

God's Perspective on Social Unrest (Isaiah 58:6-12)

Paradigm shifts in human history aren't always immediately perceived. Some are, like world wars, for instance. They've created and tested global alliances and changed societies. Others, though, are less perceptible, like the invention and proliferation of personal computers. Who knew how drastically the world would change as Bill Gates and Paul Allen tinkered around in a Seattle garage a few decades ago?

It seems to me that we're in another world-changing moment. The coronavirus has rocked our world, and the social unrest around the issue of race has garnered global attention. And though racial unrest has been around in our country since before its inception, we're still in early days when it comes to finding a reliable way forward towards racial harmony. How our country will change in response to this isn't yet clear. That it must change is.

The church of Jesus Christ hasn't been a reliable resource in this process. It has sent out mixed messages on this. Some church communities have been engaged in this work for a long time, while other church communities have been silent. Tragically there have been times in our history when church communities opposed the idea. So the church's voice hasn't been clear leaving many Christ followers in a lurch unsure of what to do or wondering why, in a nation awash with churches, racial disharmony still exists. Is there a word from God on social unrest?

In fact, I believe so. Ours isn't the first generation of God's people caught in the dilemma of social unrest. In our time together today, I want to walk through a few passages of scripture that have a bearing on this. If you have a Bible handy, it might be helpful to look at these passages with me—perhaps you might place a bookmark in these texts so that you can reflect on them again later.

We begin with the text Adrienne read for us—Isaiah 58. In the opening verses of this passage, prior to the part Adrienne read, we get a glimpse into God's assessment of the people's dilemma. And these aren't random people, these are the people of God, the nation under God's guidance. They're in a state because things aren't going well. There is a sense among them that God's favor is missing. God even says, "they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways." They claim to have fasted, humbling themselves before God, yet God hasn't seemed to notice. In effect they're saying, "we're doing our religious duty—we're doing what you want, but nothing's changed."

We—meaning people who seek God, Christ followers—might just as well say the same. "We're doing what you seem to want, our religious duty. We're going to church, praying for your blessing, confessing our sins, we're listening to this guy, and yet, problems in our society keep multiplying." Given our current focus we could even name it as racial unrest that keeps cropping up. Why, we ask, is this happening and you don't seem to notice?

Let's drop back into the text and pick up where Adrienne started reading God's reply to them. In essence, God said, "Is this what you think matters to me? A one day fast where you humble yourself but still carry on a way of life at odds with my heart? Do you really think a one-day pause in your actions is sufficient for complicity with my desires?" Just prior to this God called them out on their way of life: on the day of fasting you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. God's assessment is

clear in vs. 4: “You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.”

How might God express this to the church today? Perhaps God would say, “You acknowledge a problem—racial unrest & injustice, you hold a prayer vigil, or march in protest, you declare Martin Luther King’s birthday a national holiday, and think this is a sufficient response that aligns with my heart, even though the reasons driving this unrest are still present in your culture and woven into your thoughts and attitudes?”

Let’s go back to the text and hear again God’s answer to them essentially: Here is what I desire. First, loose the chains of injustice—dismantle the things that perpetuate it, set free the oppressed. Second, feed the hungry. Third, provide shelter for the homeless. Fourth, provide necessities for the poor—don’t ignore the needs of your fellow human beings. Down to vs. 9, do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk. In other words, stop quarreling, stop trying to place blame or shaming people, stop stereotyping—instead, help. Get involved and make things equitable. Then, God says, things will change. The life of beauty and peace you long for will emerge. These are the things that matter to me. And as you pursue these, all of your needs will be met for all. You will be known as those who restored society, the ones who make the nation a desirable place to live. God told them that they had the capability of living within God’s favor by pursuing God’s heart in the way they related to one another.

What does God say to us in this? Here is what I desire—the same things I’ve always desired: that you dismantle the structures of racial injustice, make it possible for the oppressed to live in peace and free from fear, to have equal access to the means for life—food, housing, education, opportunity—don’t turn away from the black community. They are your fellow human beings. Stop trying to place blame elsewhere, or to shame them for their situation, quit racial stereotyping. Instead of quibbling about the problem, get involved in making things right. Then, what you desire—peace, and the harmony that comes from equity for all will emerge and you will discover the beauty and goodness I intend. And you will be known as those who restored society, who make your places desirable for all. God is telling us that we have the capability of living within God’s favor, and multiplying that favor by pursuing God’s heart in the way we relate to one another.

What guides us in this process? For that we have to head over to Proverbs, chapter 24 starting with verses 3 & 4: By wisdom—and remember this means “skill in living”—a house, or society is built. And through understanding (comprised of information, perspective, and history) it is established, or sustained over time. Through knowledge—awareness, appreciation, and experience—its rooms, economy, arts, and leadership, are filled with rare and beautiful treasures—the outcomes and fruit of everyone’s contributions. So this is a marvelous picture of what is possible, but it is a process that takes place over time through concerted effort. There are going to be hurdles to be cleared in a process like this. Anticipating this, there is a further word to consider in verses 10-12: If you falter in a time of trouble, such as social unrest like we’re presently experiencing, If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength—in other words: how little your effort. Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter—essentially, be allies with them, advocate for the oppressed. If you say, “But we knew nothing about this,” in effect

claiming ignorance, or shirking responsibility, doesn't God who knows our heart perceive this? With the evidence of this problem so painfully playing out in our society, we're hard-pressed to claim ignorance. The issue for us may be a matter of our will, but a lack of response isn't due to a lack of evidence.

Again, this is why we're engaged in the 21 Day Racial Justice Challenge, so that we can be informed, so that we can hear the experience of black women and men and persons of color, so that we can gain understanding of how racist ideas are embedded in our culture. I get that this is difficult for many of us. It's hard to hear—but it's much harder to experience. At the very least it should break our heart that people in our communities have, and continue to suffer under this. If you're not yet at the point of empathy, start with sympathy—it's a first step.

As I mentioned elsewhere, we don't yet know how we'll respond to this. We're listening, but we're also praying so that we might be in the right place within and together as a congregation. Mindful of Isaiah 58, we know there is work to do. Part of that work also meets us in Proverbs 31, vss. 8-9: Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy. This is a call to action, at the very least advocacy on behalf of those who are not heard. How we speak is as important as what we say, as Andrea reminded us this week. But that we speak is vital. It is time for the white church to speak on behalf of our sisters and brothers in the black church and the black community. They have long been speaking into this, but their voice hasn't been heard because the majority race in our culture holds the reins of power. Durable change will only come about when the majority race speaks. It's time for our voice to be part of the conversation, a clear voice with a clarion call for equity and justice in the face of racism. Steve Wells, a white pastor serving a Baptist church in Houston put it like this at George Floyd's funeral in June: Racism is the reversal of the revelation of God. Racism is not perfect love casting out fear, it is perfect fear casting out love.

Is there a word from God on this? I believe we just heard it. AMEN