

Easter 4C—Revelation 7 and Acts 11
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
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The Church should look like that

The last two years have been difficult for Americans, and especially for American Christians. I'm not referring to Covid church lockdowns or the hyper-partisan political atmosphere. I'm talking specifically about the racial division in our country. As a result of the tragic death of George Floyd at the hands of police, the issue of racism and prejudice has been pushed to the forefront of our national mind. It began with protests against perceived injustices in law enforcement, but it quickly widened into tearing down statues of historic figures, questioning previously shared beliefs about our history and governing structures, calling for proportional representation in government and industries, and teaching in school of what amounts to racial essentialism and group stigmatizing.

As Christians, we are sympathetic of those who have been hurt or who've suffered injustice on account of racism. We recognize that this is wrong, that racism is a sin. But many of us don't know what to think about this moment of "racial reckoning." If we sincerely care about our black neighbors and stopping racial injustice, are we obliged to support BLM and its agenda? Would black communities truly be better served by defunding the police? Would "equity," another name for greater affirmative action, solve the problem of the scarcity of black faces on boards, faculty, and government offices? Does it help to teach children to look at the world through the lens of race and to believe their country is rife with systemic injustice? What *is* the best way to heal the racial divide in our county?

Without getting into the wisdom or rightness of any of these proposals, what we can say is we as Christians come at the problem from a different perspective. We recognize that the division between blacks and whites in this county is a big problem, one that is too big for us to solve, too big to be wrestled to the ground by plans that begin in the minds of men. It is not something we can engineer through laws and policies and initiatives. This is a God-sized problem. It is one that only God, through the Church, can heal. It requires the quality of love that only our Savior can provide. And blessedly it is something that God is working out as we speak.

To see this for ourselves, we have only to look at the vision of heavenly worship that we read today about in Revelation. Revelation, as I've said before, gives us a picture of the way things would be—will be—when God has his way and all creation is restored, repaired and renewed. In last week's lesson, John described the scene of the heavenly throne room, where the elders, angels and every creature on earth and under the earth sing praises to the One on the throne, God, and to the Lamb, that is Jesus. Today this picture widens. Now in addition to earthly creatures and angelic choir, John sees "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages," singing praise to God. It is a magnificent scene—God's dream, God's plan for salvation, for the salvation *of the world* is fully realized. And it is a direct result of Easter—in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, God has forgiven our sin, breaking down the

wall between us and God, reconciling us to the Father. Now, all who are in Christ have been reconciled, forgiven, having been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Alleluia!

But notice too how John describes this great throng of God's people. There is no discrimination between groups here, no one people or group dominates or is put first, there is no segregation or group reservations. All of our earthly divisions are dissolved, obliterated, torn down just as the wall between us and God has been torn down. Now all are one, united as a new people in Christ.

This is good news for the world, but it's especially good news for us in America. For a long time now, many have argued that unity among Christians across ethnic and class lines is a separate issue from the gospel. In fact, reconciliation between racial groups is essential to the biblical understanding of salvation.

In the world of the New Testament, you see, there were two races of people—Jews and everybody else, the Gentiles. Jesus in his earthly ministry had given clues, hints that the gospel was for all people, not just God's "chosen," the Jews. But it wasn't until after the resurrection that Jesus' followers realized what he meant. In our reading from Acts this morning, for instance, Peter describes how *he* came to understand the fullness of God's mission. He saw a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven. On it he saw all kinds of animals, clean and unclean. God said to Peter, Eat! Peter, being a good Jew, was repulsed: "Lord, I've never eaten anything unclean in my life and I'm not about to start now!" But God insists, tells him three times to eat, before the sheet is taken back up to heaven. Peter shares this vision in order to explain to the other believers why, when he was invited to the house of a *Gentile*, he went willingly and baptized the man, Cornelius, *and* his household. Peter realized then that loving God meant loving even our enemies—loving those we have previously hated. Peter explains, "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him." God, he understood, was not going to have a Jewish church and a separate Gentile church, for second-class believers. As proof, when Peter preached the Good News to Cornelius' household, the Holy Spirit fell on all of them. Peter just shrugs, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

Who are *we* that we should hinder God? Sadly, Christians in America have at times thought they had the need and right to hinder God's plan for reconciliation. In 1787, Richard Allen, a freed black man, got so frustrated with the treatment he and other blacks received from St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia that he left and founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first independent black church in the country. In the years that followed, what happened in St. George's was repeated across the county and across denominations—new black churches sprung up everywhere. White churches for their part became known for segregating worshipers by race, barring blacks from membership and black churches from joining their denomination, participating in and defending white supremacist organizations, and teaching that the Bible sanctioned segregation and opposed inter-racial marriage. Few of us here were involved in these injustices, I recognize, or were even alive when the worst of them took place. But we have to acknowledge our collective failure to be the Church John describes in Revelation. To paraphrase the rabbi Abraham Heschel, not all are guilty, but all are responsible. We all live

in a world, in churches created by these events, by these forces. We all have to decide what to do with our history.

To be sure, the shame of segregated churches is a shared shame. Black and white churches alike have maintained separate institutions long after the laws of segregation were overturned. It was Billy Graham who said it first, and Martin Luther King Jr. echoed it from his jail cell in Birmingham: “Eleven o’clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America.” That charge was made against the Church in the 1950s, and sadly it is still true today. We have all fallen short of the glory John describes in the heavenly church. This is sad, especially because the Church, not governments or social movements, is God’s way to heal racial divisions, to reconcile hostile nations and peoples.

Now, that doesn’t mean that there are no examples we can look to, nowhere that God’s plan is being realized visibly in the church. Thinking of where we might see such a Revelation church, my mind immediately goes to Clarence Jordan and Koinonia Farms. Jordan grew up in a prosperous family, earned a Ph.D. in Greek New Testament, and was en route to becoming a professor. But then Jordan read the book of Acts and was so inspired by the early Christians’ example of communal living, how they shared everything in common, that Jordan bought a farm in rural Americus, Georgia, and then invited other Christians, both white and black, to come live together, growing crops and sharing what they had. He named it ‘Koinonia Farms’ after the Greek word for communion. Mind you, Jordan conducted his little experiment in the early 1950s, during the “Red scare” when McCarthy was busy finding communists under every rock, and long before the Civil Rights Movement. You can imagine how excited the Ku Klux Klan was to have Jordan in the neighborhood. The harassment was relentless: almost-ripened crops were torched, guns were fired randomly into farm buildings, crosses were burned beside the driveway. Yet Jordan and others stuck it out and so got to see a little bit of John’s heaven there in rural Georgia.

More recently, a few years ago I came across an article in the *Washington Post*. It told the story of two churches in my hometown, Jacksonville, Florida. One of these churches was black and urban, the other white and suburban. They had done what seemed to be impossible. The two had merged two years earlier. This was no small feat. You see, one of those churches was Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church, a large, 7,000-member black church in the heart of the city. It had grown so large that its leaders decided that a second church should be planted in the suburb of Orange Park. At the same time, the mostly white Ridgewood Baptist Church in Orange Park was losing members and was behind on its bills. A Southern Baptist leader who was aware of both churches wondered, Was it necessary to plant an entirely new church? What if Shiloh and Ridgewood merged into one church with two locations?

Shiloh’s charismatic young pastor, HB Charles, Jr. explained to *The Post*: “The Bible says that from the church, God is making a tribe of every nation, people and tongue. I feel like the church should look like that.” So he did something about it.

Today, Shiloh Baptist Church looks a lot different than it did in 2014. Located in the city *and* suburbs, it is now a multi-ethnic congregation that is made up of both its original downtown congregation and the former Ridgewood Baptist. Some of the Ridgewood families decided not to

stick around for the merger, but the congregation moved on bravely. A year into the radical experiment, more than a thousand new people joined the church, including several interracial couples. And the Orange Park location, which had declined to less than three hundred weekly attenders, was now welcoming seven hundred people each Sunday. Here was a body of believers courageously living out the message of reconciliation for a divided world to see. This wasn't fake news in *The Washington Post*—it was the good news!

Stories like this remind us of what God wants to do with us, through us: to become a new people made up of all races, tribes and tongues, united in the worship of God. It makes me wonder too what might it look like if we at Good Shepherd decided to get on board with that vision. I mean, we are a largely white congregation, on the edge of a largely white neighborhood. But if you just go across the street here, or on the other side of Forest Hill Park, you'd find people who look a lot different from us. What if we made an effort to get to know them? Get to know their children? What if we made a point to invite them to join us for worship, or a barbecue, or a movie night here at the church, or in our own homes? What if we had a heart like God's heart and shared his longing for reconciliation? How might that change our church? How might we be better Christians for it?

Now I'm not offering any prescription or policy here. The problem of division between blacks and whites is big, as I said, too big for us to deal with on our own. Rather, what I want to suggest to you is this—that what this vision in Revelation gives us is a place to begin, which is to say, we begin at the end, with a glorious vision of God's plan for his people, a picture of what it will look like when God's will is done on earth as in heaven—one people bought with one blood, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, united in glorifying God and following one Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Makes you want to say, Alleluia!, doesn't it? Amen.