in the land of Nod, the land of wandering. Here he built a city where he could try to be secure behind walls of his own making and rule over his own domain.

### 1.2 Exclusion

Am I my brother's keeper? This question has echoed down through the ages. It's a question that divides. Many answer back, "Of course, you are your brother's keeper? You're brothers!" But still humanity persists in banishing fellow humans as Other, repeating the sin of Cain, denying responsibility for one's fellow humans.

*Incurvatus in se*, curved inward on oneself. Cain chose the path of exclusion. He drew a boundary around himself and excluded those outside: both his brother Abel and God. This is the choice of scarcity. The opposite is *excurvatus ex se*, curved outward from oneself. The opposite of exclusion is embrace. This

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is the choice of abundance; it requires generosity. Generosity of heart to extend love to others rather than keep love for self. Generosity of mind to imagine others as within my circle. We all struggle with these competing impulses of exclusion and embrace, of scarcity and abundance. There are always people in our life whom we would rather treat as Other.

Down through history there have been many justifications for exclusion: ethnicity, language, gender, socio-economic status, education, race. Boundaries are drawn and re-drawn. According to Genesis 10, the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth spread out with their own clan, language, land and nation, four distinguishing features for each of the seventy peoples described in that chapter.

People are separated by language. The Greeks and Romans, for example, divided the world into themselves and barbarians, those who said “bar, bar, bar,” those whom they could not understand.

People are separated by land. Various peoples have claimed that their land lies at the center, that it contains the *omphalos*, the navel, or the cosmic mountain linking heaven and earth. The Chinese, for example, claim to be the Middle Kingdom, the people at the center.

People are separated by ethnicity. For example, Jew versus Gentile, even though God had warned ancient Israel not to think itself better than other peoples. Furthermore, Israel was to be for the good of the world, for the benefit of the other nations.

There are other ways we banish people as Other. We banish them by birth, such as the caste system of India. We banish them by yuk factor or disgust, as with lepers. And we banish by race, a relatively modern concept originating in the 15th century with the Age of Discovery and the birth of Western colonialism. Beginning first with the Portuguese as they sailed further down the west coast of Africa, capturing and bringing back black African slaves. Followed by the Spanish who sailed across the Atlantic and colonized South and Central America, subjecting the native peoples to slavery. Both colonial powers treated these people as subhuman, as Other. The Western world continues to grapple with this legacy. Europe has been dismantling its colonial history and mindset. It has been removing the divide between colonist and colonized, in order to accept the latter as full equals. Equal first in granting them home rule, and then to fully embrace them as equals on the world stage, including when they live in what was the mother country. So, for example, London’s current mayor is Sadiq Khan, a Muslim who was born into a working class Pakistani immigrant family. His family suffered much racism, but he promotes mutual tolerance. It requires cognitive generosity to embrace someone from what 75 years ago was a colony as the mayor of the former empire’s capital city. It is a step some are able to make, but which others still find very hard because they still view such a person as Other.

The US is grappling with its own unique racial legacy, especially this year. All over the country people are talking about racial justice, including our own Conversation on Race. In my first talk I asked, “Can we say that Black Lives Matter?” In my second talk I asked, “Why should we care?” Now in my third talk, my question is “What should be the goal of racial justice?” My brief answer is “racial reconciliation.” This is the title of this talk. Why should we pursue this, how do we pursue this, and what are the obstacles?

## 2. Racial Reconciliation

What is the path forward to racial reconciliation? We can look elsewhere for examples. At the end of apartheid rule in South Africa there was great fear among the white population of a blood bath, that the majority black population would seek retribution for their harsh treatment. But the country chose a different path. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was launched under the chairmanship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who had already won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. Victims and perpetrators of racial violence were invited to tell their stories. In exchange for the truth the perpetrators could ask for amnesty. It was the path of restorative justice not retributive justice. It was a daring path, because the natural inclination is for retribution. This is what happened at the end of World War I in the Treaty of Versailles, which was a contributing factor to the rise of Nazi Germany. The Nuremberg Trials after World

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War II were also about retributive justice. Both paths, retributive justice and restorative justice, require a reckoning with history. In one path truth-telling condemns, in the other path it liberates and reconciles. Restorative justice is a hard path. It requires a generosity of heart and mind to pursue restorative justice, to seek reconciliation. South Africa had such a person in Nelson Mandela, and he had a willing partner in F.W. de Klerk, the last white leader. Together they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993.

Reconciliation requires a reckoning with history. The US has made some steps in this direction. In 1988 Congress apologized for putting 120,000 Japanese Americans into internment camps after Pearl Harbor, admitting that this was due to “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.” It took courage to admit that, to have an honest reckoning with history. It granted \$20,000 to each surviving internee, a total of \$1.6 billion. This came nowhere close to compensating for the economic loss suffered, but it was an important symbolic act. The Japanese American Museum of San Jose memorializes those interned in these camps, preserves the memory, keeps the history alive, and educates those who wish to learn. It is well worth a visit.

In 2011 Congress expressed regret for the Chinese Exclusion Act. Regret is not yet a full apology, but it is a major step. These two moves by Congress, to the Japanese and the Chinese, were made in order to promote racial reconciliation. Admitting history was a key element. It is one thing to express regret or to apologize. It is a step further to celebrate that ethnic minorities are valuable and appreciated parts of the diversity that is America, that they are an integral part of the rich tapestry that is this country. It is a challenging step for some.

There has been a reckoning with history concerning Chinese and Japanese. But there is much yet to do in this regards with respect to the black community. There is much history yet to be reckoned with. Nevertheless, the country has come a long way. Yesterday was the 60th anniversary of a famous walk by a six-year old girl in New Orleans. Ruby Bridges was escorted to school by four federal marshals to begin first grade as the first black student. This came after the courts ordered New Orleans to desegregate its schools. But all the other students in her class had been withdrawn by their parents. So, for the whole year it was just Ruby and her teacher. Talk about exclusion! There was not a single white parent willing to embrace Ruby. This is within living memory, within my lifetime. Norman Rockwell memorialized Ruby's walk in his painting *The Problem We All Live With* (1964). Ruby turned out okay after that traumatic beginning to her schooling. In 2011 President Obama invited her to the White House to see Norman Rockwell's painting which was there on loan.

So, the country has come a long way. But there is still a long way still to go. There is much history still to be acknowledged. Again, the purpose for doing this is not condemnation or retribution. It is not to inflict shame. It is to promote healing and reconciliation. It is to shed light on dark deeds of the past so that all concerned can move into light and freedom.

Reckoning with history is uncomfortable. Many would rather not go there. In the first two episodes of our Conversation, people have wanted to know what they can do. We can all listen and learn. It is important to listen to stories and learn what has happened in history. History can be used to reconcile.

But history can be also used, or rather mis-used, as a weapon to dehumanize, to banish as Other. In the Balkan Civil War, Orthodox Serbia evoked the memory of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 to propel their fight against Muslim Bosnia. In Northern Ireland until recently, Protestants used to march in full view of Catholics and commemorate the 1690 Battle of the Boyne when the Protestants defeated the Catholics. Marches still happen but organizers have toned them down so as not to rub salt into wounds.

If we are serious about racial reconciliation we need to reckon with history, and not use it as a weapon to perpetuate racial wounds.

### 3. Obstacles

What are the impediments to racial reconciliation?

#### 3.1 Stereotypes

Black Lives Matter has divided the nation, has divided churches, has divided Christians. Again, as in previous episodes, I distinguish between the Black Lives Matter protests and marches on the one hand and the Black Lives Matter movement. I wish I didn't have to keep saying this but I do. There is a formal BLM movement, the BLM Global Network. It has a particular ideology, rooted in Critical Race Theory, and in a Marxist paradigm of oppression: the oppressed need to rise up and throw off the oppressor. But this is not the ideology of the great majority of people participating in BLM marches. This illustrates one of the great obstacles to peace and reconciliation.

It is easy to apply stereotypes to those with whom we disagree. Stereotypes are caricatures. So, people on the right might assume that all who participate in BLM marches know, understand and are motivated by Critical Race Theory, that they are all Marxists. Conversely, those on the left might assume that all those who do not want to talk about race, who say All Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter or Unborn Lives Matter, are white supremacist nationalists. Both of these assumptions are not true. We must beware of the danger of the single story, of assuming that each side is monolithic. Part of our Conversation has been hearing stories. We need to hear multiple stories from different sides to move beyond this danger of stereotyping, of painting everyone with the same brush.

#### 3.2 Tribalism

Another impediment is that we don't have friends on the other side. Recent years have seen a tremendous polarization. People retreat into echo chambers in which they only hear like voices. It is easy to become tribal, to hang only with those who are like us. It helps to expose ourselves to a wide circle, to seek to reach across the aisle in our friendships and acquaintances.

On Tuesday Saeb Erekat died from Covid. For decades he was the chief Palestinian negotiator with the Israelis. He got his undergraduate and graduate degrees here in San Francisco, then in England did a PhD in peace and conflict studies. He was strong in his demands on Palestinian rights, but committed to peaceful coexistence, to non-violence, to negotiations. More than that, he actively pursued friendship with his Israeli counterparts. For this he was attacked from both sides. It was a very uncomfortable place to be, there in the middle. One of the tragedies of the current state of Israeli-Palestinian affairs is that the two sides have so separated from each other that they no longer know people on the other side. It is therefore much easier to vilify, dehumanize and treat as Other. This separation is steadily happening here in this country.

Others who dared to make peace with the Other were killed, often by their own side: Mahatma Gandhi of India, Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Yitzhak Rabin of Israel, all killed by their own people. One of the risks of being a peace-maker, a reconciler, is that you will be misunderstood by your own tribe for reaching out to the Other.

For three decades Northern Ireland was wracked by sectarian violence between Protestants and Catholics, a season called The Troubles. This violence spilled over into Britain, and I experienced several IRA bombings in London. In 1995 President Clinton sent George Mitchell as a special envoy to negotiate peace based upon non-violence. This resulted in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998: an agreement between the political parties, Protestant and Catholic, in Northern Ireland, and an agreement between the Irish and UK governments. Protestants and Catholics agreed to share power in Northern Ireland. Then an extraordinary thing happened. Ian Paisley, a firebrand Presbyterian minister, became the First Minister.

His Deputy was Martin McGuinness, a former IRA commander. Not only did they learn how to govern together, but they established a deep friendship. I still find that incredible. Their differences didn't disappear. But they became humanized to each other. Exclusion turned to embrace. These former bitter enemies became deep, deep friends.

### 3.3 Avoiding disunity in church

Since we are talking about racial reconciliation, about turning exclusion to embrace, turning enemies into friends, it would be tragic if our conversation here at PBCC ruptured our relationships. Black Lives Matter has split the country, it has split many churches, and it has created tensions here at this church. Compounding this are the tensions over politics. I am grateful to Gary Vanderet for being vulnerable last Sunday when he preached here to talk about this tension at Willow Glen Bible Church. He supposed that we have similar tensions here, and he's right. We acknowledge this and are aware of it.

How do we maintain our unity here at PBCC while talking about difficult topics, whether racial justice or politics or other issues? For the past few years we've held a series of Sunday evening forums to talk about difficult topics, seeking to do so in a way that preserves the unity of the body of Christ.

We must resist the tendency to tribalism lest the fabric unravel, lest our ties of fraternity be severed, lest brothers and neighbors become enemies, and we cease to love one another. We must be careful lest we devolve from *us all together* to *us versus them, me versus you*, lest we start treating those with whom we disagree as Other.

The New Testament urges us to work zealously to preserve unity. This is especially needful this year with all that threatens unity within the country, unity within the church, unity within our particular church. The fact that the New Testament commands this suggests that the apostles were well aware of the challenges to unity. The church was a very diverse body: not only Jew and Gentile, but all sorts of other different peoples, all learning how to belong together in one body as brothers and sisters.

The goal for us as Christians is to be formed into Christ. The Spirit is at work in us to transform us, to make us more and more like Christ Jesus. Jesus reached out to an eclectic set of people in the Gospels. He reached out to people whom the religious leaders of the day did not approve of. He sat down to eat with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. He reached out to touch and heal lepers. As the Spirit works in us, forming us into Christ, the goal is that we display the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23). Let us be generous with one another in our hearts, in our minds, in our attitudes, in our discourse.

Being united is not the same as being uniform. It is okay to disagree. There are matters on which we will continue to disagree. But we are called to preserve unity even while we disagree. We are to live with abundance not with scarcity. We are to live turned outwards, towards others, not turned inwards towards self, creating a boundary against those whom we write off as Other.

In this discussion about race and racial reconciliation, it is really Christians who should be leading the way. Christians who are a diverse body but nevertheless united, who are able to maintain differences while yet being brothers and sisters, should be a burning and a shining light to the world around.

As the psalmist wrote, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers (and sisters) dwell in unity" (Psalm 133:1). And as Paul wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27). May this indeed be true of us through this difficult season of polarization and fractured relationships. May we be zealous to preserve the unity of peace in this body of Christ. May we do everything we can to continue to be brothers and sisters, to resist being like Cain. May we treat each other with kindness, generosity, love and care. This is the will of God, and he will enable us to do so through his Spirit.