

Opening Chapel
Gregg Chenoweth, President

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“One Question You Should Never Ask” (with application to racial injustice)
Eccl. 7:10

Today, we begin a 7-part series spread across the entire academic year, 4 speakers in Fall and 3 in Spring, entitled “Windows and Mirrors: Discussions of Race, Justice, and the Kingdom of God.” Windows and Mirrors is a metaphor, that we all need a mirror to honestly look at ourselves, and a window to see others more clearly. Other speakers include significant persons like JC Watts (former two-time Sugar Bowl champion, U.S. Congressman, and Founder of the Black News Channel on Xfinity), Randy Melville (senior vice president for Frito-Lay western division), and Scott Gerber (the Caucasian author of *White as Sin*).

I want to talk with you briefly about a Mirror, then a Window, and finally a second Mirror.

We begin with Eccl. 7:10. Solomon wrote Proverbs as a young man, when he had kept his integrity, but wrote Ecclesiastes toward the end of his life, after repentance of sin. It is a penance kind of book. In reading Ecclesiastes, we learn from a man who blew it, was forgiven, and shares wisdom on the other side.

Eccl. 7:10 -- Do not say, “Why were the old days better than these?” It is not wise to ask such questions.

During the triple-vector crisis of COVID, economic fallout, and racial tension, we are all at risk of asking that question! Why would God censor us from that kind of thinking and speech?

The Hebrew “zeh” is singular – don’t ask THIS question, or this category of questions with the same sentiment only in different words. He’s not saying, don’t take your laments and questions to the Lord, generally.

I think God censors us from longing for the past because He wants us to manage our memory. Some types of reminiscing can actually harm us:

- (1) Why should we not linger on the good old days? Because nostalgia exaggerates or glorifies the past, like a fish story that grows over time and is a distortion or incomplete depiction of reality. When you compare a distortion of the past to modern time, nostalgia makes us an incompetent judge of the present time. For example, I grew up in the 1970s, so I could say, “I miss the 1970s when life was simpler.” Yeah, but I found a Blog online about that. The lead paragraph said this: “The Seventies were crap. It’s one of those things that ‘everybody knows’. The unions held the country to ransom, refuse piled up in the streets, power cuts were frequent and the fashions were embarrassing.” (“Were the 1970s really that bad?,” Flip Chart Fairy Tales, April 30, 2012)

PT: If I'm thinking I'm smoking hot, there's a little nostalgia going on, and that makes me an incompetent judge of myself today.

A Mirror Question is, "Am I making more of something in my past than I should?"

(2) Why should we not linger on the good old days? Because amnesia blunts learning from the past in ways that could have been useful for present decisions. This is why I hung a photo of Bethel's first president in my conference room: Woodrow Goodman. He literally looks over my shoulder as I do my work! Why do I hang him there? I don't want amnesia! I don't want to forget the "heritage of audacity" he and the first Board, first faculty and staff, and first batch of 93 students hand down to me today. His example inspires and motivates me!

A Mirror Question is, "Should I face something from my past that I have suppressed?"

(3) If nostalgia and amnesia are poor ways to manage memory, what is a good way, acceptable to God and profitable for our lives? Faithful remembrance is best.

All of us have suffered; some unequally. But you must manage your memory about that. A.W. Tozer advises how. In his book, "The Knowledge of the Holy," he says "memory can overtake imagination." I think he means that for some people, struggle saps your belief in God; but for others, struggle sparks anticipation for God's breakthrough.

Visualize a conversation in SG. One person spent too many years curating sour memories of disappointment like ugly art for their mind. Behind their eyes rests the dim resignation: God will never surprise me; God will not transcend this. Life is what it is.

Another person manages their memory differently. They also experienced disappointment, hardship, even suffering, but halfway through the conversation they break in to describe with vibrant memory God's faithfulness to them or people they know or people they read about in Scripture. Then, as they think about the future, you can see it on their face, a warm glow of godly imagination, anticipating God's coming work.

You see the relationship between memory and imagination? Sour memory -- small imagination. Vibrant memory -- vivid imagination.

Biblical imagination, says Philip Eaton in his book, "Engaging Culture," eagerly awaits promptings of the Holy Spirit and celebrates what Scripture tells us we can anticipate. It observes God's presence, not His absence. This person is filled with "shattering speech," in a voice that is "real and winsome," their confidence fully "authorized in the face of people that want to deny or dismiss them."

What does their speech "shatter"? Doubt. Great Christian universities, and great Christian people, are built on such speech, because for change to endure in your life, God must penetrate your imagination (pp. 106-115).

So, we have a task, you and me. During COVID, our conscious task must be to do as Solomon says – don't linger on the good old days; skip nostalgia; resist amnesia. Instead, look at your

anxiety or depression or hurt, and manage that memory. Remember God's faithfulness to you or others. Borrow hope from that. Then massage into your pain *the medicine* of a hopeful imagination for what God can still do.

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In about 15 minutes, I will to introduce you to two *people of remembrance*: Dr. Cristian Mihut and Ms. Ian Thompson. They are leaders on our campus on one of the three crises in our culture right now. You won't find them operating our COVID testing machines if you are sick (crisis 1), or in the Financial Aid Office to assist you with options if a parent was laid off from COVID effects on the economy (crisis 2). They are leaders in crisis 3: the racial pain in America, the hurt and confusion over why Biology is corrupting Sociology -- why skin pigment triggers judgments that ruin relationships.

Before they come forward, I want to pull out a Window, to better see racial pain in others. This could feel uncomfortable. I will soon quote members from our community about how bitter this is. But as the late Senator and civil rights icon John Lewis said: "Never, ever be afraid to make some noise to get in *good* trouble." Thank you for your patience with me this morning in stirring up a little "good trouble."

Last year, before COVID, we heard from more than 1,300 people through our questions about our climate – not the weather, our community climate.

1. We did the Race Card Project. Students anonymously wrote 6 words about race.
2. We hired a firm from Pennsylvania to conduct focus groups.
3. We also hired a firm from Washington, D.C. to conduct two large Web surveys.

I am summarizing about 200 pages of material to name 5 items of good news, and 3 bad.

Among the good news, 5 things:

1. 9 in 10 students and workers are satisfied with their choice on Bethel.
2. Across a decade, we nearly doubled the percentage of students of color.
3. And they stay, comparatively well. The graduation rate of students of color is far higher than the average across a 10-school comparison group we use for additional comparisons.
4. The top positive traits named by students were Christ-centered, community-connected, loving/kind, and professors helping you succeed.
5. Prospective students and parents named traits they most desire in their future college experience. No. 1 was safety, No. 2 was an inclusive environment (words like fairness, belonging, and understanding for people different than you). Farther down the list was a school that offers the academic major they want, and ability to afford that school.

There were also themes we could improve upon. Three things:

1. The top negative traits named by students were: non-inclusive (words like judgmental, cliquy), expensive, and strict.

2. In focus groups, a pattern of White students expressed frustration at being considered racist for reasons they don't think are accurate or fair, and that talking about race creates a form of division that wouldn't be there if we stopped talking about it.
3. The research firm summarized a valuable insight which represents a lot of input: "Bethel is a place where the institution wants all people to come, but the people of Bethel are not ready to have all people come."

As for strictness, remember we now sponsor dances and extended open hours in residence halls substantially. But if by strictness a student means they have friction with our Campus Covenant, I'm not sure how much that form of strictness will change. This is an opt-in community that isn't for everyone.

As for cost of Bethel, a few thoughts: (1) if a student is looking specifically for a private Christian school, our cost ranks in the bottom one-third of a group; (2) debt for our graduates is average, and it is good debt when \$1 of tuition gets you \$28 of income over the working years; (3) in the past 18 months we created two debt-free or low-debt pathways through Bethel: the Field Scholar Program for commuters, and the BUX extension program for students at distance; (4) But I know it is difficult for you.

Now, as for diversity and inclusion: I'm glad students of color choose Bethel in increasing proportion, and stay to graduate at age higher rates, but that light is eclipsed by the clear message from members of our community, that our inclusion is incomplete.

Race is an intractable problem, met by only proximate solutions, designed by fallible people. Actual attitudes and beliefs are harder to change than the policies, programs, or trainings we produce for that change. Part of my challenge right now is, yes, of course, there are exceptions to the generalities we speak in, regarding race. For example, when we talk about White advantages, I know there are White people, White families, and White communities marked by severe poverty, education and health care disadvantages. It's hard for that person to hear general statements about advantages for White people. Let's acknowledge that, and understand we are talking in a group now about things that tend to be true across racial experience.

I have much to say on this topic, but only have time to address just one item. In our listening tour, some (not all!) White students express frustration that we talk about this too much.

So, let's open a Window about that. White students, in your mind, take a look at students of color.

Solomon just counseled us, "don't ask why the old days were better than these." Actually, for many people of color, the "old days" were never something to be nostalgic about! In fact, the history has been so brutal, one can't help but be emotionally or psychologically attached to it. When a modern student has a grandfather who was forced to sit at the back of a theater because of his skin color, those stories are told at Thanksgiving Dinner. And that grandfather tells stories his grandmother told him -- she was not given the right to vote because of her skin color. And her grandfather was kidnapped, shipped like cargo, whipped, owned, and worse.

So when George Floyd is murdered on national television, a White person might intellectualize it as a news event, but a Black person feels it, and knows the same thing happened to their ancestors.

Keep looking through the Window.

That feeling is legitimized when every week something happens that reminds you of your skin color. I know people of color who are *still* called the N-word, still pulled over by several police cars at once because they were thought to be criminal, still assumed to be the staff of a business instead of their actual identity as the president, still assumed by a sales clerk to be too poor to purchase a luxury item, and on and on.

This is why a White person should never say, “Slavery happened. It was a long time ago. What does that have to do with us now?!” Would you tell a Jew, “The Holocaust happened, get over it!”, knowing in modern time Jewish people are still called names and must cope with ugly stereotypes that affect their relationships and business?

Keep looking through the Window. See that moment. It is insensitive, ignorant, and creates another friction point that reminds a person they are seen for their skin, not their personhood.

This summer, I called people of color from our community to see how they feel: students, faculty and staff, trustees. Here are the words they gave me: distraught, grieved, spent, fatigued, angry, at a boiling point, one questioned “Why is it White people are vocal on pro-life for babies, but silent when a person of color is killed on television?”, there is a betrayal of silence, one said it is so obvious there is racism in my life I can’t believe White people deny it.

Now, a White person can look out that Window and think, I didn’t create this mess; not my responsibility. But what I want to appeal to you about is this: you may not have built the house you live in at home, but now that you occupy it, you have to repair its flaws when they emerge. To say, “Not my problem,” is tantamount to walking past an overflowing toilet in your house, every day, for the rest of your life. There is an urgency here! Fix the toilet! It’s making a mess!

I want to pull out another Mirror. White students, let’s look at our own race. People of color can just eavesdrop for awhile. Let’s talk to ourselves. 3 things, then I’m done.

1. Definitions matter: I’ve learned that White people tend to define racism differently than others. The mere word “*racism*” shuts down psyches because it is a moral word. The internal dialogue goes, I can’t be racist because I am moral. But the definition matters.

For most White people, racism denotes a *conscious, willful, mean-spirited, prideful* subordination of another based on the superficial biology of skin pigment. If that is our definition, then clearly we don’t have a problem. But if you’re not in that group, you have another project, to examine *insensitive* or *unconscious* moments that still create needless friction in another person’s life about their skin and the attributes made about them for it.

If it helps you look in the Mirror, don't call it racism. Call it unintended racial effects. There can be a gap between your intent and the effect that leaves your motive innocent but the impact of your action still subject to blame.

In Ps. 19, a prayer – an attitude of the heart – is modeled for us: O Lord, forgive my willful sins, but forgive my hidden faults too, that I might become blameless in your eyes!

2. So, definitions matter. Second, keep looking in the Mirror, I've learned that most Whites never reflect on our Whiteness and the blessing that affords in America. It's like this: never ask a fish to analyze the water; he is so immersed in it, he never even thinks about it; he doesn't even know what water is.

In reality, Whites are fish in an ocean that feeds us, doesn't threaten us. Catch the metaphor that the ocean is our culture, feeding not threatening.

Robin DiAngelo (a White researcher) wrote a best-selling book called "White Fragility" that is controversial in some respects, but I endorse this excerpt she gives, to explain White advantage:

- When I turn on the TV, look at magazines, drive past billboards – I see myself everywhere, and I know I belong.
- When I read Hemingway or Steinbeck or Charles Dickens, I'll never be told they are White writers, but when I read Maya Angelou or Toni Morrison or James Baldwin, I'll be told they are Black writers. This means people want me to understand they are writing from a perspective. I am never told the White writers have a perspective.
- AND because of that, I never feel the burden of my color, never need to reflect on it, never worry if my color will be held against me. I will never walk into an establishment where I am a customer and wonder if I will be mistaken for the Staff.
- When I apply for a job, probably everyone in the process looks like me. Once hired, I won't have to deal with my coworker's resentment that I only got the job because I am White.
- AND because of that, I have full freedom of movement. I never have to think about how to handle myself when the police pull me over, or when I'm the only person at the meeting or party who looks like me, or get stared at when moving my family into a neighborhood that is predominately White.

I am breaking out of the book reference now, and talking in my own voice again.

You see the connection to Eccl. 7:10? Looking in the Mirror, when people talk nostalgically about the "good old days," I know what they mean because generally my life has been marked by no friction related to my skin pigment. The same for my ancestors. Same for my spouse, for my adult kids. And it will be that way for my granddaughters. I won't ever feel a need to roll my eyes when I hear about the good old days.

But, in fact, life in America for POC hasn't been great. Despite massive efforts in law, and despite White criminality and poverty:

- the unemployment rate for Blacks is still double that of Whites;

- Black infant mortality is still double;
- COVID kills people of color at higher rates than Whites;
- while only 1 in 10 murders of Blacks is at the hands of Whites ... Blacks are 2.5 times more likely to be pulled over by police, twice more likely to be arrested, five times more likely to be incarcerated, and get longer sentences than Whites for the same crime;
- median income for Blacks is 1/3 less than Whites and net worth of Blacks is 1/10th of Whites;

That scale of those patterns cannot be attributed to individual traits, like whether someone isn't smart enough or motivated enough or doesn't manage money well enough. There must be something larger going on.

What I'm saying is, "Hey, fish. It's in the water. But you're not accustomed to thinking about the water because you swim in an ocean that feeds you, doesn't threaten you."

3. So, White students, here is my ask today:

(1) Start thinking about the water of our culture. Remain curious, not indifferent. Remain humble, not haughty and defensive. Ask how it really is for a person of color;

(2) Don't think that being friendly to everyone, regardless of their race, is heroic. We expect that. Instead, move from being friendly to actually becoming friends with a person very different than you. You know the difference:

<u>Friendly</u>	<u>Friends</u>
Smile and wave at distance	Walk and talk together
Sit next to someone in class	Sit together over a meal
Keep from saying anything offensive	Defend them from offense
Tolerate their music	Learn about and enjoy their music
Wish them a great weekend	Invite them over for the weekend

In summary, Solomon was wise. Don't waste your energy asking, "Why were the old days better than these?" God censors us from that thinking and speaking because there is nostalgia that distorts our judgment of today, and amnesia that blunts valuable learning for our time. In particular, I don't want the Bethel community to have amnesia about racial pain; that amnesia handicaps our community from flourishing together.

But our mission, our community, is perfectly situated to become a peculiar people, virtually free from relational friction connected to race. This year is a great chance for Bethel to breakout of the mold of culture, and fully realize our potential as a Christian people.

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