

# “Racial Reconciliation for a Divided World”

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Ephesians 2:14-22

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Two years ago last April, I was at a Cruxifusion conference. This is a gathering of Christ-centered clergy from the United Church of Canada. I attend these meetings every year when there is not a global pandemic, and I've made many deep friendships with colleagues from across this country.



One good friend is Rev. Lawrence Nyarko who preached here at our anniversary service in 2019.

One afternoon during a break between sessions at our conference, Lawrence was outside talking to another minister colleague, Diane Walker.

(Not sure Diane would appreciate this picture, but she's a riot and this does reflect a lot of who she is ... besides, be careful of what you

put on Facebook!).



Diane is in her 60's, she's white, short, and is always laughing and smiling. Lawrence is young, younger than me anyway; tall, black and well dressed. Lawrence and Diane were outside catching some of that precious spring sun when a police cruiser turned into the church parking lot and pulled up to them.

The officer rolled down the window, looked at Diane and asked her if everything was OK. Diane in her usual friendly way said things were great, and told the officer about the conference. The police officer then drove away.

The interesting thing is that Diane didn't think anything of this interaction and went back to chatting with Lawrence. Lawrence was livid. Not with Diane. Lawrence knew *exactly* what had just happened: while driving by, the police officer saw a very black man talking to an older white woman — and decided he had better make sure that she was okay. It was 100% racial profiling. For no reason other than the colour of his skin and her skin, the police decided to intervene. Nothing happened, and listening to this story you might be tempted to brush it off...what's the big deal? After all it's nice that the police care about citizens. The problem is that these kinds of things happen to Lawrence and to biracial and people of colour (Bipoc) All.The.Time.

We tend to think of racism as being in the past or mostly in the United States. Canadians have had rose-coloured glasses on when it comes to

our own sin of racism. Perhaps it's because we did not go through a Civil War that had slavery as a central issue, but instead had slavery abolished for us in 1834 (yes, Canada had slaves!) because we were part of the British Empire. Our history is not all bad. Canada played a significant role in the underground railroad that helped to bring escaped slaves from the U.S. to freedom. But our history is far from perfect.

Most of us are becoming more and more aware that racism was and is very much an issue in Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has helped us to hear stories we did not want to hear about the horrible treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada in the past and continuing in the present. It was only last fall that the government finally committed to real action to clean up the contamination by mercury poisoning of the waters at Grassy Narrows First Nation Reserve. It was likely because of the pressure put on the current government by Amnesty International, and thanks to ordinary people like Donna Greenhorn who helped raise awareness here at this church.

Many of you signed a petition, and finally something is being done. More than 50 years ago, over the course of almost a decade, a paper mill dumped 20 tons of mercury and other waste into the rivers and lakes that the people and the animals depend on to drink and to fish. This is called environmental racism. Minority group neighbourhoods are disproportionately affected by toxic waste. Racism comes in so many different forms.

We are doing a study on the book *The Deeply Formed Life* by author Rich Villodas, and this week the value we are studying is that of Racial Reconciliation. Rich serves as senior pastor at New Life Fellowship church in Queens, New York, which is a very multi-racial congregation. There are at least 75 different nationalities represented in his church. At one point the Zip Code where the church is was deemed the most diverse zip code on the planet! So, they feel the racial divide in their country and across the world very keenly.

Brockville is not so very diverse. Thanks to recent arrivals of refugees and to a rise in international students studying at our local high schools and St. Lawrence College, Brockville has become more diverse — but in the grand scheme of things our community and our congregation are very white. So why should we care? Should this even be one of our values for a deeply formed life?

The answer is yes. For two reasons. The first is that the institution of the church has been responsible for the sin of prejudice and of valuing one group of people over others — seen especially with the legacy of slavery

and colonialism. Being a Christian meant you should look like, speak like and act like a white European Christian. Because the Church was responsible for so much evil and injustice, the Church now needs to own this and be the most committed to justice and making reparations. The second and biggest reason is that Racial Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospels. We follow and worship Jesus, who built bridges between peoples and who broke down walls that divide them.

The concept of racism is relatively new, but the belief that one group of people is valued higher than another is not. When we look at Jesus' time and before, one of the groups that Jewish people believed they were superior to were the Samaritans. They hated Samaritans. They were seen as not pure enough nor religious enough...or not the right kind of religious. But Jesus in his life worked to cross those boundaries.

You remember the time someone asked Jesus what the most important teaching of God was and he answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself." The man then pushed Jesus on the subject and asked: "*Who is my neighbour?*" Jesus replied by telling the story of a Jewish man who was attacked by robbers. Two devout Jews walked past and didn't help, but a Samaritan stopped and not only cared for him, he had him put up at an inn and paid for his stay no matter how long the stay was needed.

Jesus used the "inferior" and despised Samaritan as the hero of the story. He turned it around. You would have expected that Jesus would have told the story the other way, where the moral of the story would be "We should help even those poor and pathetic Samaritans." But it was the Samaritan who was held up as following God's law correctly by crossing a big divide.

Rich Villodas recommends 7 practices. The first three are remembering, deeply listening and lamenting the hurts and the evils that have been caused by racism. He is right on with this. No one likes to look back on past hurts, but it is the way forward for healing.

Our listening and lamenting needs to go deeper. AA talks about making a "fearless moral inventory" of past wrongs. We need to do this at the level of institutions and nations. As Rich says: "*The sad truth about modern spirituality is that we often avoid feeling our own pain and, in the process, avoid feeling the pain of others.*"

It matches up perfectly with how we know that forgiveness and healing can happen. Remember the 4-fold path of forgiveness? The first step is telling the story, the 2<sup>nd</sup> is naming the hurt, the 3<sup>rd</sup> is offering forgiveness and the 4<sup>th</sup> is renewing and releasing the relationship. This is

powerful for individuals but also for nations. It was the basis for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and in Canada. Honestly, our neighbours to the south desperately need a process like this.

My husband is a lawyer. Often he will tell me that so many of his clients don't need a lawyer, they need the church. They need their hurts and pain heard and acknowledged so they can begin to heal. Our world needs what we in the church have to offer through the power of Jesus. But we can only lead and make a difference when we have done this work for ourselves and have done our own work of self-examination so that we can see the privilege we have and our conscious and unconscious biases.

These practices fit in to what I have learned and understand about how to bring real change and healing to people and individuals. None of them are easy, but I know very well that the processes for transformation and healing come through being aware of the pain and the evil in ourselves and others, a willingness to make reparations even if it costs us something (and it always does) and a commitment to living in a renewed way. To put it into church language, we need to continually practice the values of confession, repentance and forgiveness.

I think the practice that Rich spoke about that has impressed me the most is that of Reconciling Prayer. He first pointed out how absent it is today when it comes to Racial Reconciliation. We're happy to pray for those who are sick ... but for giant issues like this, we rarely pray. He points out that if we care about this but don't pray about it, then we're really functional atheists. And so much of what we do in this work seems so thin. Professor of Theology, Soong-Chan Rah, said: "*In our day, the work of justice and reconciliation has been substituted by short-lived anger that is easily distracted, tears that start and end with tweets, and fiery rants that avoid any clear sense of action.*" (Loc 1280).

Rich lifts up the story of when the disciples were unable to heal a child who was possessed by a demon. The disciples were confused and asked Jesus 'Why couldn't we heal him?' and Jesus replied "*This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.*" (Mark 9:29.) When we hear of shootings like the one at the Quebec City mosque or the killing of George Floyd or the pain that people we know and love like Lawrence receive because they are not white; we have to as Christians name this for what it is: evil. "*For our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*"

But if we truly believe that God created the world as it is — a world of wonderful diversity—then our action needs to begin on our knees. Knees of prayer that lead to taking a knee in protest.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's wife Coretta wrote about how critical prayer was to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. This is what she wrote: "*Prayer was a wellspring of strength and inspiration during the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the movement, we prayed for greater human understanding. We prayed for the safety of our compatriots in the freedom struggle. We prayed for victory in our nonviolent protests, for brotherhood and sisterhood among people of all races, for reconciliation and the fulfillment of the Beloved Community.*" (Loc 1301). Prayer was the fuel for that movement and brothers and sisters it needs to be again!

Revelation 7:9 reads: "*After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*" That's a picture of what the kingdom of God looks like: beautifully diverse. Different nations and tribes and languages are together giving glory to God and to the Lamb.

Our call is to work to follow Jesus in tearing down walls that divide us, setting people free from hatred and unforgiveness and celebrating our differences. May we continue to pray and work every day for "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it *is* in heaven."

Thanks be to God.