

# BELPRES CHURCH

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## Transcript:

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Good morning.

Good morning.

Good morning. Good morning, sanctuary. We've been rocking out over here in modern, but you were singing one of my favorite songs of all time, Total Praise. I absolutely love that song and I missed it, but I'm over here. But we're all one church today worshipping together. Amen? Today, Happy Father's Day, I should say that. And happy Juneteenth as well. Today's scripture comes from second Corinthians chapter five, and it says, "For Christ's love compels us because we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died. And He died for all that those who lived should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and was raised again. 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. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new is here.

All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 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. Therefore, we are Christ's ambassadors as though God we're making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God because God made him who knew no sin, for to be sinned for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Man, that verse alone can just preach. But today we are concluding our Just Neighbors sermon series and it's a series where we've talked about many different things like land and justice and discipleship. And we've particularly been highlighting the history of redlining and racially restrictive covenants in our region and how they've shaped our region. And we've heard feedback from many of you that for some of you this series has been inspiring and it's led you to do things in your neighborhoods and discover how you can be bridge builders with your neighbors and people you haven't talked to before.

And then for others of you, the truth is this serious has been frustrating. We're a diverse church. We have different opinions on things. But I want to share a little bit of how we got here on this topic and this issue. For over eight years, we've had a focus in our church on justice and reconciliation. And we've had a team that's been focusing on this as well. And in the years of learning, of doing, of fellowshiping with other churches and community people, we've learned that there are many injustices happening in the world and happening here in this region.

And trying to take them all on at once actually leads to being overwhelmed and just being anxious and even leads to just inaction. And so the question that had come up for us that in our Seattle East side context, what is the pressing injustice that that needs to be healed when we talk about being healers of injustice? And the consistent answer to that question has been, for a long time, this issue of redlining restrictive covenants, that history that has been unhealed.

Because it's like when you go to the doctor or chiropractor and they ask you, "Where does it hurt?" And you point to the spot and you say, "It hurts here." That is how the response has been to this issue. And so as we said before, the laws have changed and they can't be enforced anymore, but the healing has not taken place. And so we are still faced with the consequences and that's why we're talking about this now.

And all this is due to sin. So although these things happened to in the past, sin finds a way to evolve. And so we see patterns of exclusion in our schools, in our neighborhood meetings, and we may be participating in these patterns without really even knowing it because, as humans, we like to be with people who are like us, whether that's ethnically, by education or whether it's by class. We all do this, including myself. Redlining is segregation, and that is a sin because it keeps those people over there and us people over here. But verse 16, from the passage that I just read, corrects that thinking. It says, "From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view, though we once regarded Christ in this way." Meaning we don't view Jesus as some random crucified Jewish man, but rather we view him as the risen Lord and the Savior of the world.

And so we don't see other people based on just their skin color or what school their kids go to or how much money they have. But now we have eyes of the spirit. And so where we were meant to be segregated by class, Christians have been given a solution. Verse 18 says that all of this comes from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. 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. We have been given a ministry, but to get to racial reconciliation, we first must pursue justice.

Because if something needs to be reconciled, that means that something has first been broken. But justice is the tool that repairs what is broken. So when we say disciples are Just Neighbors, we mean that we are people who restore, people who repair and people who reconcile. And we're not simply good neighbors. We are not simply good neighbors. A good neighbor will lend you sugar. And a good neighbor is what State Farm is, right? You guys know the jingles. Do it with me, "Like a good neighbor."

Like a good neighbor.

We are Just Neighbors. Just Neighbors restore, Just Neighbors repair and Just Neighbors reconcile. We have been given this ministry from Jesus himself. And so we cannot defer it. We can't push it along because whole communities are pointing to the spot and saying, "This is where it hurts." And so Christians all over the world, just so we know, Christians all over the world, they have their own issues and various continents down to the smallest village. They have their own issues of injustice that they need reconciliation and justice for, but this one is for us. And so Jesus has reconciled to us to God, and he sends us out into our communities, our neighborhood and the world. And as his ambassadors, it says, "We are therefore Christ ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us."

And so we represent Christ to our neighbors with how we respond to issues. And everybody has a role. From kids to our seniors. So today we're going to do something a little bit different. Usually here at Bell Press, our sermons have a story or an illustration, right? Every time. But today what we're doing is those stories and illustrations are going to be live from real people who are going to tell their stories here on this stage. And so the hope is that these will plant seeds in us to help us be Just Neighbors beyond this series. And so I'm going to invite three people who are our storytellers for the day. Sidney Odingo, Vicky Foreman, Rich Fukataki, and we're going to ask them some questions and hear their stories of how they're being just neighbors. Let's clap them.

This is Vicky. Vicky's been going to Bell Press for about how long?

20 years.

20 years. 20 years at Bell Press. And so Vicky, I want to start with you and ask you the first question because as I understand, Vicky's dad served in World War II and he served our country well. And after the war, many people who served in the war received, what's called, the GI Bill, right? And the GI Bill was this piece of legislation that helped people buy their first homes and also helped them get educations in various fields. And so, Vicky, tell us about your dad and how that changed his life and thus, you.

Blessed my life.

Yeah.

I will tell you, Anthony, that I got challenged to think about this through our justice and reconciliation team and through sermons to think about how have I benefited or my family benefited specifically from practices that were denied to people based on race. So here's my story. In 1943, my dad was a Finnish carpenter in Los Angeles. He assumed that would be the trajectory of his life. The war came along and so he was newly married and headed off to the South Pacific. He returned home to a wife, a toddler, but he had a new vision for his life. He wanted to go to school. He had no funds to go to school, but the GI Bill gave him the tuition resources and opportunity to attend USC where he would have been unable to go without those resources.

So his USC degree led him to a job at Seattle Pacific University and the trajectory of my dad's life was changed. The trajectory of my family's life was changed. The GI Bill also helped him get a master's degree from the University of Washington. And then he returned to Los Angeles and got a doctorate. Came back to Seattle Pacific where he became a tenured professor and a nationally recognized track and field coach, especially for women. He ended up being named to track and field teams to the US... Oh, sorry, to the Pan Am games, to the World University games and to the Olympic Games. That never would've happened without the GI Bill.

The opportunity that he had also extended to his kids. My brothers and I had free college tuition because he was a professor at Seattle Pacific. But there's another side to this access and opportunity story, and that is that it was for every returning vet. However, the implementation of those federal benefits were at the local level and people applied to their local Veterans Administration board, mostly white across our country. And too often the applications for tuition assistance and for home loans to purchase your first home were denied to Black veterans. They were denied based on color. So, access denied, opportunity denied, justice denied. The GI Bill, if you look at history, created the flourishing of the middle class in America, but the white middle class. My family benefited, I benefited, but people of color, not so much. Opportunities to flourish, to create generational wealth, were lost.

So this was a good thing that our country did, but not by getting access to it actually created this rift in the generational wealth gap. So Vicky, some people would say because you benefited from this that you should feel guilty because you're white, you should feel guilty. Let me ask you, do you feel guilty about this?

Nope. I did not implement the bill. I did not deny people of color. But what I feel is lament and a bit embarrassed honestly, that I didn't even know anything about this specific injustice until a few years ago. But once we know injustice, once we see injustice based on race that

prevents people from thriving, I believe we are called, as Christians, to lament and to action. Maya Angelou tells us, "Once we know better, we can do better." And in Ephesians, Paul says, "Stand firm then and put on the belt of truth, buckle it around your waist." So I don't feel guilty, Anthony, but I do feel called to stand for truth, for God's justice, for his shalom. Historical injustice is not my fault, but it is my time now and I might be required for me to take an uncomfortable stand and I might have to buckle up that belt of truth just a little bit tighter.

Yeah, that's good Vicky. Not her fault, but it is her time. That's something Pastor Scott said in the first sermon of this series. And so Vicky, thank you for sharing your story and thank you for your dad for serving our country in spite of that. I want to go to Rich. Rich grew up in a Japanese American family and he also has a World War II story because his family were put in internment camps during World War II. Rich, would you tell us about your family's experience? What happened in that community? Yeah, tell us a little bit.

Sure. Thanks Anthony. Just a little fun fact is that Anthony's uncle was one of my best friends growing up and we went to the same elementary school. So we just discovered that a couple of years ago.

We learned that from a Facebook post. But yeah, it was funny.

My grandparents immigrated here from Japan in the early 19 hundreds. So they ultimately had 13 children and when they were able to scrape enough money together, they were able to buy a home. But they were only able to buy a home by putting it in my uncle's name who was a US citizen since he was born here. In World War II, what many of you know, but some of you don't know, is 120,000 people of Japanese descent were put into internment camps or concentration camps or prisons across the country. My family, with kids ranging from infants all the way up to 22 years old, was sent to Gila River in Arizona for the duration of the war.

At the end of the war, they were able to return to their family home and they had a family home to come back to because there were some congregants from churches in the area who helped watch over many of the family's possessions and things while they were gone. Shortly after they got back, as an irony, my father was drafted into the army to go serve. After finishing his service, he eventually made his way back to Pasadena and was able to occupy the family home, which is where my sister and I grew up.

Just like Vicky's father, my dad also had access to the GI Bill and a VA loan. However, in his case, he wasn't able to really activate that for 25 years. And in 1973, he finally had both the resources and the ability to buy a home in what was previously a restricted neighborhood. So that was just one of the things that happened back at that time. And it

made me think, as we went through this particular sermon series, just the effect that had on our family and made me want to make sure that we were all good neighbors. The neighborhood that we grew up in, again, was predominantly... It was a redline neighborhood. It was predominantly Black and Latino, and many of the Japanese American families were living there.

Fast-forward, in addition to redlining, restrictive covenants, there were also laws and decisions that were made that kept impacting communities of color and especially Black communities even more. There was a particular decision on building the two 10 freeway through Pasadena where there were multiple routes and the route that was actually selected bisected Black communities, and so many Black families were displaced, businesses were lost, the neighborhoods were split in two and their property values plummeted because they were so close in proximity to this freeway. As an example of what didn't happen in another community, south Pasadena, which is adjacent, if you've been there for the Rose Bowl as an example, you'll notice there's a freeway that just stops and there's the seven 10 freeway that just stops and it stops in South Pasadena because South Pasadena, as a more affluent white community, was able to successfully have the ear of politicians and others and stop the development of that particular freeway.

So rich, back to the return from the internment camps, it sounds like churches played a big role in that. Could you tell us a little bit more?

Sure. Talking about just being Just Neighbors, there was a consortium of churches in Pasadena that did a great job of supporting the Japanese community. They did so before the war, during the war and after the war. So these congregants from the churches, what they did is they took care of the properties as well as they could while the Japanese were in the internment camps. They also sent letters of support and encouraging them while they were in the camps. They gathered together and sent supplies and gifts for the kids and then when the war was over and the families were able to return, they welcomed them back. And for those who had lost their places to live, because they didn't own their homes, they provided in the church places to stay until they were able to get resettled and they also put together financial assistance for them.

So when I think about it, and again, it brought the story and I had shared it with session early on, they were, to me, the epitome of what a Just Neighbor was and what I aspire to do and be like.

So you're saying churches can make a difference?

Churches made a huge difference because my family wouldn't be where we are today, and so many families in the area would not be where they are today.

I think that's such a good story, because there's things happening with refugees moving to the area today. How can we be just neighbors to people who are moving here as well? Thanks, Rich. Sydney, we're going to come to you now. Your family immigrated here from Kenya.

Yes.

And you kind of have a story where a Just real estate agent helped your family find a place to live and really helped changed the direction of your life in a positive way.

Yeah.

Tell us a little bit.

Very much so. So, being a part of this project and the sermon series, it induced reflection that let me kind of be grateful of the story of a realtor that... So we immigrated here in the early nineties. My father got a scholarship to a prestigious university. Our trajectory was going up. We moved to Washington and there was a realtor who took us around to places that, now when I reflect back, I'm grateful for how just she was. I was able to realize that our family had a lot of opportunities. And also being an immigrant, I have family that are spread out throughout the country and throughout the world. So I can see the perspective of being afforded different opportunities. And so in reflection with the sermon series and everything we've been going over, that's just something that resonated with me.

And because of the impacts of redlining in our very region, you know people who did not have those same experience because of where they lived.

Yeah. So, as I'm a realtor in the area and I have family that have purchased homes, and in different areas they have different school districts, different availability and access to resources, and I've been able to observe how I might feel more fortunate. And so it bears strongly on my heart to see what I can do in the position that I'm in.

Because now you're a real estate agent.

Yeah. So, that is me. And for me it feels like a blessing to be able to wake up and be somebody who is integral in the part of gaining the benefit of home-ownership. And there are people who feel comfortable being with me, knowing that I am passionate about the values that I have. Anything that I can do to be a Just Neighbor or be associated with that is something I'm proud of.

So, back when we were doing the gospel conversations and we were trying to get to 1200 gospel conversations collectively, you were the first person to have a gospel conversation and report it, and it was connected to this. Could you tell us about that?

Yeah, it was divine intervention. I had walked into work pretty early and I had just been having conversations with Anthony the previous weekend and getting associated with the New Covenant project, the Just Neighbors sermon series. And so being asked naturally at work, "How was your weekend? What are you up to? What's going on in life?" That was the first thing that I talked about with some colleagues. One of the colleagues had shared with me how exciting it seemed, what my church was doing.

And he shared with me that he used to go to church. His grandmother used to take him and it was a Presbyterian church, and it's been a while since he had gone and he would really like to go back to church. A lot of beautiful connections occurred and he came back to church.

That's cool.

Yeah.

That's cool.

To this church, by the way.

That's even cooler. To kind of wrap up this time, today's Father's Day. Sidney is a young father, particularly. He has a five-year-old?

He's six.

He's six. Six-year-old named Caleb. Being that it's Father's Day and we're discipling our kids as well, how do you raise a Just Neighbor or a Just Kid? How do you do that?

Yeah, that's a complex question and I love it. I've been thinking about it a lot. And during, honestly, just worshiping this morning, the songs resonated with me. And for some reason, Father's House is something that is strong and evokes a lot of emotion. And for me to raise my son in the area that I grow up and to show him the love that I've been able to receive from all walks of life, and for him to feel that invited to the father's house is everywhere, that's kind of how I wanted to raise him. And just by example, by what I do, by profession, what I do as far as what my values are, and just being a Just Neighbor.

Yeah.



Yeah.

Thank you. Well, all of us have a story. And we've heard stories in emails and in conversations in the lobby from all of you. And you couldn't tell them all, but I encourage you to reflect back on your experience in growing up and the neighborhood that you grew up in, the schools that you were able to go to, because these are things that some of us have benefited from it. And there's others here in this church who experience the adverse effects of redlining as well. And so like these folks here, regular people, disciples of Jesus, learning and growing in their faith, we all have a story, and we all have a way that we can be Just Neighbors beyond this series. We don't want to just stop. We're going to keep going and continue to be Just Neighbors and pay attention with the eyes of the spirit that we get from Jesus.

And so the Ministry of Reconciliation belongs to the church, to the Christians. He's given it to us, and he's not taking it away. And so we have a lot of work to do. It's a journey. But I believe that if Jesus gave it to us, he's going to see it through. Amen. So would you pray for me? Let's pray for our storytellers here and let's continue to worship today in our services. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you trust us enough to give us such a complex ministry, the ministry of reconciliation. But Lord, we know that you've already done the heavy work of reconciling us back to God. So we thank you Jesus for doing that. Now, Lord, help us to continue the work to reconcile our neighborhoods, our school systems, the people in our lives, Lord.

Thank you for Rich Sidney and Vicky and the ways you've sustained their families throughout the years in the midst of injustice. You've brought them out and you've given them things and ways to continue on in their discipleship. So Lord, we thank you. We thank you for the modern group. We thank you for sanctuary. Lord be in our worship today. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.