A time for empathy, a time for history

By John Fea
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On Sunday, after a tragic week of race-related killings in Dallas, Minneapolis, and Baton Rouge, I took a seat in my white evangelical middle-class megachurch in central Pennsylvania. I didn't know what to expect, but as the sermon began I found myself pleasantly surprised.

My pastor used his scheduled sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) to address the issue of race in America. He urged the congregation to take seriously the racial division pervading this country. He challenged those in attendance to do more listening than talking about race. He asked us to consider what it really means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But what struck me the most about the sermon was my pastor's assertion that racism is a structural problem. Though he did not go so far as to use the pulpit to issue a treatise on institutional racism in America, he did challenge his privileged congregation to consider the fact that racism is embedded, and has always been embedded, in virtually all aspects of American life.

White evangelical congregations in the Pennsylvania Bible belt do not usually hear this kind of preaching. The sermon took courage to deliver. I left church on Sunday proud to call myself an evangelical Christian.

On the ride home I had a conversation with my 18-year-old daughter about structural racism. We wondered whether the congregation really understood what our pastor meant by this phrase. There are various ways of examining institutional racism in America, but any exploration of this moral problem must begin with the study of the past.

Most white Americans know something about slavery, Jim Crow laws, or Martin Luther King Jr., but very few of them have studied African American history beyond a mandatory unit in high school or the brief coverage the topic might receive in a required college history course. Many have never been challenged to think historically about the plight of their black neighbors.

What does it look like to think historically about race, and how might such an exercise contribute to the process of racial reconciliation? Good history teachers know that the study of the past, in order to be a useful subject of inquiry in our democracy, must move beyond the memorization of facts. The study of history demands that students of all ages listen to voices from the past that are different than their own. How can one understand structural racism in America without understanding the long history of oppression and discrimination that black people have faced in this country?

To put it differently, the study of history, when taught well, leads to empathy. History teachers require their students to step into the shoes of historical actors in order to see the world as they did, to understand them on their own terms. As historian John Lewis Gaddis writes, “Getting inside other people’s minds requires that your own mind be open to their impressions—their hopes and fears, their beliefs and dreams, their sense of right and wrong, their perception of the world and where they fit within it.”

It will take more than historical empathy to solve the racial problems facing our country. The pundits and politicians (or at least the ones who care about these issues) are right when they call for a national conversation on race. My pastor and other Christian leaders are right when they call the church to draw upon biblical teachings on reconciliation, neighborliness, and human dignity. But a more robust commitment to historical thinking—and the virtues that result from such an approach to understanding our lives together—will also help. Sadly, public school districts and public and private universities are making drastic cuts to the study of history and social studies at precisely the time when we need it the most.

After church my daughter and I stopped for breakfast at a local restaurant. As we walked across the parking lot we noticed a pickup truck with a back windshield displaying stickers of a Confederate flag, a gun manufacturer, and a prominent Christian university.

We have a lot of work to do.

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