

The Ethnic Conflict Miracle
Race, Power, Healing Week 3
June 28, 2020

Welcome/intro/vision

If you're just joining us, this is week three of our four week series dealing with issues of race

So much going on in our country right now and around the world and when it comes to tensions between ethnic and people groups the Scripture has a whole lot of wisdom and power to bring to bear

So we're spending a couple of weeks walking a path through the Scripture towards healing from Genesis to Revelation over the span of four weeks.

This is a somewhat contentious and difficult issue and we've gotten overwhelmingly positive feedback on this series—thank you!

I'm really excited about what we're going to talk about today because it brings together a couple of things that I love and I hope that you'll love, too

First, I love looking at stories throughout history where people made decisions or things happened that nobody noticed, that didn't seem all that important but they turned out to have huge, disproportionate impact

And second, I love miracle stories—who doesn't love a good miracle story?

Today we're going to bring together both of those things

We're going to look at an overlooked miracle story from the early church where they did something that if you were reading it this morning you'd probably just keep right on reading

But what they did was so improbable and so against all odds, it was nothing short of a miracle

And they had no idea at the time, but what they do in this one little story sets NOT ONLY the Christian church on a new path of healing across racial lines

What they do in this one little story is going to have disproportionate impact on the whole world so that 2,000 years later this little story has completely shaped our understanding of and thinking about what SHOULD be happening along racial and ethnic lines

Now if you've ever been involved in a church you know that they are full of people and that inevitably means that you have problems! More people, more problems!

Today we're going to look at a passage in the new testament book of Acts that comes just as the church is really starting to grow at a very rapid pace

and in the midst of this rapid growth of the church we get the very first conflict any church ever had—and you know what?

It's a conflict or problem along ethnic lines.

One of the reasons why the Scriptures have SO MUCH to say about this issue, even though many of us who grew up in predominantly white churches never heard about it

Ethnic tensions was literally issue #1 or #2 facing the early church—all these people were coming together to worship Jesus who didn't like each other before!

And so they're having to address this new wonderful thing that's happening in just about every letter of the New Testament

Racial or ethnic issues have always plagued every nation and every community for all time

And throughout the centuries from the beginning Christians are called to bring the power and wisdom of God to bear along this pervasive fault line in human relationships

So the very first community problem in the church was an ethnic problem, that's no surprise, that's how it's been in every multi-ethnic community, nation, or organization

BUT here's what's different about this conflict:

this is the very first time racial and ethnic tensions are happening to a group of people who are following Jesus

And how they respond as a community living under the umbrella of Jesus is going to look small and simple to us,

but everything about our expectations and hopes and dreams across racial and ethnic differences race relations in the 21st century is going to be shaped and formed and by the story we read today

[This is the first time ethnic tensions happen in a community committed to Jesus, and that changes everything.]

We're going to look at Acts 6—if you're new to the Bible we're so glad you're here, the book of Acts is the account of what happened after Jesus's resurrection and ascension

and against all odds and even as they faced incredible persecution, the early church grew and thrived over and against ancient Roman paganism

And in Acts 6 we're picking up early on in the account of the early church and to this point there's been a ton of energy and movement and growth:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews [those are the Greek Jews, in other words they were Jews who weren't BORN in the country of Israel] among them complained against the Hebraic Jews [those are the Jews who were born in Israel]

because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve...

Alright so right where you are at home, raise your hand if you've ever had a DMV experience that took you twice as long as it should have!

Thank you, I see that hand! We'll come back to this in a few minutes

Even if you get a pleasant and wonderful employee to work with, the DMV is notorious for being an organization where the system is maddening to have to navigate or work with

The situation that we're looking at here has some similarities: **so far as we can tell**, everyone wants all the widows to be taken care of

But one group of widows is being overlooked. And the difference between who's being cared for and who isn't is along ethnic lines:

those born outside of Israel weren't getting food, those who were born and raised in Israel were being cared for

There's no malice or ill-intent as best we can tell—no one individual is going to be called out in this story--It seems that there's just something wrong with the system of food distribution

[Back to me] What likely is happening is that food is getting distributed through relational networks.

The apostles, who are all Hebraic Jews, collect food contributions and then they pass it along to the people they know who pass it along to the people they know to get to the people who need it

But meanwhile, there are these OTHER networks of people, they are GREEK or HELLENISTIC Jews who aren't as connected to the Hebraic social networks—so they are unintentionally getting left out

And so as the church grows, getting food became about who you knew.

Unintentionally, so far as we can tell. But unintentional doesn't mean it's not happening. And it doesn't mean it's not a problem.

This is what you call a systemic issue—where the systems designed are not serving everyone equally in the ways that they could or should

And pretty much all of us have at some point experienced the frustration of trying to work with a bad system!

A couple of weeks ago my family and I joined my in-laws for a week at the beach—remember when it rained for 4 days straight? That was our fault! We went to the beach!

And when my in-laws got there they followed the suggested COVID protocol to wash the blankets in hot water first thing

But when they went to put them in the dryer, the dryer was broken

And so they called the realty company.

But it was 6:00 on Friday and the office closes at 4:00 on Friday even though that's a check-in day

But it was after 6:00 so they said it would have to deal with it the next day.

Suggestion for you if you own a beach rental company: don't close early on check-in days!

And the person on the phone said she knew exactly what was wrong BUT the owner had to approve any repair request whatsoever

AND THEN, after that, they would have to order the part and that would take a couple days.

But in order to make up for it, they'd send someone to come, get the blankets and any other dirty clothes and wash and dry them for us

When it wasn't in by Tuesday, we called and it was going to be a couple MORE days

So they sent people AGAIN to get our laundry, this time it was four days worth of multiple changes for our family of 7 plus my in-laws—it took them HOURS and HOURS to do all that laundry

They ended up spending more money on more people doing more work as a work-around for their broken system.

Finally came on Thursday at 2:00, took less than 15 minutes to fix a problem that should have been fixed in a day but instead took 6 days and they spent tons of money working around it

Here's the thing: everyone talked to as nice as could possibly be. Apologetic and kind and warm and wonderful. But it didn't matter because the system was broken..

You've had that experience before. You've had a bad system at work to deal with reporting or HR, you've had a bad computer system that didn't do what you needed it to

You've experienced a bad system in registering for classes or for returning something that didn't work or getting an appointment with a doctor

We've all had experiences with a broken system that someone else designed that drove us crazy because it just didn't work.

This is what the apostles in Acts are facing. A bad system not working for the people who needed it.

And I stopped right where I did because whenever we hear a **complaint** from a person or group of people that they're being treated unfairly or unjustly, there's a gap between the complaint and the **"SO"**

In that gap we have **to process** that complaint and then we have choices to make that result in whatever comes on the other side of that **"SO"**

For those of us who are Jesus followers is that this is where the gospel has to intersect this conversation

Throughout history, ethnic groups have complained to people who are in power that they're being overlooked or treated unfairly—this has happened all the time.

Other people back in the first century complained about the Romans all the time! But here's the thing

Paganism didn't care about equality. Greeks didn't and then the Romans didn't either—that's almost 1,000 years of an ethnic hierarchy where they were on top and everyone else was way below them

They weren't lobbying for justice for all peoples. The Romans just conquered people almost a full 1/3 of the Roman empire were slaves almost all of them were people of other nations and ethnicities

1. ignore the complaint or 2. Defensive/aggressive

Meanwhile, the **ancient Jewish understanding was that the Jewish people were at the top of the food chain while everyone else were all just Gentiles** dogs whom God would eventually topple and take out once the Jewish people all came back to God

So you've got this early, young church with an ethnic conflict and the thinking and all the models on both sides of them were what EVERYONE today would pretty much call BAD or WRONG ways of understanding ethnicity and race

But wait a minute, today most of us think at least theoretically that everyone's life has value and we have laws that are supposed to protect them.

Today there's only a small minority of people who would actively and outwardly say that one racial or ethnic group is vastly superior to every other

Even though for the first 3,000-plus years of human history EVERYONE thought that, it was a given that ethnic groups WERE NOT created equal, and that whoever had the upper-hand was the superior ethnic group

Where in the world did the idea of human equality emerge out of the sea of nothing but racial and ethnic animosity that have marred human relationships since the beginning of time?

I want to propose to you that it was birthed right here into the world right here in Acts 6

Here's **Jesus Between the Complaint and the So**—[filter complaints of injustice through the lens of Jesus and it frees you to do what nobody else is doing.](#)

And when **the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is at the center of your life**

1. **it all began with acknowledging that there's a sin problem** in the world AND in me and in you and we're all in need of forgiveness and correction and restoration

Therefore we're free to not be defensive or surprised when a complaint comes our way!

Jesus has already graciously but firmly said to me that I've got sin in me: pride in my heart, greed, selfishness

And maybe, just maybe there's a little bit of bias or prejudice mixed in there too. If you're a Jesus-follower there should be zero shock that you might have sin at work in you, including sin across racial lines!

And sin means that I'm missing the mark—sometimes that's very intentional and sometimes that's unintentional

But if I'm missing the mark and you're missing the mark

maybe when we come together to build food distribution systems to feed poor widows, maybe sometimes those systems also miss the mark, even unintentionally

And if all of us are missing the mark, either intentionally or unintentionally

maybe when we all come together to form HOA's or build a business or write a Constitution or form a government or create a banking system or write laws

Maybe just maybe ALL of those are going to miss God's design for human community sometimes unintentionally and UNFORTUNATELY sometimes VERY, VERY intentionally

And when you understand that **Jesus was the most powerful person in the room and what he did when he was the most powerful person in the room was wrap a towel around his waste and wash dirty feet**

When THAT is the person you're learning how to use power from, that's your model of what power and authority is for, it changes the conversation

And when you understand **that when Jesus was the most powerful and perfect person in the world sacrificed himself**

To surrender himself to a cross to take away the sins of the entire world, not just one specific ethnic group

Thereby confirming exactly what the Scriptures said that every human being on the planet is made in God's image and worthy of respect, honor, love

That changes how we process that complaint

Nobody had ever wielded power, authority, influence like that before.

And when that's how you're understanding the real purpose and meaning of power, it shapes how you listen and what you do between hearing the complaint and the so

And the result is a whole new approach is introduced to the whole world that has shaped the whole world's understanding of what's SUPPOSED to be happening along racial and ethnic lines

² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

And watch what happens: ***⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.***

In 1999 Andrew Grove was the CEO of Intel which had just emerged from the frenzy of computer advances as the leading micro-chip processor

And he wrote a book called "Only the Paranoid Survive" about how the company had to drop their old line of business making memory cards in order to pivot to the processor

And he talks about how disruption is a **Strategic Inflection Point** where you either adapt to new realities or your business dies

Kodak didn't adapt to the digital camera and Blockbuster video didn't adapt to new ways people were getting movies

But if you do adapt, like Intel did, it opens up new opportunities for expansion and growth—they're still driving the market in processors 21 years later

This story is one of the church's first strategic inflection points—the first conflict or real problem in the church and it is along racial and ethnic lines—same story throughout human history

Only here, the gospel is in play. And here, the community responds in light of the teachings of Jesus and in light of his life, death, and resurrection, how he served, how he laid his power down to love others

What if our country and ESPECIALLY the church in our country is at that same Strategic Inflection Point as we have tension and conflict also along racial and ethnic lines?

The first disciples had two bad models all around them—the ethnic arrogance of the Roman pagans and the ethnic arrogance of the ancient Jews

But do Jesus followers do when they hear about a problem across ethnic lines? Let's call this The Ethnic Conflict Miracle

This is perhaps the greatest miracle ever recorded in the whole Bible that nobody ever talks about

Here's the Anatomy of the Ethnic Conflict Miracle

1. **Problem along ethnic lines**
2. **Ethnic minority complained (rightly) about the problem**
3. **Ethnic majority listened**
 - a. (for the first time in history through the lens of the teachings, life, death, resurrection of Jesus which resulted in their unlikely so...)
4. **Together they solved the problem**

That's actually not all that complicated and sophisticated or crazy, is it? Problem, complaint, listen, solve it together.

But how do they do that? They get everyone together and say "y'all choose 7 qualified people—full of God's Spirit and full of wisdom and we'll let them run this"

Do you know who they choose to correct a system where the Greek widows were being overlooked? They choose 7 people with Greek names—Ooopah! [**Stephen... Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas**]

Seven Greek men are carefully selected to re-invent the system of food distribution to feed both the Hebraic widows and the Hellenistic widows

Because for the first time in history, a problem along ethnic lines was introduced into a community of people who looked at it through the lens of Jesus

and that produced the miracle of Acts 6 IN SPITE OF the ethnic hierarchy that had been in play for all of human existence to that point

And the Christian community ends up having to continue to work this out for the rest of the book of Acts, you can read it, it's not smooth or easy, there are bumps along the ethnic road

But my friends there is roughly a straight line from the miracle in Acts chapter 6 happening about the year 50 A.D. and the great line in the United States constitution written in 1787 that we haven't even come close to living up to:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (and eventually women) are created equal"

Only it wasn't self-evident. Not even remotely self-evident. For over 3,000 years of recorded human civilization, nobody believed this, nobody even PRETENDED to believe this.

[Ethnic hierarchy was a given. Somebody had to teach humanity that all are created equal. His name was Jesus.]

SOMEBODY had to teach us that all people are created equal. His name was Jesus.

And without him and without his influence completely shaping European and American frameworks, we're not even having this conversation, at least not with this goal in mind

because the equality of all peoples and how people in power are to respond to people who don't have it and need help is all the result of the teachings, life, death and resurrection of one man in ancient Palestine who has changed the world

And the heartbreak and the Achilles heel of our nation is that we have drafted off the values and the framework that Jesus created and we have not delivered

The real story of America is not that we have racial brokenness in our country—that's always been true for every country

The real story of America is we have racial brokenness and we want to pretend that we don't.

We want to say that everyone is created equal and then not deal with the gap between what we say we're about and what's actually happening

And more importantly as Christians, the heartbreak of the white church in America that is we as a church have not lived up to our own story and have not owned the wonderful miracle of Acts 6

Christians basically created this whole category of the value of each person, no matter what their race or ethnicity or culture

BUT we have again and again and again refused the opportunity to participate in the hard work of rigorously working that out and instead have forfeited each generations opportunity for our own Acts 6 miracle

There's an adage in organizational circles that your system is designed perfectly to get the results that you're getting

in other words, if you don't like your results, but you're getting the same ones over and over again, you need to look how you're doing things to make changes

When it comes to the results in our country, in just about every meaningful measure of health and human flourishing and well-being, black people in our country are at the bottom:

Our System is Perfectly Designed to **Get The Results We're Getting:**

Median Household Income: whites \$68, 145, blacks \$40,258

Poverty: whites 8.7%, blacks 21.2%

Pregnancy-related deaths per 100,000: white 13 black 41
Household average net worth: whites \$171,000 blacks \$17,150

And of course, this is just barely barely skimming the surface—but our system is perfectly designed to get these results that we're getting

Let me see if I can simplify this a little bit--this is like the government doing a massive survey and reporting back that 90% of all trips to the DMV takes twice as long as it needs to, which anyone whose been to a DMV in their life can attest to

If the experience is so consistently miserable at every DMV then the answer isn't just a couple bad employees maybe it's the system and processes that need to be re-evaluated

And suppose that in that report they said that it would cost \$1 billion to fix it coast to coast and everyone whose ever experienced the DMV says

"Thank goodness, it's about time somebody's going to fix this problem, yes, please spend my taxpayer money to fix that system!"

But imagine, just imagine, there was someone who HADN'T ever experienced the misery of the DMV—and they might say, "wait a minute, are you sure? Do we need to spend all that money to fix that problem?"

I mean, I've never experienced it myself and sure I've heard that the DMV can be miserable for SOME people--BUT I knew one person a couple years ago who just breezed through!

And I had another person on my Facebook news feed who posted a celebration that they got in and out in only 2 hours.

In fact, there's one DMV lover who even lives in my nice neighborhood, if they can love the DMV, why can't the rest of you?

Meanwhile approximately 90% of the people who HAVE been to the DMV are complaining with one voice!

And so for those of us who are white Jesus followers

When approximately 90% of our black neighbors whom Jesus tells us to love are crying out for help, complaining with one voice that they are being overlooked in food distribution and job distribution and educational opportunities and housing opportunities

Those of us who are Jesus followers HAVE TO do the same work that produced the Acts 6 miracle

to hear the complaint through the life, death, resurrection and teachings of Jesus and then act in whatever ways are appropriate to change the system

We were looking at this passage in my small group this past week

and one person pointed out that in spite of the fact that Christianity basically invented the whole category of equality and the sacredness of each life--that's not our reputation.

Our reputation as Christians is an oppressive group that harms people

And what I said was that's because Christians are not immune to the in-group problem, the power-grabbing problem

And so throughout church history, we've committed horrible atrocities along ethnic lines just like everyone else--because we forgot we were invited into the Acts 6 miracle that has changed the standard for what justice actually is.

It is always easier to slouch into tribalism: my people, my tribe, here's why WE'RE in the right

But it is Christianity to hear a complaint, run it through the filter of the life, death, resurrection and teachings of Jesus and to actually go to work in whatever ways we can fix the problem

And of course the problems we have as a country are complicated and when I say 'fix it' I don't mean in any way to downplay how dizzyingly complicated all of this is

We have 400 years of overtly racist and horrific threads expressly and intentionally woven into the fabric of our society

Again, this is same ethnic and racial mess plays out in slightly different ways in every community and nation all throughout history

But ladies and gentlemen, this is our place. And this is our battle. And for the white church this is our opportunity for the white Christian church to either opt into this generations Acts 6 miracle

Or to AGAIN ignore or attempt to silence the complaints rather than run them through the lens of Jesus's life, death and resurrection.

Christians, we invented the whole concept of ethnic equality. And over time, we forgot it. we loved power and comfort more than we loved our neighbor, slouched into what everyone else in the world does along racial lines, and the results are predictably disastrous.

And it's time to forget it no longer. We can't afford to forget it. There's a miracle waiting for us that we get to participate in

As we actually apply Jesus to the ethnic conflict situation, it unleashes a new power that actually enables us to be reconciled to God and to each other maybe in ways that no one's imagined before—wouldn't that be wonderful?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if just the churches in our country actually decided to rigorously run this really hard and explosive conversation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, just like they did in Acts 6?

And wouldn't it be wonderful if that equipped us to listen, hear, engage, and act in ways that were creative, generative, life-giving, and reconciled?

This is our chance, once again, to participate in the Acts 6 miracle, to demonstrate to the world that there is a power in Jesus to break down these barriers that have destroyed so many civilizations throughout history

Today's Take-W.I.T.H.

Step into the Acts 6 Miracle: as a predominantly white church that's going to start with a rigorous amount of listening and not just reacting with anger or guilt

But **listening and processing racial strife through the filter of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus**—this is the difference maker!

How does knowing that we all miss the mark free me to hear complaints of injustice?

It's Christianity 101 that sin is the problem in each one of us that requires the forgiveness of God through the sacrifice of Jesus

So we of all people should have the best mental framework and best tools for dealing with all kinds of brokenness in this world

If people individually all have this parasite called sin at work in each of us, it's not any surprise whatsoever that when we come together we create laws and systems and businesses and organizations that have that same parasite woven into whatever we create

So this week, if you're white like me, and you read or see someone bringing a complaint about an injustice, between hearing the complaint and your response, I want to challenge us both to run that complaint through the same framework that they ran it through in Acts.

Justice cannot be a bad word for Christians. God loves justice, hates injustice. And given what Jesus and the rest of the new testament teaches us..

Jesus used his power to serve others—how might we?

Jesus dignified all people through sacrifice, how might we?

Over the past several weeks we've been giving you a couple minutes right here at the end of the message to talk with people in your living room or on the chat to process together

These are all big questions that will take some time to think about, so the prompt this morning as we give you a couple minutes to talk at home is maybe **what do you think the Acts 6 miracle would look like for us today?**

In the story, it was about Greeks having the authority to re-design a distribution system of food and what happened was everyone was taken care of and there was a new wave of church impact

AND it laid the foundation for a whole new way of relating across ethnic lines

What might it look like for us today in the church and in our country?

Let me take one more pass at one more miracle that takes place in this story—because the miracle isn't just that the people in power hear a complaint across ethnic lines and responded appropriately

The OTHER miracle is that the people who were formerly overlooked don't then when they have the power turn around and punish the people who were in charge before them

In the mid-1800's Karl Marx proposed a different way of seeing the world: he hated religion, especially Christianity, and he famously said that "Religion is the opiate of the masses."

that is, religion was used by the powerful to keep the poor down and waiting for heaven after they died

And unfortunately, throughout history at different points in different ways, that's been true.

There's nothing so good that humans haven't found a way to ruin it, and the good news of Jesus is no exception—Christianity has sometimes regularly throughout history been used by the people in power to keep people in their place

So he proposed his own way of seeing societies and economies

The Marxist revolution was built on this framework: 1. there's the oppressed and there's the oppressor and 2. the key dynamic in play is power and 3. the work is overthrowing the current power structure

And it's got enough truth that it resonates with the people whose experience is like the Hellenistic Jews—legitimately overlooked and struggling

But here's what happened in the 20th century: all kinds of revolutions happened that were built on the Marxist framework of the oppressed overthrowing the oppressor

And the results were utterly catastrophic—because it turns out that if your only framework is oppressed or oppressor, then once you're not longer oppressed you become the oppressor

It happened in the Soviet Union, in China, in Cambodia, it's no exaggeration to say that hundreds of millions of people were butchered, wrongly imprisoned and tortured

Because when the church forgets the power and the lessons of Acts 6 something else is going to fill that void that will result in disaster

The Jesus revolution was built on this framework: 1. everyone is an image-bearer tainted by sin, and 2. the key dynamic in play is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for every image-bearer and 3. the work is reconciliation with God and with each other

Some of my more conservative friends who are nervous about the movement for change in our country are concerned because much of how it's framed is drawing from the Marxist categories—it's all framed in oppressed and oppressor

And I want to say yes and amen to that. Every human system that does not fully integrate the most significant event in history is going to fall short

The Jesus revolution when we draw on all its richness and fullness is a much more robust, much more accurate understanding of human beings, human problems, and what the solution actually is

And the answer to my Christian friends who don't like how the current conversation in our culture is playing out IS NOT TO WITHDRAW from the conversation

It was the church's failure to articulate and demonstrate the better way from Acts 6 that left the void that Karl Marx filled that has led to untold misery in global history

The call to everyone who follows Jesus is to step into the problem with a full and rich and thoughtful and frankly better and more accurate understanding of the human condition and human situation that Jesus offers us