

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby and Alfred Babington-Johnson
Across the Lines: Race and Faith in America
2 Corinthians 5

Life is filled with the best and the toughest, isn't it? I just came from a new member class with 100 of us greeting the new folks. It was filled with life. But I also just got word that the wife of one of our pastors just delivered birth to a little girl, Faith, who we knew would have a special needs team assigned to her because she would probably live for about an hour. It is these times that make us realize we need a God who stands both at the door of life and at the door of death and walks us through both. Before I preach, would you pray with me?

I cannot imagine, Lord Jesus, what it is like to hold someone precious, who you know will die. But You can. You don't have to imagine death, You remember it. And you don't have to imagine what comes next, You know. I ask You to hold little Baby Faith in Your hands and as she breathes these few breaths, let her feel the love of her mommie and dad. As You take her to Yourself, give them the sense that she is healed. Bless us though we are fragile and frail people and need You every hour, and sometimes we are reminded of that. In Your great Name. Amen.

I have had the privilege of being here with you for almost 25 years now. Last spring I was thinking about what our community needs to be working on, thinking through this year, and I became incredibly excited, compelled I believe by the Holy Spirit to talk about the *other*. To do a series of conversations about those folks who are on the outside of our normal everyday lives, whether that is the Muslim community or the Jewish, whether it is folks who fight about sexuality, gay or straight, or immigrants or race or anything that puts us out there as the *other*.

As I thought about that, I recognized that this is a much different congregation from when I came here 25 years ago. We have more and more Latinos. We have Africans and African-Americans sitting with us. We have a growing number of people who follow Jesus, who are from India. We have Asians of different kinds. We need to recognize that conversations like this have to be sensitive and can produce discomfort, but we have to learn to talk. We have to learn to talk faithfully and graciously, and so instead of calling them the *other*, I want to talk about *crossing the lines*.

This winter we are going to have four or five weeks where we meet here on Wednesday night and have folks from the Jewish or Muslim or immigrant communities, from different sides of the gay community, from different races, come and talk to us about what it is like *crossing the lines of faith* rather than a kneejerk reaction to something like Trayvon Martin's shooting and the trial. We want to start a conversation, and we believe that the church is the place to do that. In college I was marked, even before I was really clearly a follower of Jesus, by an assignment in

one of my classes. It was 1971. Dr. King had been dead only three years. He had written a letter when he was in jail called *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. It was written to the church because the church folk and the Jewish leaders of Birmingham were not excited that Dr. King was stirring up trouble in Birmingham. Part of the letter said this:

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated."

Things are different now. The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are. But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before.

I wasn't even a member of the church and that resonated deeply with me. It sounded to me like that was the way it was supposed to be. Then I read the Letter from the apostle Paul who said this:

16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. **17** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. **20** We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God [2nd Corinthians 5:16-20].

The church used to be ambassadors. I was in Washington, D.C. on Monday, listening to an ambassador, Rick Barton [Ambassador Frederick "Rick" Barton, State Department Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Organizations], talk about Syria. After that I reflected on four things about the role of an ambassador. The first is that ambassadors are to reflect the attitude of the king. They are supposed to know their home country and know their king. Second, ambassadors are not supposed to be at home. Ambassadors are sent *out* instead of staying safely in the castle or the church. Third, ambassadors recognize problems and they get to them. The best ambassadors learn the language of the culture they are in. And lastly, true ambassadors look for ways to bring sides together, ways to be reconcilers and to understand. How does that kind of embassy reflect on the church and race? Are we ambassadors of reconciliation or are we part of the problem?

Fourteen years ago I asked a friend of mine, Alfred Babington-Johnson, to chat with me in front of you. It was the season of O. J. Simpson and Rodney King. Before we thought of Colin Powell or Condoleezza Rice or Barack Obama or Trayvon Martin or 500 young African-Americans

being killed on the streets of Chicago already this year. We get swallowed up in the spectacles that grab the headlines. Some of you saw Babington-Johnson's name on the first page of the *StarTribune* this month as Minnesota tries to bring everybody into the Affordable Care Act. He was raising a protest that not everybody was being heard, saying that that changed things. He is a successful businessman, a leader of the African-American community, a graduate of Bethel Seminary. He is the founder and president of Stairstep Foundation, an organization committed to bringing hope in tangible, economic, spiritual, and educational ways, especially on the north side of Minneapolis, but all over. He is for me, most of all, a brother in Christ, and I thank him for the courage to come and share with us. Will you welcome Alfred Babington-Johnson?

(AB-J:) Thank you very much, John.

(JC:) He said, "I will try to walk up gracefully." When we did this 14 years ago, both of us had more hair, less fat, and we could pretend that we played basketball. Just to be clear, if he says anything that is coherent or gracious, you should make sure that you give credit to Anna sitting right there. I want to talk about the idea that the church has struggled for 2,000 years to be ambassadors of reconciliation. What stirs in you when you see that text?

(AB-J:) A couple of things. First of all, the notion of being, as you pointed out, ambassadors or agents of the King, the idea of being called forward by the King. If the governor or the mayor makes an appointment, sometimes that's a source of thrill and lifting up, of pride because *the governor called me to serve*. And so the notion that the King of Heaven would call us to an assignment is in and of itself, at least, empowering and challenging. And because to be in God's will, to be a part of His agenda, is where I really want to be. But, you know, the other notion that there is a reconciliation means that's there's a riff, there's a gap there. And here is God calling us to a repairing of this gap. But you know, what occurred to me, is that there is an author of the gap. The enemy of our souls has created the gap. In the beginning, there was no *other*. Male and female were not *other*. They were part of a whole. They were complements, one to the other. There was no division with God. We were in fellowship with God. Then this enemy came and created a situation where God became *other*. Then man and woman become *other* and *other* has grown from there. So it occurs to me that we have been called by the King of Glory to repair, to cross the lines, to blur the lines, to destroy the lines, to violate the notion of *other* and become *brother*.

(JC:) When we talked last time, one of the things that Babington said was that race is not something from the mind of God. It is something that we have created ourselves. He quoted a book called *How the Irish Became White*, showing how when the Irish came here, they were not privileged. They were scorned and mocked and they were the *other*. One of the ways they became the us'ns instead of the other'ns was by standing on the backs of the people that they walked over to get into the circle. I agree with that. Race is something made up but it seems like that as other *others* have crossed the lines, the black-and-white thing has persisted. Do you have any ideas why?

(AB-J:) I guess we have these senses, five of them I understand. One of them is sight. So we create this *other* notion with different kinds of checkmarks and for some reason, I don't know the reason why, the color gets to be the biggie. We talked about the fact that a friend of mine once said, "Oh, there goes somebody with nature's passport." At that point, he was referring to the fact that there was a European-American and that the very fact that the skin tone was light, not

white because nobody is white, light got to be a passport, a place, a point of privilege. Somehow the notion that there is a darker tone, a more identifiable one—I can't help it, John, this is me, all day long and perhaps even next week—but the visual thing seems to create a divide. I don't know the root there, but it is so.

(JC:) I showed Babington a short clip last night to illustrate this. It is from an ABC news special on race in America. It's only about two minutes long. I'd like to get his reaction and your gut feelings to it.

(Film clip shown.)

(JC:) I felt very uncomfortable watching that the first time. It really did not help that in the next scene, they had a young blond woman there and two guys actually tried to help her steal the bike. Appearance does matter. But the point that was being made here was that we have us'ns and others, and they don't look the same. You taught me once, Bab, that race equals prejudice plus power. Clearly one of the thieves had power and the other did not. Race wasn't equal. It was prejudice plus power. As a follower of Jesus, Bab, how do you follow that?

(AB-J:) As I saw this clip last night and then thought about it a little more, an expression that you shared with me once came to me; it's that sin would take you further than you want to go and keep you longer than you want to stay. And so as I look at this and see those people, all of whom I am sure are nice people, if they were able to view this in retrospect, how would they feel about themselves? Would they do this again, I mean informed by the reality of what actually happened? It occurs to me that the notion of *other*, if you allow it to take root, will take you to places and have you behaving in ways that in retrospect, you will be ashamed of because that is not who you want to be.

(JC:) I think that's so true of me as an individual, but I also think it's true of churches. At the heart of the African-American community is the church. The church is still important in greater Minnesota, but when I visit Bab's church, it feels different, sounds different, lasts longer, muuuch longer. Let me just say, you people would not make it, okay? But at the same time, it is the same Jesus. When I asked you the other day what you thought, should we have one church or distinct colonies, you had some interesting things to say there.

(AB-J:) Well, God is wonderful. Did you know, John, some things slip by you, but did you know, John, that God made the hippopotamus *and* the bumble bee?

(JC:) So, which one am I?

(AB-J:) You're both. No, John, I'm only kidding. The point is, there is variety, and thank God for variety. Thank God for culture. They enrich us. They give us different flavorings of music. That's something that allows us to grow and feel life in more abundant ways, and so I think it's appropriate that there are different churches with different styles of worship and orientation because people are different. But we are all serving the same God. It's not a frightening thing to me that we have different churches serving culturally in different ways. I think that's a good thing. I don't know if this becomes a melting pot issue for you.

(JC:) I hope *for* the melting pot.

(AB-J:) We talked about the notion of the melting pot because clearly there are some churches that orient themselves absolutely to have a variety, a richness of cultures all in the same space. This, too, is appropriate in my mind because that is what we are becoming. We are no longer simply one thing. We are many things—all of us—if we are honest with ourselves. There is this book Sinclair Lewis wrote, *Kingsblood Royal*. Are you familiar with that? It's provocative. The notion was that this fellow, Neil Kingsblood was his name, was a European-American, middle-class, well-to-do fellow, who discovered that he had some African-American in his ancestry. Discovering it, he then was more sensitive to a lot of different things as he viewed them, and at some point, he began to embrace it, the fact that he was now other than who he thought he was. He shared it with his lifelong friends who were also European-American, who then began to distance themselves from him. It introduced him to a whole new life and a loss as a result of the fact that he was now an *other*, even to himself. Where did this question start?

(JC:) Does it really matter?

(AB-J:) Not to me.

(JC:) Isn't it fascinating though how one thing leads to another? How it is all connected, faith and background and race and reconciliation? One of the things that I shared with Babington the other day was from Dr. King. I really have no desire to make us feel guilty about yet another thing, but we need to press into this. Dr. King said,

Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.

We've come a long way since Dr. King wrote those words. We have so far to go. What gives you signs of both progress and stopping?

(AB-J:) I don't know if this will help me find my way back from Sinclair Lewis and *Kingsblood Royal*, but the notion that change is inescapable is happening. We are seeing it all about us. One of the things I shared with you in various conversations was about my nephew, who is the product of my brother, an African-American man. His mother is a European-American lady. My nephew was staying with me in his senior year of high school and he said to me one day, "Uncle Alfred," he didn't call me Babington, that's what I prefer, but he said, "Uncle Alfred, when I get married, I'm going to marry one of my own kind." I said, what do you mean? What does *that* mean? He said, "I'm going to marry another interracial person." That was staggering to me on several levels because in a way, it is a sign of hope because the lines are getting blurred. Whether we accept it or not, the lines are getting blurred, but it was also a frightening notion because, does that mean the lines are being blurred and new lines are coming up? Somehow or another, we've got to do what you are asking us to do. Cross the lines and get rid of them and recognize we are in this larger space and we ought to embrace it. So, I'm hopeful by the change that is inescapable and challenged by it at the same time.

(JC:) Go on just a bit because we talked last night about what race President Obama is.

(AB-J:) Uh, huh. My dear wife, Anna, is a very, very friendly person. We were traveling by plane

once when she immediately engaged the person sitting next to her in conversation. They talked about everything and she discovered that this lady was a Christian so when we got to this new place, we took her to church with us. She was European-American. At the end of the service, we got into a political dialog, and all of her opinions were anti-President Obama. That's like the list of her opinions under the skin would be anti-President Obama, and it got to be that he was an *other*. So I asked her, what race is President Obama? She says, "Oh, he's African-American." I said, "Well, why is that? How do you come to that conclusion? Because notwithstanding the fact that his father is a Kenyan, his mother is a European-American as well as his grandparents on that side. How does it come to be that he is now an African-American? I welcome the notion. It's a sign of progress for my people, but something that ought to be considered." What race do you think he is, John?

(JC:) I guess I've talked about this enough or heard enough about it that I would say that he is like me. He is mixed race. That's the kind of thing that we are not used to talking about. And because we are not used to talking about it, we are afraid of saying the wrong thing. We don't have the conversation because we are afraid we will offend or they will offend us and because we don't have the conversation, it gets worse.

I've got to tell you how proud I am to be part of this community. In the last decade over 700 of you have crossed the line, short-term missions, whether that is on the north side of Minneapolis or in northern Uganda, we have tried to do this. One of the lessons I feel like we are still learning is that whether it is Lusaka, Zambia or the Phillips neighborhood here, the good intentions of the church often go astray. A friend of mine wrote a book called *Toxic Charity* [*Toxic Charity: How the Church Hurts Those They Help and How to Reverse It* by Robert D. Lupton]. When help does not help. How could we do better?

(AB-J:) I think all of us tend to be ethnocentric. All of us tend to feel that our piece is the better piece. My auntie said she had the good fortune of being black on a Saturday night. That's what she said.

(JC:) That's so wrong!

(AB-J:) But all of us have this sense that our piece is a special piece. And that's good except when we try to foist it off on someone else. So much of what goes on in philanthropy, in charity, in church work comes out of an ethnocentric place, which would be great if that ethnocentrism was about Christ. That would be a good thing, but it ends up being cultural or political. It ends up being paternal, not empowering but tutoring.

(JC:) I love that because it's putting my mind back to the ambassador language. The ambassador does not come in and say, "I have a better idea for you. I know how to do it right." The ambassador comes and talks about King Jesus, that we would share King Jesus, that we would follow King Jesus, together.

I want to give Babington the last word. I asked him last night if he had one prescription, one question we should have asked, what that would be? But I also want to leave you with my little nugget. That is, I read recently that some folks believe that Jesus had a sociological imagination. A sociological imagination means that when Jesus came in front of someone else, He was able to put Himself in the place of the one who was before Him. Whether that was a

leper or a Samaritan or a woman or a Samaritan woman, Jesus was able to identify with that person, not in a pitying way but in a way that crossed the line. I would beg that God would place in you and in me Jesus' sociological imagination, so whether it is a student who is struggling or the woman at the checkout counter or the neighbor giving you a hard time, long, long, long before it's just an image on TV, that we would start to see people the way that Jesus would view them.

(AB-J:) It occurs to me that what you are asking of us and what I think God is asking of us is to take our Christianity seriously. I mean, if we start really trying to view with the eyes and mind of Christ what Scripture tells us, we wrestle not against flesh and blood but that's where we often find ourselves. We find ourselves wrestling against flesh and blood. That's not the challenge. The challenge is the fact that the devil is the one who has created the *otherness* that we all have to struggle with, so we then must find a way to escape the categories that suggest themselves so easily. "I see myself as a prosperous European-American male." Or "I see myself as a brother who is down." What if we escape those kinds of categories and think of ourselves as Christians? Oh, if we thought of ourselves as Christians! There is no gender there. There is no ethnicity there. There is no tribal group there. We are the children of God the Father, brothers and sisters of the Lord. What if we thought of ourselves like that?

(JC:) After our closing hymn, I'm going to ask Babington to give us the benediction so I can run over to the hospital and baptize little baby Faith. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank You so much that You are with us this morning, that You have broken down the dividing wall. I pray, Lord Jesus, that You will not help us rebuild the wall, You will help us go over it, again and again, and that You will take us by the hand and show us that You are our peace. Bless us all in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.