

Mark 13:24-36
Color Courageous Community: Week 1
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Sermon

The idea for this sermon series came to me in two parts. The first part happened months ago when I saw a billboard in Tulsa advertising a church called “No Limits.” At the time, I knew nothing about this church except what I read on the billboard. It said, “No Limits Church—Where Jesus Ain’t Woke.” I’ve since discovered that the pastor of the church did a whole sermon series titled “Jesus Ain’t Woke.” This made me wonder if perhaps “woke” did not mean what I thought it meant. So, I’ve done some research on how the word “woke” is being used, both by people who think “woke” is a good thing and people who think being “woke” is not a good thing, especially some Christians. The way in which some are using this word reminds me a little of the way the word communism was used in the 60s. If you want to make someone seem dangerous and un-American, call them “woke.”

The second part of the idea for this series came to me as I read a book called *Color Courageous Discipleship: Follow Jesus, Dismantle Racism, and Build Beloved Community* by Michelle T. Sanchez. While the author’s theology is very different from my own and likely from most of yours, I do think many of the ideas presented about racism and our call to dismantle it are important. I’ve been reflecting on what it means to be, in Sanchez’s words, “color-brave” rather than “color-blind” and I’ve imagined what that might look like in the Church and in our own lives.

So, with all that in mind, this sermon series was born. Today, I am going to introduce us to a couple of new terms and point us in the direction we are going. Let’s start with the word “woke.” The reason I was so puzzled by the billboard I saw in Tulsa is that, based on my understanding of “woke,” I can’t imagine why a church would market itself as a place where Jesus “ain’t woke.”

As I’ve investigated how “woke” is used, I’ve encountered many definitions, but the one I like best is from a blog post in June of 2023 by writer and minister John Pavlovitz. He wrote, “...woke is simply the empathy that makes human beings human.”¹ We know that empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Imagine a billboard that said, “Disciples Christian Church—Where Jesus Doesn’t Care How Anyone Feels.” First, as long as I have breath in my body, “ain’t” will never be a word on a billboard associated with me. It made me feel icky to even write it in my manuscript. But more importantly, marketing Jesus as uncaring does not sound like a way to drum up interest in following him. “Come and join us as we follow the ways of a guy who didn’t really care about the lives of the people he met. Come, be like Jesus.”

Jesus’ wokeness, his care for others’ suffering, was precisely why people chose to follow him. His first followers were poor, oppressed, marginalized, and pretty much

¹ Pavlovitz, John, <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2023/06/05/woke-will-win/>, accessed 1/8/24.

fed up with a system in which they didn't matter. Jesus cast a vision for a world turned upside-down, a world where their problems mattered, a world made whole. Jesus was most certainly woke. He was the guy who ate with people others refused to eat with. He touched people others wouldn't touch. He valued the contributions of women beyond their traditional roles within families. He crossed cultural lines when he held a man from Samaria up as an example against the example set by religious leaders. He encouraged his followers to love their neighbors, even the ones not like them. Jesus was woke.

And so, if we are going to follow his ways, we will be woke too. You might be wondering what being woke looks like in this time and place. It's really not that different from Jesus' day. It is woke to care about immigrants and refugees, regardless of their countries of origin, how they came to this country, or their documentation status. It is woke to include everyone at meals and to make sure everyone has food. It is woke to want the history taught in our schools to represent reality. It is woke to respectfully use a person's preferred pronouns, to embrace all kinds of families, and to affirm the worth of all human beings, creatures, and to trust science when it tells us to wear masks and take care of the planet.

And yet...as we saw on the billboard, there are those who don't understand woke as a good thing.

In fact, much like whether we should be buying and drinking from Stanley cups, whether being "woke" is a good or a bad thing is a topic of fierce debate in America. In a recent poll cited by Allsides.com, "56% of respondents said the word "woke" means to 'be informed, educated on, and aware of social injustices.'" On the other hand, "thirty-nine percent said it means 'to be overly politically correct and police others' words.'"² Those definitions have very different vibes, and they certainly come from different ends of the political spectrum.

For our purposes, someone who is "woke" is awake or has "woken up" to the experiences of people who have been the recipients of racial and social injustices in the United States. They believe those experiences and embrace and engage in efforts and legislation that would bring about change. Woke people are aware of and care about the lived reality of other people. And that, friends, is a good thing. Jesus was woke. His followers were and are woke.

Today's text from the Gospel of Mark urges the early followers of Jesus to remain awake and vigilant. Mark was likely written between 66 and 70 CE, either just before or right after the fall of the temple. Jerusalem was under siege by the Romans, and the author was writing to a community that had expected to be saved from the Romans by their Messiah. They were growing increasingly desperate and anxious about what the future held. To address this anxiety and give them hope, the author created this scene between Jesus and his disciples in which Jesus answers their questions about what to expect in the future.

² <https://www.allsides.com/translator/woke>, accessed 1/12/24.

This is Mark 13: 24-37.

²⁴ “But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and
glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds,
from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts
forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things
taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this
generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and
earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son,
but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will
come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts people
whom he has enslaved in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper
to be on the watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of
the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn, ³⁶ or else
he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all:
Keep awake.”

Keep awake. The 13th chapter of Mark is called The Little Apocalypse. It describes events that, according to the author, will take place at the end of history. If you’ve read Revelation, you might notice that this text sounds a lot like that. Apocalyptic literature, whether in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, was written to give hope to people facing difficult times. The first-century community the author of Mark was writing for lived under Roman rule, and they needed some hope. Their hope was in Jesus’ return. They still very much understood Jesus as a warrior Messiah who would return and kick the Romans’ butts and reign as their king. When Jesus was king, they would finally matter.

Admonitions to be ready, to stay on guard, or to stay awake were common in early Christian literature. Because of some inconsistencies in this morning’s text, scholars guess that the author compiled it by weaving details from various oral and written traditions into this conversation between Jesus and his followers. Jesus told the disciples to stay awake to what was going on around them and to watch for signs that the present season was ending, and a new season was being ushered in.

This is not the only instance in the Jesus stories when the disciples were told to stay awake. Later in this gospel, on the night Jesus was arrested, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, and while there, he asked his disciples to stay awake and alert while he prayed. We know they did not. Three times in the garden, they were found

asleep. And, in the Gospel of Matthew, there is the parable of the ten maidens who took their lamps out to meet the bridegroom; five had plenty of oil for their lamps, and five did not. The parable ends with the admonition to stay awake and alert, for they never know when Jesus will return.

These stories serve different purposes in the gospel narrative in which they are found, but we can see that staying awake seems to be something followers of Jesus ought to be doing. That makes sense to me...When we are asleep, we don't know what is going on around us. Anyone who has ever drifted off with a toddler or a puppy in the house knows the danger of falling asleep when you should be awake. We have to stay awake, or wild things happen. In his book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "One of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people fail to remain awake." We get complacent, frustrated, and distracted, and we are metaphorically lulled to sleep while the insidious evil of racism and other isms continue to seep into all aspects of our lives. This negatively impacts all of us, but especially people of color and people in other marginalized communities.

This sermon series will wake us up anew to ideas we know and understand and hopefully awaken us for the first time to ideas that will challenge and inspire us. As we begin this series, there are a few terms that require definition so that when I use them, you will know what I mean. In her book, *Color-Courageous Discipleship*, Sanchez does a good job of explaining the difference between ethnicity and race. She writes, "...ethnicity was God's idea; race was our idea. Ethnicity is natural; race is artificial."³ When we think about God's dream of shalom, of people living in Beloved Community, we think of people of all ethnicities gathered, everyone having a seat at the table. There will be no racial division because, finally, we will understand that human beings made up the idea of different races based on skin color solely to create a color-based hierarchy in which people with light skin from European descent were always at the top. We know the truth is all human beings have exactly the same worth.

For years, the concept of "color blindness" has been viewed as the way to end racism. I mean, if we don't notice or consider a person's skin color, then we cannot possibly be negatively biased, right? With the best of intentions, those who adopt a color-blind strategy by saying, "I don't see color," are unrealistic and misguided. I know a family that includes ten children. Eight of them were adopted: one from India, one from China, three from Uganda, one from Ethiopia, and two from inner-city Chicago. When one of the children from Uganda was in elementary school, a child in his class called him a derogatory name. The child told the teacher, who told him to ignore it. When the child went home and told his mother what had happened, his mom called the teacher and explained that allowing another student to use that word when referring to her child was unacceptable and perpetuated racism. The teacher declared, "I am not a racist; I don't see color. I see all my students the same." To this, the mother replied, "If that is true, then you are not seeing my child. My child has dark skin, and the color of

³ Sanchez, Michelle T., *Color-Courageous Discipleship: Follow Jesus, Dismantle Racism, and Build Beloved Community*, (Waterbrook Publishing, a division of Penguin House, 2022), 12.

his skin is part of who he is. You cannot possibly know or understand my child if you ignore parts of him.”

In his book, *The Psychology of Racial Colorblindness: A Critical Review*, Dr. Philip Mazzocco summarizes the research on color blindness: “Racial color blindness denies the continuing relevance of race, and in doing so, cultivates ignorance of racial inequalities, or the blaming of racial minorities for their lot in society. Color blindness inhibits frank conversations about race ... and creates organizational settings in which minorities feel less comfortable. ... Racial discord is a kind of societal cancer that weakens society, and racial color blindness appears to be exacerbating the situation.”⁴ Based partially on this, Sanchez encourages us to exchange being color-blind for being color-brave.

Color-brave is a term coined by Mellody Hobson in her 2014 TED Talk, titled “Color-Blind or Color-Brave?”⁵ In her talk, Hobson says that color-blindness doesn’t mean there is no racial discrimination it means we are ignoring the problem. She suggests that we get comfortable with the uncomfortable conversation about race. She says, “We cannot afford to be color-blind; we have to be color-brave...We have to be willing to have proactive conversations about race with honesty and understanding and courage, not because it’s the right thing to do, but because it’s the smart thing to do...” She goes on to explain that everything about our society is better with greater diversity.

When we become color-brave, we choose to see the gift of diversity and the ways in which our differences make our world, our church, and our lives better. When we see color, we are awakened in new ways to the ways in which diversity is villainized and punished. Sanchez writes, “When we are color-brave, we choose to ask questions about other people’s stories. We choose to explore our own biases—both conscious and unconscious—and become part of the solution.”⁶ I believe part of color-bravery is embracing God’s vision for the world which is always more beautiful and always more colorful than ours.

It is that vision and our role in it that I want us to explore through this sermon series. But in order to do so, we have to be awake for it and not just at 10:15 am on Sunday mornings. If we are going to claim to be followers of Jesus, let us embrace what it means to be woke and see what that takes us in 2024. Amen.

⁴ Sanchez, Michelle T., <https://outreachmagazine.com/features/discipleship/64059-being-color-brave.html>, accessed 1/13/24.

⁵ Hobson, Mellody, https://www.ted.com/talks/mellody_hobson_color_blind_or_color_brave, accessed, 1/13/24.

⁶ Sanchez, Michelle T., <https://outreachmagazine.com/features/discipleship/64059-being-color-brave.html>, accessed 1/13/24.