

Doing Justice Together:

Background and Context

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

FOR DEEPER READING

The Historical Background, Biblical Basis, and Cultural
Context for

*Doing Justice Together: Fresh Expressions Pathways
for Healing in Your Church*

Michael Adam Beck
and
Stephanie Moore Hand

*Abingdon Press
Nashville, TN*

DOING JUSTICE TOGETHER: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Copyright © 2024 by Abingdon Press

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act, the 1998 Digital Millennium Copyright Act, or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed to Abingdon Press, 810 12th Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37203 or emailed to permissions@abingdonpress.com.

Scripture quotations marked CEB are from the Common English Bible. Copyright © 2011 by the Common English Bible. All rights reserved. Used by permission. www.CommonEnglishBible.com.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked (AMP) are taken from the Amplified® Bible, Copyright © 2015 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org

Scripture quotations marked (ASV) are taken from the American Standard Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked (CEV) are from the Contemporary English Version Copyright © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from THE MESSAGE, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Contents

Chapter 1	
The State of US Congregations	5
Chapter 2	
Racialization: The Invisible Pyramid	14
Chapter 3	
Jesus Healer of Racialization	29
Chapter 4	
Excavating the Soil	45
Chapter 5	
Cultivating the New Creation in Your Parish	55
Chapter 6	
Healing Racialization—A Journey of Grace	71

Chapter 1

The State of US Congregations

“Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.”

Judges 2:10

We have built it, and they have not come. The often-misquoted line from the film, *Field of Dreams* could be a fitting description of the Church in the US. The attractional church, a strategy focused on buildings, programs, and making faith attractive enough that people will come to us and find it for themselves, is largely failing. Many church buildings sit empty. Some are fortunate to have a handful of faithful ones hovering in the shadows of overbuilt spaces. Spaces once filled to capacity with committed members, albeit usually all of the same race, similar social standing and political views, are few and far between.

Decline

What has happened? How did we get here?

In our work we often have a front row seat to the decline, division, and segregationist tendencies of many congregations.

We work with churches across the theological spectrum that have lost a sense of vitality throughout the United States. Most of these local church people are working hard. The pastors spend many hours preparing sermons, reorganizing the staff, programming, and caring for their flocks. In many cases, the flock is working hard to support the pastor. They are praying, reading Scripture, having meetings, “doing outreach,” and yet in most cases they continue in a marked spiral of decline.

The Pew Research Center reports that all Christian groups in the US are declining, while the fastest growing demographic is the so called “nones” (those that report “none” when asked to identify religious affiliation), between 2007-2014 this group increased from 16.1 to 22.8 percent, (approximately +6.7 in seven years). The only other growing demographic according to this data is “non-Christian faiths.” That

means 23 percent of all adults and more than a third of all millennials, now find a home in the tribe called “none.”¹

So, while the US population has grown tremendously, conversely the number of Christians is shrinking. To clarify, between the years of 2007 and 2014 North America’s population grew by 18 million people, while the number of adults who identify as Christian declined by 7 percent. There are 17 million self-described agnostics and atheists, and 39 million “nones.” The sharpest rate of decline was among mainline Protestant churches at 3.4 percent.² To put it bluntly, this is a seismic shift that indicates the potential death of Christianity as the leading religion.³ The data predicts this trajectory will continue, so that by the year 2050 church attendance will be fifty percent of what it was in the 1990’s.⁴

The perspective of these so-called “nones,” and the growing tendency of disaffiliation, may be surprising. Certain myths are perpetuated about this group that are not exactly accurate, like that they are “atheists” “hostile” “self-absorbed” and “not spiritual.” A 2012 survey offered some interesting insight. Of the 46 million unaffiliated adults, 68 percent believe in God. 37 percent self-describe as “spiritual but not religious” and 1 in 5 reportedly pray every day (21 percent). Many are open to spiritual practices and have a receptivity to Christ... but not the church.⁵ They are not particularly hostile toward organized religion, although their critique is it’s typically “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political.”⁶ The United Methodist Church (UMC), the largest single mainline denomination has fared no better. Mainline denominations declined from 18.1 to 14.7 from 2007 to 2014, and the UMC, fell from 5.1 of US adults in 2007 to 3.6 percent in 2014.⁷ The UMC has been declining in membership at a fairly consistent rate of around 1.6 percent (consecutively each year) since 2006 with worship attendance decreasing

¹ Taylor, Paul. *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* (New York: Public Affairs: Public Affairs, 2015), 38, 172.

² Gregory Smith, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow.” Pew Research Center, Washington D.C. May 12, 2015, 1, accessed May 10, 2019, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changingreligious-landscape/>.

³ Taylor, Paul. *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* (New York: Public Affairs: Public Affairs, 2015), 163.

⁴ David Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based On A National Database Of Over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 15–17.

⁵ Taylor, Paul. *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* (New York: Public Affairs: Public Affairs, 2015), 163.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁷ See Michael Lipka, “Mainline Protestants Make Up Shrinking Number of US Adults,” Pew Research Center, May 18, 2015, accessed May 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/>.

approximately 2.9 percent during that time frame.⁸ Decline for the UMC is not a new phenomenon, it has been occurring for approximately 40 years.⁹

Florida

Michael's field work takes place primarily in the Florida Conference of The United Methodist Church (hereafter FLUMC). The Florida UMC measures vitality and decline by certain institutional markers: 1. Average Worship Attendance: the congregations annual average of worship attendees. 2. Professions of Faith: new Christians, or first time Methodists becoming members of a congregation. 3. Apportionments Paid: the percentage of a local church's giving that proportionally supports the churchwide budget of the denomination. 4. Expense vs. Giving Comparison: how much money is a local church receiving, compared to what it's spending (paying of bills, clergy compensation, health benefits, and so on).¹⁰

In 2017, there were 625+ churches (+ correlates with multi-site scenarios), 472 churches were flat or declining in Average Worship Attendance (AWA) over the previous 5 years; 242 lost 20 percent; 272 with 0 or 1 baptism in 2017; 304 who lost AWA in areas where the population is growing. In 2018, these trends continued with 593 church entities reporting End of Year Statistics, of those 64 percent were flat or declined in membership and 69 percent were flat or declined in average worship attendance.¹¹

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this decline. Many churches saw about one of three persons return from regular pre-pandemic worship attendance. In these congregations all standard metrics of vitality also declined.

From 2020 to 2021, average worship attendance decreased in Florida UMC congregations from 82,540 to 59,568 which is a -28 percent decline. In 2012, 3,933 persons were baptized. In 2021, 1,284 baptisms were reported, an increase from 811 baptisms in 2020 the year of COVID lock downs. In 2020, 368 congregations reported no baptisms, while in 2021, 309 congregations reported no baptisms. Total

⁸ Heather Hahn, "U.S. Church Sees Numbers Slide in 2015," United Methodist News Service, November 18, 2006, 1, accessed June 20, 2019, <http://www.um-insight.net/in-the-church/finance-andadministration/u-s-church-sees-numbers-slide-but-there-s-more-to-the-story/>.

⁹ Gregory Smith, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," 1.

¹⁰ All data on any FLUMC is available and accessible to all at <https://www.flumc.org/congregationalvitality>

¹¹ Email correspondence with Steve Loher, Florida UMC Manager of Knowledge & Information Services on April 9th 2019.

membership in the FLUMC decreased from 203,875 in 2020, to 191,902 in 2021, an overall decline of 11,973 or -6 percent.¹²

These troubling statistics are not unique to our contexts. Among approximately 33,000 United Methodist congregations in the US, only five, or .01 percent, have been able to maintain an annual growth rate of 10 percent for the past ten years.¹³

Perhaps even more troubling than the sheer magnitude of decline, is the lack of diversity among these congregations. In Florida, our antiracism task force discovered a predominately White church located in a very racially diverse Florida. The demographic growth of the Persons of Color is a mismatch within the church growth patterns. Of 213,400 lay persons who are members of the FLUMC in 2019 those congregations 85.9% are of White/Anglo ethnicity. Compared to the percentage of White population in the state of Florida which is 56% Anglo, 24% Hispanic Latino(a)s, 15% African Americans and 5% Asian, Pacific Islander and Native Americans.¹⁴

Western North Carolina

Consider the same phenomenon in Stephanie's conference, the Western North Carolina UMC. There is a significant dissonance in the racial makeup of the general population of the WNCC geographic area versus the WNCC membership. The racial makeup of the geographical area is 69.46% White (non-Hispanic), 16.99% Black/African American, 8.51% Hispanic/Latino, 2.59% Asian, and 2.45% Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Other.¹⁵ Meanwhile the racial makeup of the WNCC membership is 93.85% White, 4.68% Black/African American, 0.59% Hispanic/Latino, 0.35% Asian, and 0.03% Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Other.¹⁶

Racial disparities are reflected in salaries in these conferences as well. Consider the racial disparity between salaries among full-time clergy in Florida for example, with

¹² Email correspondence with Steve Loher, Florida UMC Manager of Knowledge & Information Services on February 2nd, 2023.

¹³ Wilson, Len. 2017. "Top 25 Fastest Growing Large United Methodist Churches, 2017 Edition". *lenwilson.us*. January 10. <http://lenwilson.us/top-25-fastest-growing-large-umc-2017/>

¹⁴ "Becoming Antiracist Comprehensive Plan" <https://florida-email.brtapp.com/files/fileslibrary/communications/anti-racism+comprehensive+plan+-+final+-+6-10-21.pdf>

¹⁵ "Custom Demographics Report," MissionInSite, accessed October 25, 2022, <https://www.acstechnologies.com/missioninsite/>.

¹⁶ Custom Statistical Report," Ezra Data Management System, accessed October 25, 2022.

the Black/African American average being \$50,264, the Latino average \$ 52,740, while Whites average \$ 61,420.¹⁷

The denomination is quite outspoken against racism, consider that The United Methodist Social Principles state: “Racism, manifested as sin, plagues and hinders our relationship with Christ, inasmuch as it is antithetical to the gospel itself. . . . We commit as the Church to move beyond symbolic expressions and representative models that do not challenge unjust systems of power and access.”¹⁸

The church affirms that “all peoples and individuals constitute one human family, rich in diversity. . . . We recognize that religion, spirituality, and belief can contribute to the promotion of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person and to the eradication of racism.”¹⁹

And yet The United Methodist Church was one of the only denominations in America which segregated its membership by its constitution on the basis of race. When the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church South and Methodist Protestant Church merged in 1939, the Southern church only agreed to the merger if a jurisdiction based exclusively on race was created. This compromise led to the creation of the Central Jurisdiction, which segregated African-Americans from their Methodist brethren. White conferences were placed in five regional jurisdictions, while nineteen black annual conferences were placed in the Central Jurisdiction.

The Supreme Court made a ruling in 1954 (*Brown v. Board of Education*) that “separate but equal” was invalid, yet the Central Jurisdiction continued on until 1968 when the Uniting Conference in Dallas, finally eliminated it. While the legislation technically eliminated the Central Jurisdiction, Black church leaders wondered if the merger meant a union of equal entities or were they being absorbed into something that would blur their identities. Consider for example, a composite report about the merger read by the Rev. Joseph B. Bethea at the Carolina-Virginia Conference,

We have not come to join; we have come to merge. The Episcopal leadership of Western North Carolina is to be commended. Until black people can lead white people, it will be most difficult for white people to lead black people. Where Negro leadership is unacceptable, white leadership is unacceptable. Our struggle for personhood may lead to conflict in the merged conferences, but we must love all men. And, acting in mercy and in charity for all, we will be true and

¹⁷ Equitable Compensation and Development of Clergy and Churches of Color <https://florida-email.brtapp.com/files/fileslibrary/ac+2022/toward+equitable+compensation/%5b104553%5d.pdf>

¹⁸ *Social Principles: The Social Community*, 2016. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/social-principles-the-social-community>

¹⁹ Ibid.

faithful to our God. There was still a sense of hope, mingled with the knowledge that meaningful inclusivity would always be difficult.”²⁰

Even after the merger, shared leadership, equitable compensation, and equal opportunities for advancement failed to materialize. The structures themselves prevented equity. The United Methodist Church became one of the least diverse denominations in the United States according to a 2014 report by Pew Research. Yet, this is a problem among denominations across the board.

The Most Segregated Hour

Sadly, over 50 years after Dr. King famously said that Sunday at 11 is “The most segregated hour in this nation” (December 18, 1963) it is still true across the board. We must face the fact that in America, the church is still the most segregated major institution in America and more importantly we must confess that this is contrary to God’s will for the church.

Recent events have even amplified this reality.

On May 25, 2020, between 8:01–9:25 pm CDT, Derek Chauvin, a 44-year-old white Minneapolis police officer publicly murdered an unarmed black man. The victim, George Floyd, a 46-year-old was being detained on suspicion of using a counterfeit \$20 bill. Chauvin knelt on Floyd’s neck for over nine minutes, guarded by his fellow officers from concerned passerby’s as he did so. Floyd was suffocated while handcuffed, defenseless, lying face-down in a street. He was among 226 Black Americans killed by the police in 2020.²¹

The day after, the world watched this public execution in horror when videos made by witnesses and security cameras went viral. The four officers involved were immediately fired for the homicide. Floyd’s murder sparked worldwide protests against police brutality, police racism, and lack of police accountability.

In the US, it was as if Floyd’s murder was the spark to a powder keg of a country already in crisis with a pandemic, distressed economy and racial unrest. Protestors organized in cities across the nation. Mayors in 25 cities issued curfews and police attempted to manage the mostly non-violent crowds with rubber bullets, tear gas and arrests. In Washington DC, more than 1,000 demonstrators flooded the streets,

²⁰ Addo, Linda D. and McCallum, James H. *To Be Faithful To Our Heritage: A History of Black United Methodism in North Carolina*. (No city) Jostens Publishing, 2011. 95.

²¹ Statista. “Number of people shot to death by the police in the United States from 2017 to 2023, by race.” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/585152/people-shot-to-death-by-us-police-by-race/>.

some of them using violence to voice their frustration. Former President Trump, was accused of agitating the unrest, tweeting controversial statements like the now infamous, “Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts.”²²

For those of us serving congregations through this turmoil, we found ourselves in a lose-lose situation. People had extreme opinions for and against gathering onsite or online, masks or no masks, temperature checks or none. Pastors and their teams found cohorts of congregants with varying levels of support for suggested protocols. This continues with debates around vaccinations to the present day.

The same challenges were associated with whether clergy supported the former president’s rhetoric or not. Some spoke out against his inflammatory comments, others supported them from their pulpits. Any way you went, congregants were dissatisfied and left.

Perhaps the unspoken crisis beneath the crisis was how racist ideas, policy, and structures were exposed for many white people during this time. For many whites, the Obama presidency was a sign of true progress, a manifestation of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream. During the pandemic there was a sense that overnight we had gone back to blatant racist rhetoric and segregationist tendencies. This unmasking of the virus beneath the virus—racism—left many clergy and congregations in an untenable position.

Some chose to prophetically confront what they saw as a clearly racist response to the crisis, others sided with political party lines that suggested this was just a case of a few bad apples spoiling the bunch. For the former group, non-violent mass protest was a responsibility of the church to organize and participate in. For the latter, a church endorsed show of force and militarization was the appropriate response.

Any choice that clergy made, even if it was to try and remain neutral, resulted in hemorrhaging members. Many of whom have yet to return and most likely never will.

Consider the scenario in Wildwood for example. Wildwood and the historic Black community of Royal share the same zip code. This is one of Florida’s oldest Black communities, founded by former slaves in 1865, who claimed their “no more than 40-acre homesteads” and a mule, granted under Special Field Order 15. Over a

²² Rogers, Alex. “Trump’s response to police killing threatens to further deepen unrest in America, Democrats and Republicans say” May 31, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/31/politics/trump-george-floyd-protests/index.html>

decade before the first white surveying crew came trampling through what they named the “wild woods” the people of Royal lived at peace with the land and the Seminole, Miccosukee, and other tribes that called this land home for over 12,000 years. Those white invaders renamed what was then Royalville, Picketsville, after the white picket fences that marked the homes. After the Civil War, the residents quietly changed its name back to “Royal,” which was documented as early as 1880.²³

The families of Royal trace their ancestry back to African kings, queens, princes, and princesses. Descendants like Michael’s friend and colleague Beverly Steele are among those original families of royal descent. As a child, Steele endured the horrors of segregation living on the edge of a sundown town. She has courageously preserved the hidden history of this place so that future generations would know that some of the first Blacks here came from African royalty.

Today, the legacy of colonialism, slavery, racism, and segregation is preserved in the Wildwood community. Essentially, there is a railroad track down the middle of the town, with predominantly White folks living on one side and Black folks living under the influences of systemic racism on the other. Just east of Wildwood is The Villages, the width of a wall separates the two communities, but they are worlds apart.²⁴

The Villages, a master-planned age-restricted retirement community is a sprawling city of 139,822 people. Between 2010 and 2020, The Villages was the fastest growing metropolitan area in the United States, growing 39 percent, from 93,000 in 2010 to 130,000 in 2020. It covers an area of approximately 32 square miles, an area larger than Manhattan, and is expanding mostly to the south of the current community. The Villages community, a favorite campaign stop for former President Trump, is 98.8 percent white. They proudly boast about having the lowest crime rate in Florida.

On the White side of the Wildwood tracks, the old Wildwood families who stayed are dying off or being bought out, but on the west side the Black community remains largely unchanged. They can peer across the tracks and see a wall, on the other side of which is affluence, comfort, and the culmination of White privilege. The wall is designed to keep us Wildwood residents out. Just on the other side is a town square, dozens of restaurants, a high-end movie theater, and multiple supermarkets. For the Black community of Wildwood there have been few opportunities to knock at the door. Drug dealing, service industry, and construction jobs seem to be the main

²³ Webb, Wanton S. *Webb's Historical, Industrial and Biographical Florida: Pt. I* (United States, W.S. Webb & Company, 1885), 104.

²⁴ Beck, Michael Adam, and Tyler Kleeberger. *Fresh Expressions of the Rural Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2022.

options. The neighborhood is plagued by gun violence, with multiple murders making headlines every year.

The twin viruses of a COVID and racism agitated an already fragile situation. For many long-time members, welcoming a black and Latino church plant into the facility was the final straw. The church, which had been experiencing steady growth up until this point, faltered and almost closed. Yet from the ashes of that time of turmoil a new kind of congregation emerged.

We suspect there are many congregations in a similar scenario. We want to provide hope and a pathway that might help congregations heal the wounds of racialization, both in themselves and in the world.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Chapter 2

Racialization: The Invisible Pyramid

“Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”
Exodus 1:8

In 1971, American anthropologist, educator, philosopher, and natural science writer, Loren Eiseley published *The Invisible Pyramid*. This book was a collection of essays, inspired in part by the lunar landing and a recollection of a young Eiseley watching the passage of Halley’s Comet with his father in 1910. Bringing a masterful blend of poetic-prose to bear on science as a discipline, Eiseley reflected on the evolution of species, the history of civilizations, the multiverse, inner and outer space, and our proclivity as a species to destroy the planet in the name of progress.

Eiseley mentions the Egyptian pyramids as man’s valiant attempt at “effacing time.”²⁵ While reflecting on a clearing of destroyed trees by his suburban Pennsylvania home he describes the “pyramid that our particular culture was in the process of creating” as a kind of “monster.” In a telling line he wrote that humanity, “fed upon the world, and the resources they consumed would never be duplicable again because their base was finite. Neither would the planet long sustain this tottering pyramid thrust upward from what had once been the soil of a consumed forest.”²⁶

Eiseley was not focused on racialization in his metaphor of an invisible pyramid, rather he viewed the building of the great pyramid at Giza 5000 years ago as an endeavor that required “great public sacrifice.” His main point was that modern science was constructing a new invisible pyramid that also had a great cost to humanity and the planet.²⁷ In his essays, he only uses the word “race” in terms of humanity as a whole. In essence, his language is correct, there is actually only one race. But modern society is built upon a global hierarchy that is organized racially.

The Racial Caste System

²⁵ Eiseley, Loren C. *The Invisible Pyramid* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 85.

²⁶ Eiseley, 87.

²⁷ Eiseley, 59.

W. E. B. Du Bois saw the racially inequitable features of this modern project, “The giant forces of water and of steam were harnessed to do the world’s work, and the black workers of America bent at the bottom of a growing pyramid of commerce and industry; and they not only could not be spared, if this new economic organization was to expand, but rather they became the cause of new political demands and alignments, of new dreams of power and visions of empire.”²⁸

There was indeed a public cost to the construction of the great pyramids of Egypt, enslaved human lives, battered, abused, and discarded in the sands of time. Their sacrifice resulted in a social structure that became normative for much of human history. There was a similar cost in the construction of the neoliberal economic and social hierarchy we inhabit today, and it was disproportionately black and brown lives.

Isabel Wilkerson refers to the racially defined modern social structure as “the assigning of meaning to unchangeable physical characteristics, the pyramid passed down through the centuries that defines and directs politics and policies and personal interactions.”²⁹ Critical Race Theory (CRT) employs terms like the “pyramid of white supremacy” or the “pyramid of racism.” CRT is the cross-disciplinary study of how laws, social and political movements, and media shape, and are shaped by, social conceptions of race and ethnicity. The field is led primarily by social and civil-rights scholars and activists.

It is not our aim to analyze CRT concepts in particular. But rather to explore a Biblical and theological framework for the global race hierarchy in which we live, move, and have our being. This hierarchy is what we refer to as racialization, or the structurization of society based on categorizing people according to race.

Wilkerson calls the structure of this invisible pyramid a “caste system.” She provides the metaphor of renovating an old house. The skeleton of the house, the studs and joists, while hidden behind the walls, are the structures that hold the dwelling we inhabit together. She writes, “Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions. It is the architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining, in our case, a four-hundred-year old social order.”³⁰

²⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois. *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, 24.

²⁹ Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (First edition. New York: Random House, 2020), 26.

³⁰ Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 21.

Pyramids of Egypt

The Old Testament books of Genesis and Exodus give us a window into the cost involved in building the Egyptian Empire. We think there are lessons we can apply to our reality today in the 21st century.

Joseph's story in Genesis 37-50 reads like a best-selling New York Times novel. A gifted dreamer and natural born leader, sabotaged and discarded by his family of origin. Thrown in a pit and left to rot, he ends up picked up by a group of slave traders. He's sold on the open market into the service of a wealthy, urbanite, politician. Then falsely accused by his owner's wife of attempted rape. He's incarcerated in a dungeon, hidden away by society. But even in the darkness of confinement, he uses his gifts. One of the fellow prisoners he helps remembers him when the king has a dream that no one can figure out. He uses his gift and goes from prisoner to vice president of the most powerful nation in the world. Tell us that this wouldn't be a movie trailer that had you hooked?

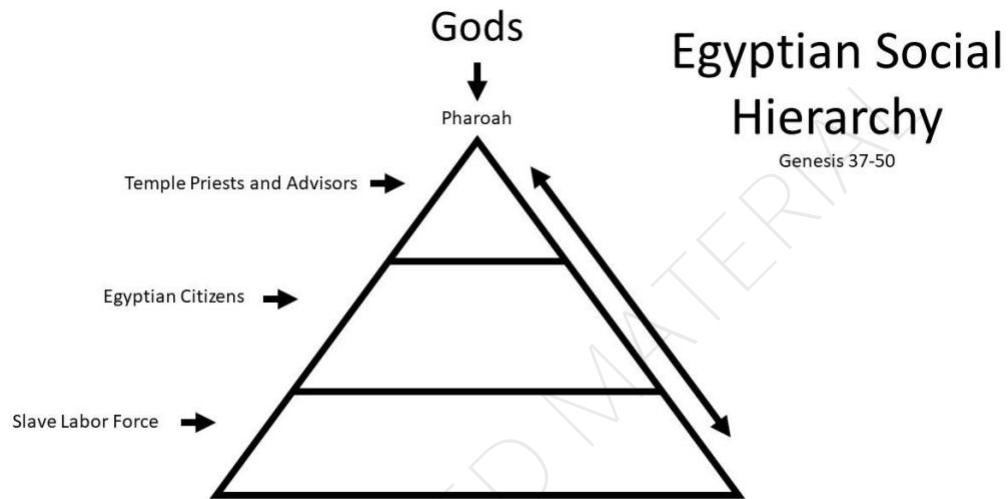
The story gets better though. Once he is in a position of influence. He uses his gifts to ensure the flourishing of the entire nation. Through his brilliant strategy, millions of lives are saved. He starts a family, lives in ultimate opulence, and governs the known world with wisdom and integrity. Tribes from all over the earth come to receive sustenance from his hand, as the worst famine on record wreaks havoc.

Then one day, some familiar faces show up. The very brothers who threw him into the pit, destroying his life, are begging him for a handout. They don't recognize the little brother they left for dead, as he's clothed in the garb of Egyptian royalty. Here is the crucial moment, here is the time for vengeance. Are you waiting with bated breath to see what he will do? Rather than responding in kind to their evil, he grants forgiveness. He has the spiritual wisdom to see that what they meant to kill him, actually led him to the place he was supposed to be all along. The adversities shaped him into the man and leader he was called to be.

He showers his siblings with forgiveness and invites the entire family to come live in the security of this juggernaut of a nation. He is reunited with his long-lost father, who blesses his children with his own hands. It's the perfect story book ending, roll the credits. This is the story of Joseph, the aptly named "king of dreams."

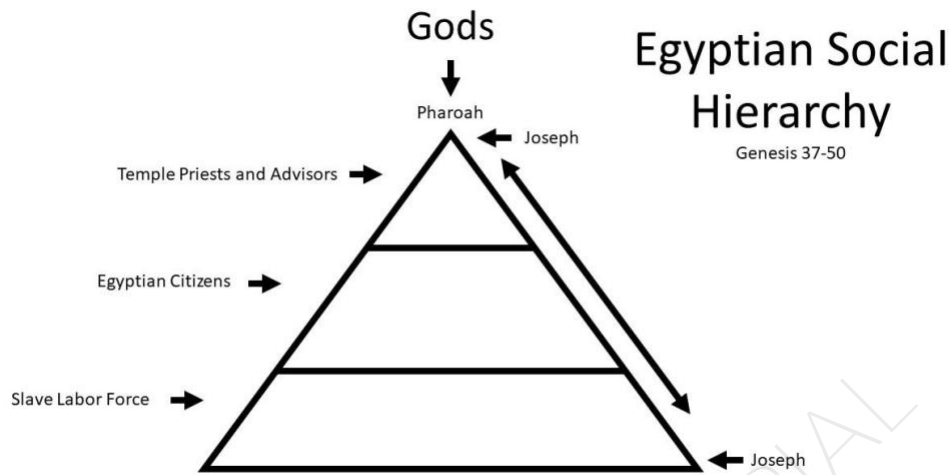
If we were to diagram what happened in Joseph's life, it would look like this. Egyptian society was modeled on a hierarchy. They didn't just build pyramids that would stand the test of time, they created a social hierarchy, a pyramid of power. At

the top was Pharaoh, considered a living god, worshiped and venerated. His court advisors and priests inhabited the top of the pyramid. Egyptian middle classes in the layer below. But at the bottom of the social pyramid were the slave labor force. These were largely non-Egyptians, people outside the ethnic ancestry of the empire. People like Joseph.



Joseph was at the very bottom of this caste system. A slave, owned by an Egyptian master, a piece of property to be bought and sold like merchandise. There's only one thing lower than a slave, a criminal slave, an accused rapist at that. An offense committed against an Egyptian elite would be brutally punished. Execution would be standard. Lifelong imprisonment would be a mitigated sentence. But somehow, from the bottom of that pyramid, Joseph used his gifts. Through a series of extraordinary, some would say miraculous events, Joseph has a chance to influence the Pharaoh. He does not throw away his shot.

Joseph's movement into the upper echelons of the social pyramid would look like this. Now he finds himself among the elite in the top tier of the social hierarchy, second only to Pharaoh. From that place of power he can influence the entire social system. He even imbues the entire pyramid with compassion and wisdom. Through his influence in the upper levels of the hierarchy, thousands or even millions of people are saved from famine.



For oppressed persons, those who have been victims of discrimination, this is a story with deep resonance. The ultimate underdog, longshot, who defies all the odds. It's a story that has given hope to untold scores of souls, who found themselves in Joseph's shoes. Those who were mistreated and enslaved. Those who were falsely accused and incarcerated. Those who were abandoned by the very people who were supposed to love them. Those who have caused great harm and need forgiveness.

Yet the story doesn't end there. In fact, it gets more complicated. Genesis closes with a happily ever after ending, but Exodus opens with a different tone:

Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

Exodus 1:8-14

Now another Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph. Another Pharaoh who did not know or care about his strange God named YHWH. These words can make

everybody on the bottom of the pyramid shutter. How can this be? For all the good Joseph did? What about the multitude of lives he saved? What about the favor he earned for himself and his family? All of that blows away like desert sand as a new regime takes power.

Suddenly, Joseph and his people are cast right back down to the bottom of the pyramid. They are back to disfavor. They are now property. They are now a subjugated labor force, tasked with finishing the empire's grand building projects. They will pay the price with blood, sweat and tears. They will know the lash of whips and the pain of shackles. There will be rape and abuse. There will be bricks without straw. There will be bodies littering the desert and children drowned and fed to crocodiles in the Nile. The fairy tale becomes a nightmare.

How is this kind of shift even possible? Now for a moment we can see the invisible pyramid coming into view. Joseph's dream is not more powerful than the unforgiving reality of structural oppression. Compassionate hearts are no match for the cold stone of the empire. An economic machine with grand plans, that make the rich richer, and the poor poorer, grinds the hopes of the oppressed into dust. Perhaps these first books of the Bible show us what human society broken by sin and greed looks like. This is the first creation of a structural pyramid of power that benefits some and disadvantages others. A social hierarchy that structuralizes oppression and inequality.

Constructing the Invisible Pyramid

These kinds of political and economic systems have existed ever since. The story usually has similar features. The key characters change, pharaohs, kings, presidents... the oppressors. The faces of the powerless are many, but the visage of the oppressed is unchanging. This was the invisible pyramid of Egypt, and yes there was a heavy public toll. But what if we told you another invisible pyramid was created around 400 years ago, just as insidious, and just as much a nightmare? What if we told you that we were living in the same kind of an invisible pyramid right now?

Historian Ibram Kendi traces the history of race as a global power construct in, *How to be an Antiracist*. The first character we meet in the complex narrative of invisible pyramid building is Dom Henrique of Portugal, Duke of Viseu whom history would know primarily as Prince Henry the Navigator (1394 –1460). The fourth child of the Portuguese King John I, Henry was central in the foundation of the Portuguese

Empire and European maritime expansion. More commonly regarded as the key figure in launching the “Age of Discovery,” he was also the architect of the Atlantic slave trade.³¹

Slavery is a persistent shadow of humanity across recorded history. Premodern Islamic slave traders were equally enslaving Africans, Europeans, and Arabs. However, Henry created a new form of racist slave trading that had not existed before him. It was Prince Henry’s first biographer, Gomes de Zurara, who used racist language to categorize a group of people by their skin color, describing them as fitted to be enslaved.³²

Jacques de Brézé, a French poet, first used the word “race” in his hunting poem, and Jean Nicot de Villemain, a French diplomat first used the language of “a good or bad race” to create a racial hierarchy. Yet, it was Gomes de Zurara who grouped African people into a single inferior race. Kendi calls this “the first racist idea.”³³ Gomes grouped all the diverse tribes and peoples of Africa into a single “Black race,” calling them bestial, slothful, unreasonable, and inferior. He crafted a narrative of Prince Henry’s exploits which were not merely about the accumulation of wealth, but rather the conversion of this primitive race to Christianity. Race slavery was about salvation, not economic gain, and the Catholic Church and a succession of popes sanctified Henry’s good work in the name of Christianity.³⁴

Across the pond, Spanish and Portuguese colonizers continued the work of race making as early as the fifteenth century throughout the Americas. The diversity of tribes and people indigenous to these lands were placed under the category of a single name, “Indians.” For the colonizers, this weak and unruly race was not fit for slavery, but rather needed to be eliminated all together through an attempted genocide.³⁵

By 1735, Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, zoologist, taxonomist, and physician who formalized binomial nomenclature, the modern system of naming organisms, also sealed the racial hierarchy in his *Systema Naturae*. There, Linnaeus color-coded the human species as White, Yellow, Red, and Black, in order of superiority, assigning each color to one of four global regions. His hierarchical pyramid looks like this:

³¹ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World), 38.

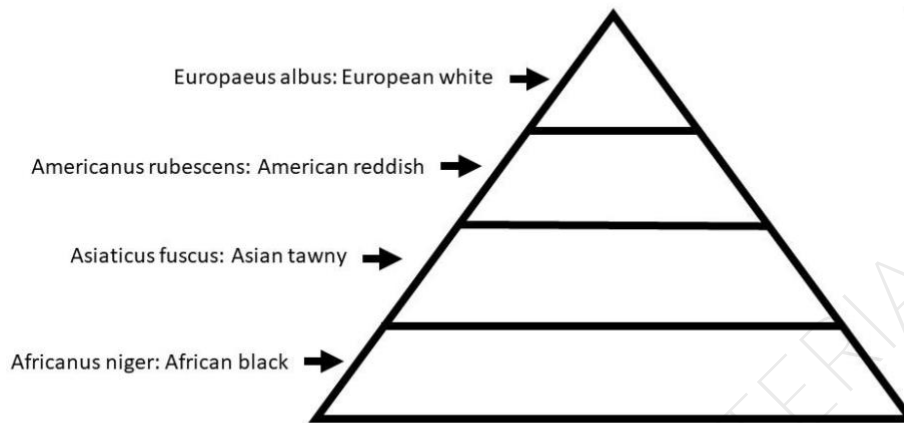
³² Kendi, 39.

³³ Kendi, 40.

³⁴ Kendi, 41.

³⁵ Kendi, 40.

Linnaeus Hierarchy



Linnaeus' taxonomy became the blueprint for every "enlightened race," and it is part of the invisible pyramid we inhabit still to this day.³⁶ Kendi shows that it is not racist ideas that create racist policies, but rather it is these racist structures and policies that perpetuate and enforce racist ideas. What is the driving motivation behind this invisible pyramid? The economic, political, and cultural accumulation of capital, that is the foundation these structures are built upon.³⁷

The Pyramids of the United States

The pursuit and accumulation of wealth and power is the material from which this racial hierarchy was forged. Martin Luther King Jr. cut to the heart of the dilemma in April 1967, at New York City's Riverside Church. King delivered a sermon that made the invisible pyramid visible to his hearers. He diagnosed the illnesses afflicting the nation and went beyond race. King called upon the nation to "undergo a radical revolution of values" that would transform the United States "from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society." It would take a revolution of this magnitude to overcome "the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism."

³⁶ Kendi, 40

³⁷ Kendi, 42.

King's giant triplets belong together, they feed and enforce each other. In *God, Neighbour, Empire: The Excess of Divine Fidelity and the Command of Common Good*, Walter Brueggemann identifies three "markers of empire" that recur in ancient and modern imperial iterations. 1. Extraction: empires extract wealth from the vulnerable and transfer it to the powerful. 2. Commoditization: empires reduce everything and everyone to a disposable commodity, bought, sold, traded, possessed, and consumed. Everything and everyone has a price. 3. Violence: empires enforce imperial policies and practices of commoditization and extraction with violence.³⁸

Brueggemann goes on to say that while there are other empires in the global arrangement, globalization is primarily spearheaded by the United States, "with its inexhaustible consumerism, its unrivaled military power, and its growing economic gap between haves and have-nots, is a forceful, willful practitioner of extraction and commoditization."³⁹ While globalization brings great benefits overall for most of humanity, a small handful of very powerful people are benefiting disproportionately, while a great multitude remain disadvantaged.

Empires use a religious tradition to legitimate these activities of commoditization, extraction, and violence. It seems behind every pyramid project, from ancient Egypt till today, that endeavor is worth human bodies, beaten, enslaved, raped, and murdered. Sadly, the church has been all too willing to step forward and legitimize the building of this pyramid, then and now.

Race as a construct is not neutral, it was invented to legitimate racist policies that enabled the enslavement of human beings. It is false. Anti-Biblical. Anti-Christian. Anti-human. Anti-life.

The accumulation of wealth based on the slave trade created in some ways, the global economic system we inhabit today. This is particularly true in the United States, where our political, judicial, economic, and educational systems were formed from the alloy of slave trade.

Consider the birth of American democracy and the great lengths the founding fathers went to ensure slavery would continue. As Nicole Hannah-Jones notes, "The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie" ... "The Declaration of Independence proclaims that 'all men are created equal' and 'endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.' But the white men who drafted those words

³⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *God, Neighbour, Empire: The Excess of Divine Fidelity and the Command of Common Good* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 1–2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of Black people in their midst.”⁴⁰

The creators of this declaration, many who owned slaves themselves, were working with the racist ideas they inherited from the racist policies that legitimated slavery to begin with. For them the word “men” was up for interpretation, and slaves were not considered to be fully human beings to which these ideas applied. This belief was solidified in the Three-fifths Compromise reached during the 1787 United States Constitutional Convention over the counting of slaves in determining a state’s total population. Article I, Section 2, counts each slave as three-fifths of a person for state representation. This was an important political and economic development, as counting would determine the number of seats in the House of Representatives, the number of electoral votes each state would be allocated, as well as how much each state would pay in taxes.

The lucrative economy of the United States received a massive jump start from the system of slavery. Yet, the colonists were not the only ones to benefit from a slavery-based economy. Historian and Harvard professor Khalil Gibran Muhammad notes, “Over the span of nearly three hundred years, from the mid-sixteenth century on, a succession of European nations—Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France, Britain—plied an international slave trade, with African elites and dealers on one side of the ocean and an insatiable demand by white colonists for enslaved labor on the other.”⁴¹

This exploitation and extraction, fueled by black bodies, produced mountains of cotton, tobacco, and sugar, also known as “white gold” which helped lay the economic foundation for the modern world. Those crops grew in soil soaked with blood. The land on which this all took place, was stolen land. Indigenous persons, disadvantaged by the superior weaponry of foreign insurgents were dispossessed of the land that they had lived harmoniously with for tens of thousands of years.

Tiya Alicia Miles, professor of history at Harvard University describes how after the American Revolution, US colonists had to navigate relationships with Native governments who controlled the majority of the continent. Indigenous people, devastated by over a century of imperial and colonial battles, were still a populous and powerful force to be reckoned with. Native people played a critical role in the development of the American economy primarily through the fur trade. A series of manipulative treaties were formed with the leaders of tribal nations, each

⁴⁰ Hannah-Jones, Nikole and New York Times Company, eds. *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021), 11.

⁴¹ *1619*, 73

undergirded by the racist ideas of indigenous inferiority. “Red people” had not cultivated the land in a civilized way, they were unenlightened “savages,” and “heathen,” non-Christians who needed to be converted and ruled over as a lesser race by superior whites.⁴²

The Doctrine of Discovery was an ideology partly built upon the assumption that Christian nations had the right to dispossess and conquer non-Christian nations. It was promulgated by the church. In the aftermath of the Civil War, many formerly enslaved black persons were forced into indentured servitude or leased out to companies as convict laborers.

President Abraham Lincoln, who led the Republican Party in opposing slavery and fighting the war, also maintained the inherited racist ideas about the inferiority of non-whites. After his assassination, the grand vision for a new unified America was short-lived. The Reconstruction era (1865 to 1877) while making great advances in civil rights also went backwards. Congress did effectively abolish slavery and proclaimed the newly freed slaves citizens with (ostensibly) the same civil rights as white persons. The new 13th, 14th, and 15th, known as the “Reconstruction Amendments” nominally guaranteed this equality.

Vice President Andrew Johnson, who assumed the presidency after Lincoln’s death, had different ideas. He began to favor the ex-Confederates and became the leading opponent of freedmen and their allies. Johnson fought to return decision making power about the rights of former slaves to the Southern states. Over time, this tension gave way to Jim Crow, state and local laws enforcing racial segregation in the Southern United States.

Urban sociologist, Matthew Desmond, notes that these twinned economic and political systems pushed capitalists and workers further apart. Racial subordination and exploitation continued through racist policies. He writes, America has evolved into one of the world’s most inequitable societies. Today, the richest 10 percent of Americans own over 75 percent of the country’s wealth, with the top 1 percent owning well over a third.”⁴³ Beckert and Rockman simply state, “American slavery is necessarily imprinted on the DNA of American capitalism.”⁴⁴

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois famously reflected that “to be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of

⁴² 1619, 141

⁴³ 1619, 185.

⁴⁴ Beckert Sven and Seth Rockman, eds. *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3.

hardships.”⁴⁵ Du Bois highlighted how capitalism works differently based on race and that black people were disadvantaged in pursuit of the American Dream. In an economic mainstream that celebrates the virtue of creating opportunity for people with limited financial means, being black was simultaneously a matter of racial and economic marginality.

Du Bois was a pioneer in exposing the invisible pyramid, the hierarchy of racialization. He preceded King in diagnosing how white racism, colonialism, and the logic of capitalism led to two World Wars and the “collapse of Europe.” Du Bois named that white supremacy had capitalist and colonialist origins, and that racialized slavery helped create the modern global economy. The “Age of Discovery” was the legitimating narrative of imperialism, capitalist development, and systematic slavery.⁴⁶

The economic system we inhabit today has roots in these soils. Noticeably, the American middle class is disproportionately white. This stems from overt and covert discrimination in housing and lending. Black Americans are disproportionately less likely than whites to own a home, and thus enjoy the generational benefits of home ownership, this in turn drives the lack of inheritance, and racial wealth gap we described earlier.⁴⁷

The oppressive practice of “redlining,” refers to federal insurers deeming properties and neighborhoods occupied by racial minorities ineligible for mortgage investment. This exploits, Blacks and Latinos, left to deal with predatory loans and depreciating housing markets. The strategic building of highway systems create more distance between affluent white suburbs and the economic destitution of black inner cities.⁴⁸

The snapshot of the racially exclusive realities of inclusive capitalism does not even touch healthcare, education, credit, and other basic dimensions of social life. White people at the top of the invisible pyramid have benefited disproportionately from the generational wealth created from a slave-based economy from then until now, not just structurally, but actually.

The Church has played a hand in not only creating and legitimating this invisible pyramid, but we continue to perpetuate this structural racism today. Sadly, in spite of

⁴⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward A History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* ([1935], New York, NY: The Free Press, 1998), 219.

⁴⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward A History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* ([1935], New York, NY: The Free Press, 1998), 219.

⁴⁷ Laura Sullivan et al., *The Racial Wealth Gap: Why Policy Matters* (New York: Demos; Waltham, MA: Institute for Assets & Social Policy, Brandeis University, 2015).

⁴⁸ See Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

decades of attempts at racial reconciliation and multicultural church movements, Dr. King's words still indeed haunt us, "the church hour is the most segregated hour."

The Church: Healer of Racialization

Inhabiting this invisible pyramid of racialization plays out in daily life in a myriad of ways. It starts in our mental life. Every person is born and raised in a family system that inhabits this pyramid. We are programmed from our early formative years into certain ideas about race. Perhaps some of those assumptions are racist. For instance, that white people are typically on average more intelligent than black people is a racist idea. That black people are better at sports than white counterparts is a racist idea. That blonde-haired blue-eyed people are more beautiful than others is a racist idea. That Hispanic people commit more crimes than white people is a racist idea. That Asians are innately superior in developing and using technology is a racist idea.

These ideas cement in our mind's categorizations about race, and it takes a period of repentance and unlearning to see how these ideas are wrong. The fundamental building blocks of the invisible pyramid are these ideas, but these ideas originated with and became concretized in structures.

We can see these ideas become concrete reality in the way that persons of color receive harsher sentences than white persons for the same crime. Or how law enforcement officers approach the vehicle of a white, blonde-haired blue-eyed woman, differently than a Hispanic male in a traffic stop. It shows the disproportionate number of white students who get accepted into ivy league schools. It can manifest in how white people draw upon generational wealth that can sometimes be traced back to slavery or segregation. It can manifest in how Asians are overlooked in a check-out line, or a restaurant. It shows up when a teacher spends an unequal amount of time helping students in the classroom based on the color of their skin.

It's as if white people, often located at the top of this invisible pyramid, are unaware of the advantages this structure provides. Some use the term "white privilege" to describe this reality. When we consider this structural element in how a white person might altruistically offer a "hand up" to a person of color, the very fact that they do so from an advantaged position from the beginning doesn't register. White people think they have pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps and earned their advantages, and this is not untrue, but they had a head start in the race just by virtue

of their being born white. We cannot look someone in the eye as an equal, if we inhabit a structure that places us in a position looking down on them.

First, the invisible pyramid requires us to acknowledge that it's even there. Christians can first paint the pyramid with Biblical truth, enabling ourselves and others to see it for what it is. In the same way that Moses was sent to confront Pharaoh about the exploitation of the Israelites in the Egyptian pyramid building scheme, so also the church is called to name and work to heal that reality. The painful part for white people can be that this requires us to climb down off our advantageous positions. We must forfeit our place in the structure to co-labor with persons of color to dismantle it and create equity.

Loren Eiseley was correct in his estimation of the invisible pyramid of progress, it is a "monster" that required "great public sacrifice." To apply Eiseley's metaphor specifically to racialization, what it cost to build this invisible pyramid was human lives. Inhabiting this racist social structure that Wilkerson calls a "caste system" continues to cost human lives today.

Racialization leaves a trail of devastated bodies in its wake and wounds that will never fully heal. The toll is incalculable. And yet, Jesus of Nazareth has given the world a gift that can heal this racialization. It is the church. The sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom of God breaking into the world. In the pages that follow, we want to suggest a pathway that gives Christians and congregations practical tools and processes that can release a cascade of healing on the world. One that might sweep away the costly pyramid projects of oppression and make the new social possibility Jesus promised a reality.

Chapter 3

Jesus: Healer of Racialization

“Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

Matthew 3:8-9

To use a popular term today, Jesus was an antiracist.

Now again, race is not actually a Biblical concept. Nor is race real. All human beings regardless of skin pigmentation are 99.9 the same, genetically speaking. As we detailed earlier, the social construct of race as we know it didn’t come into being until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it was created for the purposes of establishing a hierarchy that justified the slave trade, the invisible pyramid of caste we inhabit today.

Yet, just as race is not real but racism and racialization are very much real today, a form of what we would call racism or ethnocentrism existed in Jesus’ day. And Jesus’ life and ministry prophetically confronted the reality of a race hierarchy in his own people and the larger society. He was actively *against* it. Not neutral or silent but engaged in challenging it. Yes, Jesus was *antiracist* in that sense.

Sometimes to be for love, it requires us to be against or “anti” something else. Perhaps a more generous way to say it—Jesus sought to heal the death-dealing racialization of his time. This put him at odds with those who were stakeholders in the status quo of a racial hierarchy.

Jesus the Vine of Many-Colored Branches

We follow James Cone in seeing Jesus as “the Oppressed One whose earthly existence was bound up with the oppressed of the land.”⁴⁹ As we explore Jesus as liberator of the oppressed and healer of racialization, let’s begin with an image that Jesus gave us for the community of disciples or the “church.” In John 15, Jesus described himself as the true vine. He is the central life-giving relationship of the

⁴⁹ Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. 20th anniversary ed (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1990), 110-111.

entire organism. A branch disconnected from the vine cannot bear fruit. It withers and dies (John 15:5).

Another important aspect of the vine imagery is the “vinegrower.” Jesus refers to God the father as the vine dresser, who cuts, prunes, and does the work of helping branches bear fruit (John 15:2). No one in the community is called to do that work. It belongs to God alone. We do not decide who gets cut off the vine. We dwell together, abiding in the vine, bearing fruit, which glorifies the father (John 15:8).

Fruit bearing is less about action and more about abiding. We don’t actually do anything in this image. God is doing all the work. God the Son is the embodiment of the life-giving vine. God the father is the cultivator. God the Spirit is the life force that flows through the vine into us. Our only responsibility in this equation is to “abide” in Christ (John 15:4). Abiding in this sense is about living with, dwelling in, and inhabiting a living relationship with Christ.

There are many ways to go about this abiding: prayer, meditation, studying Scripture, worship, to name a few. At the heart of each one is the intentionality of growing in our relationship with Jesus. Spending time with Jesus. Listening to Jesus. Hearing from Jesus. Communing with the Triune God.

As we approach this work of healing racialization, we must begin here. The true work is abiding in Christ *together*. It’s not about our actions on Jesus’ behalf, it’s about fruit that flows from our relationship with the healer of racialization and each other. Bearing fruit is secondary to the relationship. Faithfulness to Jesus, proceeds fruitfulness in his name.

Yet at the same time, notice how inextricably bound abiding and fruitfulness actually are? Through this posture of abiding, we actually bear “fruit that will last” (John 15:16). We are not suggesting that we should spend our days secluded away in prayer and meditation, it is a false dichotomy to break apart prayer and action. We abide in Christ as we bear fruit. So, our prayer and our action are integrated. Ignatian Spirituality, for example has been called a spirituality of action, a synthesis of prayerfully laboring with Christ in seeking his kingdom come on earth. Abiding does not just entail abiding with Christ, but also abiding with each other. The vine is not merely a collection of individuals, it is a communion of many. It is a communal image. While historically the Church in the West has placed the focus on the individual branch bearing fruit, the image is actually one of a community of branches all bearing fruit together. It’s within the context of this vine and branch imagery that Jesus delivers the centerpiece of his message, the platinum

commandment, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

The entire metaphor builds to this climax of community. A community of fruitful disciples abiding together in Christ. What a sad interpretation it is that never gets to this communal dimension, it is within the metaphor of branches abiding in the vine together that Jesus says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13). Jesus is preparing the disciples to live in this type of community, a diverse singularity. Diverse in that it includes the community of disciples across all geography and history. Singular in that this community is connected by the one true vine. It is an image of ultimate togetherness.

This is a vine of many-colored branches. If the church represents all the disciples of Jesus across time and space, it represents the diversity of humanity that are all God’s children. Every person of every shade and hue of pigmentation is represented on this vine. We can see the fulfillment of this community in Revelation 7:9, where a great multitude representing all the diversity of humanity, “from every nation, tribe, people and language” is gathered in worship around Jesus.

As a vine of many-colored branches, a church that does not represent this diversity of branches, does not represent the community that Jesus envisions in John 15. The diversity and unity of a community doing life together is in itself an expression of the kingdom. Yet, the fruit of this community, if it is truly an extension of the life of Jesus, will include liberation of the poor and oppressed.

Jesus the Disinherited—A Racial Minority Messiah

As Howard Thurman so beautifully portrays in his seminal work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Jesus was part of a disinherited people with their “backs against the wall.”⁵⁰ Thurman shows that the Christian faith originated among a people that were poor, disinherited, and dispossessed. Jesus was a “member of a minority group in the midst of a larger dominant controlling group.”⁵¹ One aspect of Jesus’ minority status was in his being among what we consider today the “racial minority” in his culture.

We want to follow the lead of James Cone in stripping away the stereotypical portrayal in the West of Jesus as a white man. “*Jesus was not white* in any sense of the word, literally or theologically” writes Cone.⁵² This flies in the face of the images of a

⁵⁰ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 11.

⁵¹ Thurman, 14.

⁵² Cone, *Black Theology*, 123.

Caucasian Jesus of European descent on the walls of so many Sunday school rooms in America. Cone shows that this image of a white savior enabled Christianity to become an instrument of oppression. Cone writes, “If Jesus is white and not black, he is an oppressor, and we must kill him.”⁵³ Indeed, perhaps we must kill the image of a white Jesus, in order to really meet him.

We have no way to know what Jesus really looked like and the Bible is largely silent on the matter. Some have suggested that ancient skeletons in Palestine reveal that Judeans of the time were biologically closer to Iraqi Jews than to any other contemporary population. It’s safe to assume that in terms of physical appearance the average Judean of Jesus’ time would have likely had dark brown to black hair, olive skin, and brown eyes.⁵⁴ Sorry, to our white friends, but a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus is very unlikely.

When we admire the many Roman statues left to us by antiquity, we might assume that Romans were white people. We might be surprised to discover that the Roman empire was truly multi-ethnic. The ancient Romans (Latin: Rōmānī) were a cultural group, which can be understood as both an ethnicity and a nationality. From the 2nd century BC to the 5th century AD, they came to dominate the Near East, North Africa, and large parts of Europe. The Roman Republic evolved into the Roman Empire as they conquered more territories, becoming an amalgamation of many subjugated peoples spread across vast distances. People of every “race” (the term we would use today) identified as Roman citizens.

The Jewish people were one minority who lived under the subjugation of the Roman Empire. They were an oppressed people with little political or military power. They attempted unsuccessfully multiple times to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression with a sword. Those armed rebellions were quickly stamped out. In the time of Jesus’ ministry Rome was growing to its greatest extent as an empire.

Jesus was not part of the dominant or majority culture, but rather he belonged to a group of people who existed at the bottom of a social, political, and economic hierarchy. They were a religious minority, one of many religious groups among the conquered subjugates of Rome. Jews were and are an ethnoreligious group and nation who claimed ancestry originating from the Israelites. Their defining story was that of a once oppressed minority, enslaved in Egypt, who were liberated by an obscure God named YHWH (Deut 15:15). Jewish ethnicity, nationhood, and religion are deeply intertwined. Judaism is the ethnic religion of the Jewish people; thus, their

⁵³ Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. 20th anniversary ed (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1990), 110-111.

⁵⁴ Taylor, Joan E. *What Did Jesus Look Like?* (T & T Clark, 2018).

religious identity also has what we would consider today a racial or ethnic component.

In Jesus's time, to be a Hebrew was to be part of a tribal family that traced its ancestry back to Father Abraham. There was a strong in-group and out-group dynamic. A "gentile" meaning someone not of the genetic lineage of Abraham, would have to go through a ritual conversion process which included circumcision to become a Jew. Even then, there was a hierarchy within the community among those born Jews and those who were gentile converts. Certain aspects of the priesthood and leadership were reserved for those within the Jewish genetic pool, and even genetic groups (particular tribes) within that larger ethnic identity.

Jesus was in every way a faithful adherent to that group. He participated in the sacred rituals, rites, and pilgrimages, appropriate for a Jewish male. While there seems to be a missional thrust to the Abrahamic Promise of Genesis 12 that all nations "would be blessed" through Israel, it seems to have been being read in mostly an exclusive way by the religious leadership of Jesus' day.

A Snapshot of the Religious Landscape

To be a Hebrew then is not only to be an adherent of a particular religion, but it is also a religion primarily based in an ethnic identity. It appears that in Jesus' more heated exchanges with the religious leaders of his community, some adherents had taken on a posture of what we could call today racial superiority.

The three primary religious sects within Judaism in Jesus' day were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. The Essenes were a mystic group that flourished from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE. They lived in cities across the empire but some congregated in monastic communities dedicated to voluntary poverty and asceticism. We will restrict this conversation to the Pharisees and the Sadducees mentioned frequently in the New Testament.

The two dominant religious groups, Pharisees and Sadducees seemed to have certain ideas around how their ancestry (read genetic lineage) placed them in an elite and superior class.

The Sadducees were a socio-religious sect of Jewish people who were active in Judea during the Second Temple period, from the second century BCE through the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. The sect was associated with the upper social and economic classes of Judean society. They fulfilled various political, social, and

religious roles, which included overseeing the Temple and the religious system centered there. Sadducees recognized only the Written Torah (with Greek philosophy) and rejected doctrines such as the Oral Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, and the resurrection of the dead (Mark 12:18). They seemed to favor Hellenization, meaning to conform to Greek or Hellenistic culture.

Temple leadership was composed of the high priests, both Pharisees and Sadducees who often had membership in the Sanhedrin, a supreme court of 71 judges established under Moses. The Sanhedrin had obtained increasing political power during the time of Jesus.

The Pharisees were a Jewish social movement and a school of thought that had conflicts with the Sadducees. These conflicts had juridical-religious, social, and theological dimensions and were aggravated by Roman occupation. Pharisees recognized the Torah (written and oral), the Prophets, the Writings, and believed in the resurrection of the dead. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Pharisaic beliefs became the foundational, liturgical, and ritualistic basis for Rabbinic Judaism. The Sadducees went extinct.

The Pharisees functioned as the leaders of the local synagogues and seemed to be closer theologically and in practice to Jesus's own expression of his Hebrew faith. Both the synagogue and the Temple were an important aspect of Jewish faith in Jesus' day.

In temple-centered Judaism, the legitimating narrative was institutionalized in a stationary place, where the formative stories are reenacted by the professionalized priesthood. Zion serves as the throne of YHWH, the holy hill where God dwells (Ps. 135:21). The ritualistic center of the community was localized on this mountain. Faithful adherents to Judaism made the journey to Jerusalem for special feast days. The Sadducees oversaw temple functions.

Jesus seemed to challenge the air of superiority that accompanied the Temple system. His statement that the Temple would be destroyed and that "not one stone will be left here upon another" (Matt 24:2) would have been shocking to many Jews.

Alongside the Temple, were synagogues spread across the Roman Empire. Most scholars regard the synagogue as a postexilic development. The Babylonian captivity necessitated the emergence of the synagogue, a term synonymous with both a gathering of people and a place where they gathered. The synagogues were a more localized, contextual, religious center but did not replace the expectation of

pilgrimage to the temple. The New Testament gives us a window into how both temple and synagogue were functioning fully together.

The synagogues emerged contextually as communities formed and grew large enough to support the minimum requirements of a quorum of ten Jewish men. People typically made the temple pilgrimage one to three times each year for the three major feasts— Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks, and Feast of Booths—but they worshiped at the synagogue each Sabbath. Even under conditions of subjugation and diaspora, the innovation of the synagogue allowed the Israelite religion to thrive and multiply in an unprecedented way.

Julius Caesar first granted Judaism the status of a *religio licita* (permitted religion). Some scholars estimate a Jewish population of 7 to 8 million, or perhaps as much as 10 percent of the empire’s entire population.⁵⁵ The Pharisees cultivated and oversaw the synagogue as an institution of religious worship, outside and separate from the Temple. The synagogue was largely a Pharisaic institution. At minimum, the Pharisees raised the synagogue to high eminence and gave it a central place in Jewish religious life.

Traces of “Racial Superiority” in Ancient Judaism

Jesus had controversial encounters with both the temple priests and the synagogue leaders. His well noted temple tantrum in which he flipped over the tables of the money changers and accused them of turning it into “a den of robbers” (Matt 28:13) seems to be a social and theological critique of their activity. Immediately following the disruption, Matthew tells us, “The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them” (Matt 28:14). Jesus’ ministry with the disinherited draws the ire of both the “chief priests and the teachers of the law” who when they saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” became indignant (Matt 28:15).

Additionally, Jesus had several unpleasant encounters with the Pharisees often in the synagogues which resulted in his near execution, for example in Nazareth when he identifies himself with the messiah in Isaiah, they seek to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:16-31); when he challenged the Pharisee’s traditions about the Sabbath they begin to plot on how to execute him (Matthew 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 6:1–11); when Jesus placed Himself above the Pharisee’s level of authority (John 5:1–18); and perhaps most informative for this conversation when Jesus told the chief priests and

⁵⁵ Geoff rey Barraclough, ed., *The Times Atlas of World History* (Edinburgh: Collins Bartholomew, 1978), 102–3.

Pharisees that the kingdom of God would be taken from them and given to another “ἔθνος” (*ethnos*) a tribe, nation, or people group (Matthew 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19).

It seems the default response of these religious leaders in these heated encounters with Jesus was to default to their ethnic and religious superiority. This was not a new development in their faith tradition, clearly they were working from racist ideas embedded in the Old Testament itself. For example, permanent restrictions against certain racial groups:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall come into the assembly of the Lord even to the tenth generation. None of their descendants shall come into the assembly of the Lord forever, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Yet the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you.) You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live. (Deuteronomy 23:3-6)

Or the ironic development of how a group of liberated slaves would go onto to make a more graceful form of slavery acceptable for other groups:

If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the Jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall go out from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property. For they are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. You shall not rule over them with harshness but shall fear your God. *As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you and from their families who are with you who have been born in your land; they may be your property. You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness.* (Leviticus 25:39-46, italics ours)

Some of these racist passages were taken up by Christians to justify the Transatlantic Slave Trade. We can see that ideas of religious and racial superiority are embedded in the religious mindset, and Jesus was challenging these ideas and practices. For instance, a consistent defense of the religious leaders seemed to be that they could

claim superiority based on ancestry, “Abraham is our father” (Matt 3:9; John 8:39). A typical expression of this attitude is captured in The Book of Tobias (3rd or early 2nd century BCE), an apocryphal work (meaning noncanonical for Jews and Protestants) that found its way into the Roman Catholic canon through the Septuagint:

Beware, my son, of every kind of sexual immorality. First of all, marry a woman from among the descendants of your ancestors; do not marry a foreign woman, who is not of your father’s tribe, for we are the descendants of prophets and true-born sons of prophets. The first prophet was Abraham, then Isaac and Jacob, our ancestors of old. Remember, my son, that these all took wives from among their kindred. They were blessed in their children, and their posterity will inherit the land. (Tobit 4:12)

John the Baptist, who’s ministry was a forerunner of Jesus confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees in their superiority claims,

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. (Matt 3:7-9)

John is minimizing their claims of superiority based on ancestry, leveling the playing field, and focusing his message on the divine power of God, which can turn inanimate objects into ancestors. Jesus continues this idea throughout his ministry.

In John 8 when religious leaders pull the ethnic superiority card “Abraham is our father,” they go on to accuse Jesus of being a “Samaritan and demon-possessed” (John 8:48). Samaritans were a group they labeled as racially and religiously impure, and inferior, as we will explore in depth next. Jesus indicates that their claim might be valid, but it’s irrelevant, for they are in the presence of one who was before Abraham. They respond expediently by picking up stones to execute him (John 8:58-59).

Indeed, it seems the most revolutionary claim in the life and teaching of Jesus was that these religious ideas of superiority and exclusion were being turned upside down. This was an aspect of the kingdom he came to proclaim in which he was anointed to, “bring good news to the poor” ... “proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18). A

kingdom through which one must repent, rethink, turn around and move the other direction in order to enter (Mark 1:15).

This was a core component of the “good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10-11). This was the “mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints” (Col 1:26). It’s quite clear that one aspect of the mystery involves “to make known how great among the gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27).

So, when Jesus tells the religious leaders, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits” (Matt 21:43), he is indeed turning all their claims of superiority inside out, the gentiles, the *ethnos*, are being invited into the kingdom as equals beside you.

We want to be careful not to promote some form of anti-Semitism here, which is its own form of racism. Among all groups of people there are those who display both harmful and healing behaviors. As Rev Dr King has famously said, “There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.” It’s also notable that Pharisees and religious leaders were disciples of Jesus as well (John 19:39). But we cannot ignore a plain reading of the Scripture that highlights how some religious leaders of Jesus’ day were functioning from a position of what we identify today as ethno-religious or racial supremacy, and Jesus challenged this. Let’s turn now to some of the antiracist encounters.

Antiracist Encounters

Jesus seemed to have a bad habit of reaching beyond the in-group, healing, blessing, and even calling so-called “gentiles” to be his followers.

One such encounter took place with a Roman Centurion. This is not only someone outside the Hebrew community, but he is also literally a symbol of the oppressor over the community. We could think of Centurions as a kind of police force to keep the subjects in line with the Caesars’ will. They enforced tax collection and kept the Pax Romana (Latin for “Roman Peace”) at the tip of their weapons. If their subjects got out of line, they responded with violence. There are stories of “God fearing” centurions who actually helped the people and contributed to the building of the synagogue (Luke 7:5, Acts 10:1). But for the most part these were a despised people, seen as a vehicle of Roman subjugation.

So then, the story of Jesus encountering one of these centurions and healing his servant is quite remarkable (Matt 8:5-13). In the story the Centurion has heard of Jesus' ability to heal. His servant is sick and he asks Jesus to heal him, but believing himself to be an unworthy gentile person, he resists allowing Jesus to come to his home. Jesus does heal and then remarks on the Centurion's "mega" faith, commenting, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Matt 8:10). The encounter would be astonishing on its own, but then Jesus uses it as a teaching moment..

I tell you, many will come from east and west and will take their places at the banquet with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt 8:11-12)

Here is the reversal language which we could say has an "antiracist" flare. This person, outside the ethnoreligious in-group demonstrates faith not found inside of it. Thus, a surprising disruption of the dominating religious narrative: people who are children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be taken off the banquet guest list, while those who were not on your guest list will be invited.

Centurions were not allowed to be married. It's interesting that in Matthew's Gospel, the word used to describe the servant is *παῖς* (*país*) which could denote a male child, son, or servant. It is the root from which we derive words like *παιδεραστής* (*paiderastés*) and *paedophilia*. Luke's version of the same encounter starts using the more common term "*δοῦλος*" (*slave*) to narrate the story, adding the additional detail of "*ἔντιμος*" (*entimos*) meaning dear, precious or beloved (Luke 7:2). Luke then reports the Centurion using the term *παῖς* to describe his servant, rather than *δοῦλος* (Luke 7:7). This has led some scholars to suggest the Centurion was in a same sex relationship.⁵⁶

Sir Kenneth Dover's insightful study of Greek same sex attraction revealed that *παῖς* could mean a particular type of servant, "his master's male lover."⁵⁷ Pederasty, usually described a sexual relationship occurring between adult men and pubescent or adolescent boys. It was the most widespread and socially significant form of same-sex sexual relations in ancient Greece and was adapted by the Romans who saw it as an expression of male privilege and domination. It is not a forgone

⁵⁶ See, Helminiak, Daniel A (2012). *Sex and the Sacred: Gay Identity and Spiritual Growth*. Routledge. P, 192; or Saddington, D. B. (2006). "The Centurion in Matthew 8:5-13: Consideration of the Proposal of Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., and Tat-Siong Benny Liew." *Journal of Biblical Literature*. 125 (1): 140-142. doi:10.2307/27638351

⁵⁷ K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1978), 16.

conclusion that the servant was underage, and most Biblical scholars dismiss the possibility of a sexual relationship entirely. While the passage is left to multiple interpretations, it does add interesting possibilities. Nevertheless, the Centurion was not on the original kingdom banquet guest list.

Another encounter occurs with a Samaritan woman. Recall the religious leader's accusation that Jesus was himself a "Samaritan and demon-possessed" (John 8:48). Again, many Hebrews based their identity on the purity of their bloodlines. When we enter into Jesus' story we hear of the bitter racial rivalry between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans apparently interbred with their captors and built a new temple on Mt. Gerizim. As a result, they were considered half-breeds, racially and religiously impure.

Yet, Jesus "had to go through Samaria" a place many faithful Jews avoided at all costs (John 4:4). This is Jesus making an intentional decision to go into the neighborhood of his racial other. So, when Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman there at a well, he begins to break all kinds of social and racial customs (John 4:7-9). Initiating a conversation with her, inviting her to share a drinking instrument with him, which would make him unclean, and then ultimately sending her as a missionary to her community, were all quite controversial on many levels. Strikingly, the town responds favorably to the message, stretching the racial imagination of just how inclusive God's kingdom truly was (John 4:39-42).

We could continue on with other stories, like Jesus' missional excursion into the gentile region of Tyre where he healed a Syrophenician woman's child. The gentile woman persistently pressed Jesus, begging him "to cast the demon out of her daughter" (Mark 7: 26). Jesus responds in a seemingly harsh manner, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27). Meaning, Jesus was offering salvation first to the Hebrew people. But in her persistent humility she states, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28). Jesus heals her daughter, again challenging ethnoreligious, or what we would consider today racial hierarchies.

Suffice it to say Jesus was constantly breaking the social barriers and reaching out to people who were different, we see him constantly pushing the boundaries and expanding the concept of who was "neighbor" to Israel. Jesus reaches out to the cursed ones with withered limbs (Mark 3), the untouchable lepers (Luke 17:11-19). Jesus reaches out to sinners, tax-collectors (Luke 15), and sex workers (Luke 7:36-50, John 8:2-11). In fact, Jesus demonstrates that the scope of "neighbor" is massive in

scale, it includes people from every race, tribe, and nation (Revelation 7:9). Thus, we now turn to the parables of Jesus.

Antiracist Parables

The most controversial and explosively hopeful parable is what has become commonly known as the “Good Samaritan.” As mentioned above, Samaritans and Hebrews were locked in a bitter racial hatred for one another. In the context of an expert in the law asking Jesus a question he most certainly thought he already knew the answer to, Jesus responds with a story.

The legal expert asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life? Jesus responds with, “you know the law what does it say?” (author’s version). He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:25-37).

Jesus says, “bingo, you nailed it, now go and do that and you will have eternal life (author’s version). But the expert is not satisfied, he wants to justify himself, so he asked Jesus another deeper question, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29).

Jesus tells the story of a person who is mugged and left for dead on the road to Jericho. This was a path notoriously known to be dangerous with bandits and brigands. A priest, most likely heading back from his responsibilities at the Temple, passes by the wounded man. A Levite, someone from the priestly tribe but potentially a layman also passes by. The Samaritan, the character who would be the “bad guy” in the story becomes the anti-hero. He stops to care for the man. Bandages his wounds. Transports him to an innkeeper, and fully funds his healing. The innkeeper nurses the man back to health at the Samaritans direction.

Jesus asks the scribe “who was a neighbor to the man?” The expert in the law apparently unable to use the term Samaritan says, “The one who had mercy on him” (Luke 10:37). The racially and religiously impure Samaritan, that’s right. Jesus says, “go and do likewise.”

One could imagine Jesus telling a story about a good rapist, a good drug addict, or a good war criminal. The story would be shocking to the sensibilities of most Jews. But a more important reading of the story involves how Jesus challenges the

accepted racial hierarchy. Think of a story of a good white supremacist told to a black person, or a good black supremacist if you were a white person.

While it's true that a key lesson in the story is that an embodied faith seeks to do justice and altruistically seek the healing of our neighbors. Some might say "actions speak louder than words" or "religious observance that ignores the love of neighbor is useless" is the key point here. Yes, but the characters that Jesus chooses to use in the story are antiracist in the sense that they challenge the accepted racist ideas, actions, and policies that kept Hebrews and Samaritans in conflict.

Many of the parables of Jesus have a similar theme. Some are aimed at the surprising nature of the kingdom. Those who think they own the inherited land and can do with it what they will, find themselves cast out (Matt 21:33-46). The kingdom is like a great banquet where the people on the guest list reject the invitation, so anybody and everybody gets invited in (Luke 14:15-24). A reckless sower casts good seed everywhere, an act of sower malpractice, but it demonstrates the profuse nature of God's love for all (Matt 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 8:4-15).

These parables have embedded within them surprising challenges to the social, economic, religious, and racial structures of Jesus' day.

Antiracist Formation of Disciples

While space only allows for a brief treatment of the antiracist practices and parables of Jesus, it gives us a snapshot for seeing Jesus' life and ministry in the light of his commitment to healing racialization and all other types of stereotyping, prejudice, and superiority complexes.

A final point to make is how Jesus was forming his disciples in these ideas and practices. Jesus was discipling the racism out of them. While at times they seemed to demonstrate profound growth and acceptance, we can see that this was a lifelong journey.

For example, Peter, seemed to have reverted back to an exclusivist and in some sense racist understanding of the life and teaching of Jesus (Acts 10). Paul had conflicts with Peter about this (Gal 2:11-21). But ultimately Peter's eyes are fully opened in his experience with Cornelius, a gentile convert who the Spirit instructs Peter to baptize (Acts 10:34-35). In this scenario, the Spirit speaks the voice of Jesus perhaps with the clearest summary of his teaching in regard to healing the

racialization of their culture... “The Spirit told me to go with them, and to make no distinction between them and us” (Acts 11:12).

Perhaps reading that statement back through the actions and teachings of Jesus, we can discover this is a central aspect of his ministry. Jesus was a healer of the racialization of his society, and he formed disciples that were as well. His disciples continued his activity of liberation. As Cone notes, “Jesus is the Oppressed One whose work is that of liberating humanity from inhumanity. Through him the oppressed are set free to be who they are.”⁵⁸ The church is the vine of many-colored branches, where this activity of Jesus continues today.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

⁵⁸ Cone, *Black Theology*, 177.

Chapter 4

“Excavating the Soil”

I (Stephanie) grew up on the east coast of North Carolina, Morehead City, and was taught at a very young age how to use a rod and reel to catch some of the favorite local fish: Spots, Blue Fish, Croaker, Black Sea Bass, Hog Fish, Red Drum, Puppy Drum, and Founder. It was important in my family that everyone understood how to catch crabs using a nail, string, a fish head, and a little boat, and as an East Coast girl, I know how to dig and gather clams for dinner. All these things were taught to me by my Mother, Alva Lee.

Morehead City is surrounded by water on three sides of the land mass. Some of these delicious substantive seafood gatherings occurred in the inlet area of the Atlantic Ocean. My family and I grew up on the inlet side of the city. Instead of sand, we had mud. Growing up, we were consistently told not to fish in the inlet in our community. My grandparents were told the sewage plant from the city was dumping sewage in the waterways of our communities. Therefore, the mud and water were toxic, and the fish, crabs, and clams were unclean and not healthy for human consumption. The community I grew up in was African American, on the left side of the tracks.

During my teenage years, the contaminated water and mud narrative shifted in my community. The mud was no longer toxic. The ocean was cleansed, and the seafood was cleared to eat again.

Why does this story matter? Some pyramids are made of mud brick and clay. In Egypt, Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people to no longer give the people straw to make bricks, but required the same quantity of bricks as before (Exo 5:6-8). Mud describes the material our social hierarchies are built from. It matters because if we do not understand what's lurking in the mud or the dirt, it is challenging to understand clearly the toxic symptoms of sin that surface in our everyday lives. As Christians, it is important to see through a spiritual lens, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to identify what is the toxicity in the mud. This enables us to get at the root of the symptoms, our sin nature, and turn back to God. According to Holy writ, sin is tangential to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Oftentimes we unintentionally and maybe sometimes intentionally gloss over dysfunctional behaviors because, after all, we are the church. Then instead of getting to the root of

the problem we gloss over the symptoms, rush to address the surface “technical” problems, potentially never getting to the root of the real problem.

Ronald A. Heifetz, professor at Harvard Kennedy School, and author of *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, identifies two types of change: Adaptive and Technical. Every Day, people have problems for which they do, in fact have the necessary know-how, tools, network and procedures that can bring tangible resolve. We call these technical problems.

The problem or defining the problem of the crisis is very clear and can be fixed relatively quickly. The leader or resident expert simply provides the solutions to the problems. For example, if a child is running, they trip and fall and scrape their knee, the problem before you, a child, a scraped knee that has some blood oozing out. How does one solve this problem? Comfort the child, assess the situation, then what? It just might end with a band-aid with some type of superhero or princess image. Mom, Dad, Poppa, Gigi, auntie, etc. are the household expert for scrapes and bruises. The solution to resolve the problem happens to be in the household cabinets, and after a few days, the band aid falls off, and the child has forgotten about the fall because they are skipping and running again. Problem solved.

But there are a host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. There are systemic problems that affect the foundation of organizations, families or people's day lives that cannot be resolved by a mere bandaid. These systemic problems need new information, for new outcomes, as church folks these problems require answers and direction from God through the power of the Holy Spirit. If we are honest our everyday life should be seeking the power of the Holy Spirit and obedience. These are called adaptive challenges. This requires new experiments, new discoveries, new information that will require adjustment in organizations, communities and individuals.

Psalm 20:6-9 (NIV) says...

May the Lord grant all your requests.

Now this I know:

The Lord gives victory to his anointed.

He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary

with the victorious power of his right hand.

Some trust in chariots and some in horses,

but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

They are brought to their knees and fall,

but we rise up and stand firm.

Lord, give victory to the king!

Answer us when we call!

Trust the Process

Yes, there are technical challenges with the church that simply require the energy of resolving these challenges with the things we already are familiar with and have some expertise doing. But the work of inclusion, equity and justice is adaptive work. It's a change of heart, a shift in how we used to do things, new discoveries about our thoughts, our heart and how we really see the world, our communities, and the people that may not worship with us.

It is time to excavate the root of the matter and deal with the adaptive challenge. How do we revisit our history with a spiritual lens? American history, your state history, your conference history, your church history, your family history, your history. What will you discover with a spiritual lens? We encourage you to get a notebook, journal or a computer and write out your discoveries.

What biases may be present? Bias is an inclination of preference that influences judgment from being balanced, and fair. The reality of the matter is we all have biases. If we do not recognize this fact, this potential toxic inclination will affect our decision making, how we lead or how we view people.

For example, according to the Barna Report:

while women represent just 5% of all Protestant Senior Pastors, Female pastors are much more likely to be seminary-trained (86% have a seminary degree, compared to 60% of male pastors, have less experience in the pastorate (9 years in full-time paid ministry, compared to a median of 17 years among men); last less time in a given church than do men (three years per pastorate, compared to almost six years among men); are almost four times more likely to describe themselves as theologically liberal (39% vs. 11%, respectively); much less likely to embrace the

label of “evangelical” (58%, vs. 85% among male pastors); and receive much lower compensation packages.⁵⁹

In 2017, women were 57 percent of Unitarian Universalist ordained clergy and congregational pastors, and half of United Church of Christ clergy and 38 percent of pastors, according to the report. In Episcopal churches, women made up 37 percent of ordained clergy and 33 percent of pastors, nearly identical to the percentages for Evangelical Lutherans. They were followed by the United Methodist Church, in which 29 percent of clergy and 27 percent of pastors are women, the report said, and Presbyterians, at 29 percent and 25 percent, respectively.⁶⁰

3% of evangelical congregations and 30% of mainline congregations have a female senior pastor. 13.5% of U.S congregations in 2018-2019 had a female as the head or senior clergy person.

In the years prior to the Civil War, some racial integration in Christian churches occurred, but mainly as a way for white leaders to control the actions and religious life of Black people. As Charles F. Irons wrote in *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, “Sunday morning only became the most segregated time of the week after the Civil War. Before emancipation, black and white evangelicals typically prayed, sang, and worshiped together.”⁶¹

We must ask ourselves, what's in the dirt, and WHY? It is important to discover and remember what's under our foundations. How do we resolve the concern, even as “Christians” worshipping God, Jesus Christ and believing in the advocate, the Holy Spirit, together under the same roof, black and white people? However black people were treated differently, as second-class citizens in the church, the church that was formed to Follow Jesus, Make Disciples and Transform the World. Yes, there were folk and if we are honest there are Christians even now, who attend worship on Sunday mornings, between eight o'clock and noon, Saturday evening week in and week out, and potentially forget or do not understand the essence to love their neighbors as themselves, therefore miss the mark to love God.

According to the article “Ecclesiastical Color Line,” by Jamar Tisby, “Anglican leaders excised portions and even entire books of the Bible to form an edited “Slave Bible” that emphasized obedience to earthly masters and hard work—messages

⁵⁹A Profile of Protestant Pastors in Anticipation of "Pastor Appreciation Month"
Research Releasing Leaders & Pastors•September 25, 2001
<https://www.barna.com/research/a-profile-of-protestant-pastors-in-anticipation-of-pastor-appreciation-month/>

⁶⁰ Ibid.
⁶¹ Andy Rowell, Church Leadership Conversation; Some statistics on women in church ministry
https://andyrowell.net/andy_rowell/2022/02/some-statistics-on-women-in-church-ministry.html

befitting the moral uplift and diligence of people who were considered property and enslaved for life.” Yes, there was such a thing as a “Slave Bible.” Why was there a need for a “Slave Bible?”⁶²

Remember the purpose of this question is to hold a mirror up to our faces, metaphorically or in real time, being honest with ourselves, asking God, why was there a need for a “Slave Bible? How did we get to the polarization in our present-day society and the church? - What’s in the dirt?

In your journal write down this question, “What is God calling me to do in this season, to become a part of the solutions that lead people to Christ?”

According to Tisby’s article, African Americans were never content with the inferior position and relegated to the balcony or back of Methodist churches in America, “after the Civil War Black Christians quickly mobilized their own fellowships and denominations. As soon as they could feasibly extricate themselves from predominantly white congregations, they did so with speed and creativity. Several historically Black denominations still in operation today trace their origins to the years following emancipation including the, African Methodist Episcopal Church (1816), African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (1820), Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (1870), the National Baptist Convention (1895), and the Church of God in Christ (1907).⁶³

Tisby says, “Yet there was always a contingent of Christians who were open to racial integration in churches and made attempts to form interracial worship spaces. In 1906, William Seymour, a Black preacher and evangelist, led a religious revival that witnesses said included speaking in tongues, and miraculous healings. At first, these meetings, which lasted for months, included people of various races. One attendee reflected, “Blacks, whites, Chinese, and even Jews attended side by side to hear Seymour preach.” Despite these interracial beginnings, however, Pentecostals would eventually split along racial lines.⁶⁴

We must ask the question WHY? Remember to be totally honest with yourself, so no judgment zone, realizing God already knows. What historical unhealthy structures of leadership might exist in your church, or organization that have elements of suppression, implicit and explicit bias, treating another human being as less than,

⁶² Jamar Tisby, Crossing the Ecclesiastical Color Line: Black Churchgoers in Multiracial Congregations <https://www.aaihs.org/crossing-the-ecclesiastical-color-line-black-churchgoers-in-multiracial-congregations/> February 14, 2022

⁶³ Jamar Tisby, Crossing the Ecclesiastical Color Line: Black Churchgoers in Multiracial Congregations <https://www.aaihs.org/crossing-the-ecclesiastical-color-line-black-churchgoers-in-multiracial-congregations/> February 14, 2022

⁶⁴ Ibid.

inequity of income allocation etc.

Meditate on Romans 5:20 CEB

“The Law stepped in to amplify the failure, but where sin increased, grace multiplied even more. The result is that grace will rule through God’s righteousness, leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Read this aloud three times, then write in your journey what is the Holy Spirit saying to you pertaining to this scripture? Is the suppression of one group of ethnic, social economic, ability-disability, gender, etc., sin? How are we called to actively evaluate ourselves daily to ensure with our individual power, yes we all have power, and privilege in our leadership role ask, are we missing from the mark? Are our systems and processes equitable across our organizations? If we hesitate, answer no, or I don't really know, it's time to discover and unearth what's in the dirt of our foundations and through prayer and fasting how do we address, root of the problems in the dirt. What is our sin, your sin?

Paul reminds us sin is real, and actively points us to a real adaptive challenge. One that births division, and pushes us away from being God's church, “imitators of Christ,” Christ like Christians. It is essential to excavate the mud and dirt, examine and discover the sin that pushes us off the straight and narrow path, sin aids us to miss the mark, right beneath the foundations of our lives.

This lack of understanding of what’s in the dirt, the invisible pyramid, that our social structures are built from, makes the foundations unsteady therefore we find cracks in the floors and walls. If not resolved over time these cracks make the building unsteady and unsafe to dwell, because the foundation has a crack in it. Therefore it makes it difficult for us to illuminate the things that pull us away from God. There is a danger in having toxic thoughts and actions in us and as the body of Christ in God’s church. Toxic behaviors make us lose sight of what is required of us as disciples.

Micah 6:8 (NIV) reminds us as Christ believers and followers, *To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.*

Matthew 16:17-18 (NIV) speaks to the fact that the Gates of Hades will not prevail against the church. We win! So, we must spend time excavating the dirt-mud.

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Psalm 32:5

I acknowledged my sin to You,
And my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”;
And You forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah.*

When we do not resolve these lingering crisis issues, we maintain division that pushes us away from “imitators of Christ” Christians, disciples, apostles, the church. It is essential to excavate the mud and dirt, examine and discover the sin that pulls us off the straight and narrow path, missing the trail markers that are right in front of us, that lead us towards a beloved community, that just might transform the church, communities, America, the world.

Over the next four weeks we invite you to do a prayer walk around your building and where people gather in community outside the walls of the church. What do you observe? Who’s around the leadership table in the church? What’s the gender makeup? Who has been the lead pastors of the church, since the church launched? How many Men? Women? White Folks? Black Folks? Brown Folks are engaged with the church? Who are the founders, charter members of your church? What is the culture, in your opinion, of the church you attend? Who lives around your church? Remember, in order to understand what’s in the dirt, it is important to look, listen and write what you experience.

Remember Isaiah 44:22 ESV translation says, “I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.”

This beautiful, loving scripture, spoken to Jacob and the redemption of Israel, simply reminds us that God has already redeemed us. This scripture text potentially points us to the reality this redemption access was and is given to us all, through the power of Jesus’ resurrection. However, this precious gift of redemption of our transgression and salvation requires action from us, “return to me, for I have redeemed you.”

Understanding what's in the dirt, will guide the church to discover what needs to be unearthed, and what needs to be nurtured for healthy growth. The church (the people of God) must continue to self-examine in order to resolve oppressive systems, in order to illuminate the hope and love of Christ to the world, through the tragedies and beauty of life.

When we continuously use words like, "It just takes time," we might consider holding a mirror up to our own faces, and ask ourselves why does "it take more time?" It has been over 400 years, yes, so progress has been made, and we celebrate it. Our present-day people are still saying yes to Christ's salvation, transformation of communities is still occurring while at the same time the reality of the matter is we have church buildings closing, property being sold, new apartment buildings and condos in place of the church, with shrinking presence of the church within miles. There is a dramatic change in our landscape and after a while there is a danger no one will even remember a church that used to be in the neighborhood. So how do we as Christians illuminate what in our communities that pulls us away from God?

We are often drawn back to the prolific spiritual leader and founder of Methodism, John Wesley, as we excavate the soil of where we come from as Methodists, the state of the church in 2023 who we are now and what God is calling us to become.

In August 1736, John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, commented in his Journal that he was "glad to see several Negroes at church" in Charlestown, South Carolina. Wesley's first note of condemnation appears when he shows that slavery first originated in "barbarous" times and died out with the rise of Christianity in Europe.⁶⁵

Some Methodists affirmed the need for slavery because of the discovery of the new territory, America—(although as we noted earlier America had already been discovered and was inhabited by Native Americans)—and therefore, they needed large amounts of free slave labor to navigate the harsh conditions. This great sin of America, the rationale for slavery, became a prevalently affirmed thought process on American soil.⁶⁶

Wesley refutes this notion that justified slavery when people stated slavery in America

⁶⁵ Nehemiah Curnock, *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., Bicentenary Issue*, 8 vols. ed. (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), i, 244n, accessed December 25, 2017.

⁶⁶ Joseph Cruikshank, "Thoughts on Upon Slavery." In *John Wesley, 1703-1791*, accessed December 25, 2017. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/wesley/summary.html>

was a good thing because its purpose was to rescue Africans from the harshest of conditions of their homeland. Wesley quoted several authorities with opposing opinions, attesting to the great fertility of West African countries. He also pointed out that African nations were highly organized and cultured, using examples from several major tribes and nations to prove his point. Given this evidence, Wesley could not support the notion that slavery represented an improvement to the Africans' health and well-being.⁶⁷

Wesley points to the condemnation of slavery, by discussing how African slaves were unwillingly brought to America and stripped from their homeland. The details were damning to Americans who supported the egregious acts. Wesley recounted numerous instances of fraud, rape, and violent abuse by Anglos to these African slaves, in which the slave-owners attempted to justify these acts and the reason to own slaves for the greater good of American stability. He then describes the travesties of middle passage in some detail, as an attempt to condemn the practice of slavery as barbaric and cruel. He describes the inhumane treatment of slaves in the West Indies and other slave states (including the southern United States), providing considerable detail as to modes of punishment and the laws that allowed this harsh punishment without limits to the cruelty.⁶⁸

Irv Brendlinger's article on "John Wesley and Slavery: Myth and Reality," states, "Slavery is one of the greatest atrocities of civilization and holds the reign as the singular greatest social injustice in all of human history."⁶⁹

"When we think of the human atrocities in the world, our minds immediately go to the Holocaust, with its six to seven million Jewish victims plus others that have received less notice, like gypsies. World history also draws us to think of the ethnic cleansing, figures approaching 1.4 million victims. The question that is before us is, how did American enslavement of African people compare? Not only is slavery directly responsible for over 20 million deaths of Africans (to say nothing of the generation of the of those who "survived" these atrocities), but what about the after-effects, of the families enslaved, generation after generation is difficult to calculate (or grasp) either in numbers, or lasting influence."⁷⁰

Again, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King said in a 1960 "Meet the Press" interview, "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Brendlinger, Irv. "John Wesley and Slavery: Myth and Reality" (2006) Faculty Publications – George Fox School of Theology. Brendlinger states, "Slavery is one of the greatest atrocities of civilization, and holds the reign as the singular greatest social injustice in all of human history."

⁷⁰ Ibid.

o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours in Christian America.⁷¹

It is important to reflect, not judge, not say get over it, but to reflect on how this atrocity of “yesteryears”, unresolved consequences possibly affects our present day realities. Ask yourselves the question the next time you are in worship, 1. Who am I worshipping with today? 2. What are the age of the people worshipping with me today? 3. What ethnic groups are worshipping together today? 4. What are your personal reflections pertaining to your observation in worship, small groups etc. of church engagement compared to what scripture, John Wesley and Rev. Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. say about being Christians who are followers, imitators of Jesus Christ? How are we doing? 5. What's one step you are willing to take to improve?

⁷¹ The Most Segregated Hour in America - Martin Luther King Jr., Youtube clip, https://youtu.be/1q881g1L_d8

Chapter 5

Cultivating the New Creation in Your Parish

“I looked again. I saw a huge crowd, too huge to count. Everyone was there—all nations and tribes, all races and languages. And they were standing, dressed in white robes and waving palm branches, standing before the Throne and the Lamb and heartily singing: Salvation to our God on his Throne! Salvation to the Lamb!”

Revelation 7:9-12-9-12 (The Message)

During the discernment and exploratory phase of my (Stephanie’s) doctoral writings in the fall of 2017, I really struggled to narrow down, what exactly did I sense God calling me to write about in this season of life. I wanted to create something that could be transformative to the people of God. People who claim Jesus’ Lordship over our lives, who believe that God loved us so much that God’s self reached inside of God’s self and created Jesus in a virgin’s womb to come and save a broken people, and a broken world.

I personally was seeking something that wasn’t in the numerous books about the church of that season, but seeking the essence of what scripture says about the present day in Isaiah 43:19 NIV, when he says,

See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

Or in Matthew 16:18 CEV when Jesus speaks to Peter,

“So I will call you Peter, which means “a rock.”
On this rock I will build my church, and
death itself will not have any power over it.”

What kind of Church, what kind of people who declare we are followers, disciples, apostolic leaders of Jesus the Christ. Do we realize the power we have with the advocacy of the Holy Spirit?

What is amazing to me about this text is that Jesus renames Simon Peter, whose first name was Simon and middle name Peter, and begins calling him by his middle name Peter. Jesus made what was secondary in Peter, flipped it and made what his family called him secondary. Simon, flipped the script and called him Peter, according to Matthew this stood for “the rock.”

I can imagine Jesus, when we hear this story preached or read from our paper bibles or mobile iPhone bibles, we too, possibly sense the boldness of Jesus, as he began calling Simon Peter, simply Peter. There is something powerful about our names. Scripture reminds us there is something about the name Jesus, because James 2:9 CEB says,

“You believe that God is one; you do well [to believe that].
The demons also believe [that], and shudder and bristle
[in awe-filled terror—they have seen His wrath]!”

The reversal of his name, Simon he knew well, but was he living to fullness of who he really was, a creation of the Most High God. The name Peter, deriving from the Greek to mean rock. Simon by any stretch of the imagination was far from being a rock. Possibly better described as the rock crusher. So might describe him to be very emotional, impulsive, and extreme. Remember when Jesus was surrounded by his disciples, teaching them the essence of what being a disciple in a practical sense was all about, foot washing. Jesus was preparing to wash Peter’s feet, but Simon Peter refused to allow Jesus, his spiritual mentor, his Lord, his teacher, to stoop as if a servant, to wash his dirty, crusty feet. In John 13: 6-9 NIV it reads,

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

“No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

“Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”

The Rock, Peter was so extra, all the time! Scolding Peter gently, Jesus said. "If I don't wash your feet, you have no share with me. Those who have had a bath need

only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.”

Why did Peter feel the need for a full body bath? Just so extra! Or another time in scripture in Luke 22:45-54.

Judas, one of the Disciples of Jesus, who betrayed Jesus to the Sanhedrin who came to arrest Jesus. John 18:10 NIV states,

“Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear.” Peter drew his sword and cut off one of the guy’s ear [clearly we did not see that coming].”

But then Jesus is arrested, and the boldness of “The Rock.” Peter avoided being arrested himself, as he made a decision to deny knowing Jesus-not once, but three times, as Jesus said he would.

After denying Jesus, Simon Peter, began living into becoming Peter: a rock, a powerful preacher, a healer of the sick and lame. Peter is believed by some to be the author of two New Testament letters. He became fearless, an inspiration of the challenges he faced, and did not falter even in the face of death.

Following Jesus is not popular, not easy and requires a deep passion and unwavering belief to be in a deep relationship with Jesus Christ, with the assistance and lead of the Holy Spirit. Yes, we must have a personal relationship with Jesus, and because of this personal relationship we are also called to do the “work of Jesus” leading people, shepherding people, towards their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, salvation. To “follow” someone requires keeping in close proximity to the leader. Peter and the disciples remained in close proximity and relationship with Jesus. Peter became committed to teaching, healing, and shepherding people into the conversion of new followers, at whatever the cost.

Peter understood his assignment therefore he was able to focus on sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ which started a movement and began transforming communities. The reality of following Jesus Christ, often time means, we shift in leading and doing things we had no idea we could do, way out of our comfort zones. There becomes a shift from the way we have always done it, to doing the new way God directs us to lead in the New Season.

How is God shifting you and your faith communities' focus? What are some ministries you used to do pre-COVID but now in this New Normal, you are noticing new ministry opportunities, How will you respond?

Can you imagine the disciples when Jesus came after the resurrection and gave them this “new blueprint”, on where to spread the gospel, and how to do it. Jesus said in Matthew 28:19, which can be challenging for us modern day Christendom folks, just as I can imagine it was for the apostles during Peter’s time. The disciples, apostolic leaders, us-we are commissioned to leave our church buildings, our families and familiar neighbors and neighborhoods to go and tell it, go preach, go teach about Jesus to all neighborhoods, and all nations.

Yes, even the unfamiliar people, who look different, speak different, socially economically different, think differently, act differently than you and your people. Remember Peter preached the Gospel, early in his ministry only to Jews, Samaritans (folk with Jewish blood), and Jewish proselytes. Homogeneous ethnic groups, you know familiar folks. But Jesus changed the trajectory of ministry moving forward until his return.

We must ask ourselves, are we stuck in our religious traditionalism and beliefs? It's time to reevaluate, self-examine, discern present realities and ask, why are our United Methodist Churches 98% Anglo, even when in some the general populations of America, like Charlotte, NC, racial/ethnic groups are White (40.2%) followed by Black (34.7%) and Hispanic (14.9%) according to the North Carolina Demographics Study 2021?⁷²

Peter and the crew accepted the new Gentile converts (members) of the new church of Christians, but with conditions. The new converts had to conform to the Jewish law as proselytes by being circumcised, whether they were grown men or boys or babies, and they had to keep the Law of Moses. Act 15:1 NIV

“Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

⁷²North Carolina Demographics 2021 [https://www.northcarolina-demographics.com/charlotte-demographics#:~:text=Race%20%26%20Ethnicity,%25\)%20and%20Hispanic%20\(14.9%25\).](https://www.northcarolina-demographics.com/charlotte-demographics#:~:text=Race%20%26%20Ethnicity,%25)%20and%20Hispanic%20(14.9%25).)

But God, the God of all creation, had a different plan for creation, a brighter future that was inclusive for the future of God's people. Peter caught wind of the new paradigm reality in Act 10:9-16 which says,

“About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. 13 Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

This dream showed God's new assignment for God's followers, in the new season. God was re-directing the apostles to be more concerned about the heart of the people and not the rules. Laws and practices of the Jewish traditions.

As a Vitality Strategist for the Metro District of the Western North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, I (Stephanie) am charged with assisting the 118 local churches of the Metro District to discern, rethink, vision, and connect to what God is already doing in their local communities, to determine their next faithful steps to re-mission, create strategic partnerships, engage, build relationships with their neighbors, and develop strategic processes for economic development and planting new diverse faith communities.

Mark DeYmaz, in his book *Disruption*, asserts because of the systemic segregation of local churches today and in the eyes of an increasingly polarized, diverse and cynical society, the vast majority of pastors in the United States have virtually no credibility when attempting to resolve the most pressing concerns of our time: racism, classism, and culturalism.⁷³

Look yourself in the mirror, yes find a mirror and look at yourself, asking the question what is hindering you from focusing on the things that break God's heart and God is calling you too. Acts 1:8 AMP reminds us,

⁷³ Mark DeYmaz, *Disruption: Repurposing the Church to Redeem the Community* (Thomas Nelson, 2017) xxvix.

“But you will receive power and ability when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be My witnesses [to tell people about Me] both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.”

Scripture says we will receive the power from the Holy Spirit, then we will have what we need to GO! So what’s holding you back? I have heard stories from clergy who I have coached and done consulting work with say to me they would teach and preach on the pressing issues of this present age, but they are afraid of upsetting those who faithfully pay their tithes and offerings. Charles Arn says in DeYmaz’s book *Disruption*, “The longer a church exists, the more concerned the clergy, leaders, and members become with self-service, and less concerned with the church’s original mission and reason for being the church.”⁷⁴

I reiterate this is not easy work, but necessary kingdom work. Gone are the days of “Lone Ranger Leaders.” Lone Rangers are persons who act alone and without consultation or the approval of others, broadly: loner.⁷⁵

Our current culture thrives on collaborative leadership in our local faith communities. Places where a collaborative group of folks come together bringing their specific gifts to the table of conversations, to determine God's vision now. God really does speak to a diverse group, not just those who are ordained and called pastor, clergy, apostle, bishop. You remember Numbers 22:23-35 ASV:

“The angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick. And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?” Then Balaam said to the donkey, “Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now.” The donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?” And he said, “No.”

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. The angel of the LORD said to him, “Why have you

⁷⁴ Ibid., pg 12

⁷⁵ Merriam Webster Dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lone%20ranger>

struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live.” Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I have sinned.”

Yes, God will even use a donkey to do God's work in the earth. Animals recognize the King of Glory and are obedient. What is God saying to you, and your church to do in this season? How will you be obedient to God's call to move the Kingdom of God forward to cultivate the new creation.

In 2018 as I (Stephanie) worked with a predominantly Anglo congregation, the leadership did a deep dive canvassing, discovering new demographic data of the community, they realized there was a diversity shift in their surrounding neighborhood. They discovered sixty percent of those who engaged in the church on a regular basis drive over five miles to attend the homogeneous church. Therefore they were faced with a decision, to reach and engage the ethnic, culturally and economically diverse mission field of their changing communities, do nothing and slowly no longer exist at that address, or abandon the ship and start over in a new location with people they were familiar, culturally, ethnically and socioeconomically.

Unfortunately, the Anglo members decided to leave the community to go and start another homogenous United Methodist church on the other side of town. Why did the established members leave the church when the community around them changed? Why weren't these Anglo United Methodists willing to engage with their African American neighbors and welcome all in the community and in the church? What was so difficult to “cast the nets to the other side of the boat?”

There is a sense of urgency before the church, all Christians. The urgency is not about survival of a denomination or a church, but the urgency is to become a relevant witness in the spaces and places of darkness, hopelessness, brokenness, where people don't know Jesus, who need affordable housing, food and clothes in a world that sometimes feels alone. We believe the earth is groaning for the people of God to be a credible witness in a racially-tense, unjust, broken moral-compassed society. In the midst of our social justice crises, society is presently looking to the government, to business leaders to solve the problems to save us. The reality of the matter is the church is the Hope of the world.

It is time for us rise up out of our sleep, connect to the giant within us, to be on the front lines in collaboration with civic, government, business, and other faith

communities to discern solutions to create beloved communities. We must strive for a beloved community, so all of God's children, all ethnic groups, social economic groups, zip code groups etc., have access to a seat at the table of opportunity, equality, and salvation.

The United Methodist history reports, in the early days of Methodism in America, we were a diverse community where blacks and whites worshiped together, where the Methodist church spoke out against slavery and equity concerns in America. John 17:20-23, says,

“I am not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one.”

This prayer speaks to all generations, the Jews and the Gentiles, even the present age generations of 2023, all ethnic, social economics, and status in life groups, because Christ desires unity for the children of the Most High God. Christ desires us to be one, seeking equity and justice for all. We believe we are at the greatest moment in history to re-mission Christianity, to increase our impact in this present age, being change agents.

Gods Vitality–In Sync (The Tribe)

Dwight Zscheile in his article “The Trinity, Leadership, and Power Diversity-in-Unity”³⁰ writes Christianity is:

“Rare among the world’s religions in understanding holiness not as homogeneous, or uniform, but rather the yoking of heterogeneous, diverse members into a single body. The life of genuine mutuality of the three persons of the Trinity invites us to affirm the full humanity and giftedness of others around us as God-given and vital not only for the world's well-being and growth but for ours too. In a Trinitarian perspective, otherness is not to be erased, diminished or overwhelmed, but rather treasured and enhanced within the pattern of a larger unity and purpose. Thus reconciled diversity, not uniformity or division, becomes normative for a Trinitarian understanding of human community.”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Dwight Zscheile, “The Trinity, Leadership, and Power,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2007) 53, accessed August 23, 2017. <http://arl-jrl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Zscheile-The-Trinity-Leadership-and-Power-2007-Fall.pdf>.

The church must struggle with these questions, asking should the church shift after internal examination from a homogenous faith community when the surrounding neighborhoods, schools, shopping and entertainment areas are diverse? If the answer is yes, then the work begins to get back in sync with the communities, the “Third Places,” that surround the church?

If you are United Methodist, other denomination or non-denominational, those of us who believe Christ is the head of our lives, we must ask ourselves the question, for example, why we, The United Methodist Churches in Western North Carolina, ninety-seven per cent homogenous Anglo churches? Do the demographic work for your faith community to see where you fall.

Furthermore, in the largest district out of the eight districts, the Metro District has a church population of approximately ninety-two percent Anglo churches? While on the other hand, the census reports the population demographics of the ninety-two per cent Anglo churches, according to MissionInsite, the general population demographics, shows that fifty-nine per cent of the population is Anglo, while forty-one per cent of the population are ethnic minorities—African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, African and Native Americans Indian.⁷⁷

In John 21:5-7 DARBY the scripture says,

“And he said to them, Cast the net at the right side of the ship and you will find. They cast therefore, and they could no longer draw it, from the multitude of fishes.”

We must ask ourselves the questions, are we acknowledging our theological purpose, to be the sign of the reign of God, by living fully into our Baptismal Covenant?

“Do you (we) confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
“Do you (we) put your (our) whole trust in his grace, and
Do you (we) promise to
serve Him as your Lord, in union with the church, which
Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?⁷⁸

⁷⁷ MissionInsite, accessed August 4, 2017. <https://maps.missioninsite.com/Maps.aspx>.

⁷⁸ *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, Pastor's Pocket Edition (The United Methodist Publishing House Nashville Tennessee, 1992), 11.

According to Kevin Dougherty, a sociology professor at Baylor University in Texas, and a co-author of the article "Why Sunday Morning Remains America's Most Segregated Hour," reminds us:

“Churches have not kept pace with other institutions. Socially, we have become much more integrated with schools, the military, and businesses. However, in the places where we worship, segregation still seems to be the norm.”⁷⁹

However, in the places where we worship, segregation still seems to be the norm. Dougherty asserts that calling a church segregated makes some people uncomfortable because, for some, it implies that those individuals or those churches might be racist. Oftentimes cultural or ethnic groups have affinity groups, which is natural, in which they are comfortable. Therefore, there is a tendency to gravitate towards churches where people look alike, act alike, and are in the same social circles and economic class as them.⁸⁰

Dougherty reminds us that, “The first Christian church was known throughout the society of its day, for its diversity. Jews, Gentile, and Greek [men] co-mingled alongside the women and slaves of the community. According to Dougherty, biblical scholars have maintained the belief that the early church’s diversity was one of the main reasons the early Christian church became so popular.⁸¹ It mirrored its communities.

One question he asks is, why is it important for the church to assess whether or not they have the propensity to mirror that kind of ethnic and or cultural diversity, similar to the first Christian church?

In the book of Acts 15 it tells us of the landmark event of the Jerusalem Council, and the church’s attempt to deal with the changing face of Christianity in the early church with the Jewish leaders and the new converts the Gentiles. “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” If we remember, Christianity, in its early inception, was identified as merely a sect of Judaism.⁸² Modern day Christians in church, maybe we too should consider introspection and reflection, asking ourselves the questions, how limited would the

⁷⁹ Daniel Burke, ed. *CNN Belief Blog*. “Why Sunday Morning Remains America’s Most Segregated Hour.” (October 10, 2010), accessed August 4, 2017. <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/10/06/why-sunday-morning-remains-americas-most-segregated-hour/>.

⁸⁰ Daniel Burke, ed. *CNN Belief Blog*. “Why Sunday Morning Remains America’s Most Segregated Hour.” (October 10, 2010), accessed August 4, 2017. <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/10/06/why-sunday-morning-remains-americas-most-segregated-hour/>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Moody Publishers: Chicago IL, 2010), 114.

early church have been if the leaders were trying to reach Gentiles, converting Jews, and impacting the world, if they solely focused on Judaism?

Love of Neighbors

The author, Soong Chan-Rah, states in his book *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* that a common characteristic between the context of Acts 15 and the twenty-first century American Church is fear of losing power.⁸³

Earlier we mentioned the phrase “Build it and they will come.” This phrase was made famous by the actor Kevin Costner in the movie *Field of Dreams*. The quote was actually “If you build it, (he) will come.” Costner built the baseball field and lo and behold they did actually come.

The COVID-19 Global Pandemic shifted the world’s paradigm. People all around the world who worked in corporate offices, business offices had to pivot and set up home offices as their new work environments. Interestingly enough, lots of businesses thrived, and employees were highly effective in their work responsibilities, while working at home or working any place in the world with strong wifi and a personal commuter. The anomaly of this new pattern, throughout our cities, our downtown, uptown buildings no longer are full of employees. The new hybrid model of work is an employee can work at home part of the week and also work in the office part of the week, has become normative.

In 1989, I (Stephanie) was a senior in college, some of the things that worked for me during that time frame, do not work for me today. Again, Soong Chan-Rah’s point about the twenty-first century American Church having a fear of losing power. It is often stated in the local church, “We want them to come to us, to our church, to participate in our worship.”⁸⁴

“We want them to come to us, to our church, to participate in our worship.” Do we require the people outside the walls of the church to assimilate into our infrastructures of leadership, worship styles, rituals, and customs?

Alternatively, are we willing to accommodate our neighbors, their cultural nuances, so that they might encounter Christ for themselves? Do we define the biblical and

⁸³ Ibid., 118.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

theological frameworks of Jesus to solely be the churches personal standards of Jesus or are we, as Christians, willing to align ourselves with God's standards of God's Church?⁸⁵

Take a moment and reflect on this question, are we willing to accommodate our diverse neighbors in our spaces, for the sake of the Kingdom of God? If yes, what might that look like? If not yet, what are some first steps that can be taken to begin? If no, what are the barriers?

Soong-Chan Rah also shares, to not talk about the dynamics of power at work in cross-cultural relationships, we unwittingly continue to perpetuate the systems of power that currently exist. The early church's ability to deal with the changing power dynamics, in Act 15, gives us a foretaste of hope and how it is possible to embrace and walk into the shifting dynamics of our present cultural context.⁸⁶ Friends, it excites us because it's clear, we really can do this, we really can. We must look ourselves in the mirror, and ask ourselves are we willing to go, to our Jerusalem, Judah, Samarah and to the ends of the earth, to reach all people for Christ.

It is urgent for faith-based communities to address the sin of racism and ask ourselves WHY the church of Jesus must play a role.

Scripture

1 Timothy 1:15 Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”

John 12:46 “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”

John 13:34 reminds us, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If the church is the hope of the world, and we are the church, then we are the faith community that offers a more just and equitable way through the advocate, the Holy Spirit.

1 John 2:11 But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 114

1 John 3:8 The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.”

Luke 2:10 “And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

Luke 4:18-19, 42; cf. Isaiah 61:1-2 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”

1 Corinthians 12:13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Exodus 22:21 “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

James 2:2-4 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. **3** If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” **4** have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Our Witness

Racism falls in the category of sin. Sin is an offense against religious or moral law, an action that is or is felt to be highly reprehensible or transgression of the law of God.

⁸⁷

According to U.S. Catholic Bishops in the article Brothers and Sisters to US, sin divides the human family, blots out the image of God, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same God. Racism is the sin that

⁸⁷Websters Dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sin>

says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of races. It is the sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights. It mocks the words of Jesus: “Treat others the way you would have them treat you.” Indeed, racism is more than a disregard for the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.⁸⁸

Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the humanity and denies the new creation for a redeemed world. It demands an equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structures of our society.⁸⁹

Blacks and other minorities are meagerly represented on the decision-making level of faith communities and organizations in our societies. Inner-city schools are disappearing and Black vocational recruitment lacks support. This subtle racism still festers within our Church as it does in society. Some progress has been made, but much remains to do.

This stain of racism, which is so alien to the Spirit of Christ, is an opportunity to work for renewal through the faith communities inward assessment of self and change management, alongside of our outward witness inside the church and surrounding communities.

As the people of God it is important to have concern for those who hunger and thirst for justice in our communities, states, country and throughout the world. As the faith community we must not ignore those whom we and others forget.

According to the article when we share our gifts and our resources with the forgotten or invisible, oppressed of humanity, we share Christ. Faith in the one God, Creator and Redeemer of all humankind, made in his image and likeness, constitutes the absolute and inescapable negation of any racist ideologies. It is still necessary to draw out all the consequences of this: “We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God’s image.”⁹⁰

In the article, “Amid Protests, US faith leaders engage racism and politics,” by ELANA SCHOR, on June 3, 2020, Bishop LaTrelle Easterling, leader of the United

⁸⁸ Brothers and Sisters to Us U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979
<https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Brothers-and-Sisters-to-Us.pdf>

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Brothers and Sisters to Us U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979
<https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Brothers-and-Sisters-to-Us.pdf>

Methodist Church's Washington-area conference, joined by Rev. Mariann Budde, the bishop of Washington's Episcopal diocese, which includes St. Johns, and other faith leaders during a prayer vigil that aimed to orient the religious conversation around fighting racism.

Bishop made the following statement pertaining to the followers of Jesus racism and sin. She states, "I think that all leaders that consider themselves to be religious or moral leaders have an obligation to rise and to speak to this moment, because institutional racism and supremacy cannot be dismantled by African American leaders alone," said Easterling, who is African American. "Those who enjoy the privilege of those systems must also rise to change systems that oppress anyone."⁹¹

It's time for honest dialogue in congregation, it requires the bravery of clergy leaders and the people of the church, said Rev. Joshua Whitfield, a priest at the St. Rita Catholic Community in Dallas.⁹²

We are in the season of revival of God's church, therefore faith leaders are being beckoned to the challenging work of unpacking truthfully, holding our inward selves mirrors. It's time that we honestly wrestle with the truths of uncomfortable questions and answers pertaining to racism, bias and privilege, while gaining clarity about the word race. The reality of the matter, there is only one race, that is the human race. Therefore, we are one. Now is the time, revival of the church is at hand. Ready, Set, Let's Go!

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹²<https://apnews.com/article/death-of-george-floyd-george-floyd-religion-discrimination-race-and-ethnicity-d0b80e43fb34d8d6f4726baa95ac9151>.

Chapter 6

Healing Racialization—A Journey of Grace

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Ephesians 2:8-9

“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.”

1 John 4:20

*“He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?”*

Micah 6:8

Racialization is in essence a structural problem. We inhabit an invisible pyramid made from the mud of sin that must be seen, understood, and dismantled. While the two of us understand this is a larger societal reality, as clergy shepherding local congregations, we also know we have to start somewhere.

The work of healing a racialized world begins in our own heart and life. Healing racialization is not something secondary or separate from being a Christian, it is a central aspect of our ongoing spiritual development.

A Matter of Discipleship

Discipleship is the word that describes this ongoing journey of growing in grace. To be a Christian is to be a “Christ one” or a “little Christ” and in the words of E. Stanley Jones, we are all Christians “in the making.”⁹³

⁹³ E. Stanley Jones, *A Song of Ascents* (Abingdon Press, 1968), 19.

As we travel along this lifelong journey, we realize we have many “isms” that may not have been evident in the beginning. Alcoholism, sexism, classism, narcissism, the list could go on ad infinitum, but one of those categories is certainly *racism*.

In a racialized world, in which society itself is structured around the racial hierarchy we’ve described, we can’t help but be stained by the sin of racism. It is literally part of the social air we breathe. Even if we were brought up in a home that was anti-racist, we went to schools, work spaces, and third places in which racism was in the mud and air. We participate in a societal system that was built on the slave trade. A society once defined by segregation. Every educational, economic, judicial, and governmental aspect of our social lives has been formed and sustained by racist ideas, practices, and policies. Depending on the color of our skin, this has provided advantages for some while disadvantages for others.

One way to understand how we heal from the sin of racism, individually and collectively, is in the part of our discipleship process called *sanctification*—the lifelong journey of holiness.

We want to explore holiness from the Wesleyan lens as “growing in love with God and neighbor.” Holiness is about living and loving like Jesus, not following the dos and don’ts of some moral code. We draw this understanding from Jesus’ own life and teaching. Consider the following encounter recorded in Matthew 22:34-40.

An expert in the law, a master student and interpreter of the Torah, witnessed Jesus silence a group of critics from the two ruling religious elite classes—the Sadducees and Pharisees. So, the expert “tested” Jesus with the following question, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” It’s not really a particularly original or probing question, and Jesus’ reply is not all that original or exceptional either, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (v. 37). Jesus responds with the *Shema*... “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God; the Lord is one” which is drawn from Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (the first Hebrew word in v. 4, *Shema* means “Hear!”). This is one of the preeminent texts of the old covenant and something any Jewish person would know by heart.

Jesus simply affirms the central teaching of Judaism, “This is the first and greatest commandment (v. 38), and then continues, “And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (v. 39). This is another well-known and essential idea for Hebrew people, drawn from Leviticus 19:18. Nothing original, nothing spectacular, combining these two ideas is the essence of the Jewish faith. Jesus concludes with a

summation, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (v. 40).

Earlier, we explored Luke’s version of Jesus’ response to this question in which he follows up with the antiracist parable of the Good Samaritan. Suffice it to say, Jesus as the fulfillment of all the Scriptures, points to the reality that the law and prophets are fulfilled by love. When we speak of holiness as follower of Jesus, we are talking about the lifelong journey of growing in love for God, with all our intellect, all our will, all our emotionality, and every fiber of our physicality, as well as growing in love for neighbor, which flows from a healthy sense of self-worth as God’s beloved. This ongoing movement of grace, growing in Christlike love, is *sanctification*.

Dr. Stephanie Crumpton reminds us that before there was original sin, there was original goodness and “original blessing.” The human being was and is created in God’s image and called “very good” (Gen. 1:26). She writes, “Before any doctrine of original sin, there was original goodness. Sin is a condition of woundedness, alienation from God and from others in creation, but goodness is prior.”⁹⁴ The journey of grace begins from the starting point of this innate goodness. It is a journey of healing from original woundedness.

The Mansion of Salvation

John Wesley had a helpful analogy to describe this journey as a house. In his sermon, “The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained” Wesley said, “Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself.”⁹⁵ All metaphors ultimately break down. The most problematic element with this one is that one might assume it is a one and done event. We cross from the porch, through the door, and into the house... we have arrived! More accurately, repentance is a lifelong journey we must walk out every day. 12 Step fellowships understanding of recovery as a lifelong “one day at a time” journey of grace is fitting. Also, if we think of the house of salvation more as a mansion, one which we will spend the rest of our lives exploring day by day, the analogy is more helpful in so many ways.

⁹⁴ Crumpton, Stephanie. *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 18.

⁹⁵ Wesley, John “The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained,” VI.4, page 227, Volume 9 of *The Works of John Wesley* – Bicentennial Edition.

So, if we imagine the journey of grace as a house, there are three main features, repentance as the front porch, faith as the front door, and holiness as life inside the house itself.

How do we end up on the front porch after all? Wesleyans describe this in the language of prevenient grace—a grace that goes before us, preventing us from further consequences, sheltering us in ways we don’t even realize. Before we are even aware of God, God is wooing us, pursuing us, and inviting us into a restored relationship. We didn’t make it to the front porch on our own. It’s like an invisible hand and a great cloud of witnesses, people who loved us into being, guided us here. We only think we discovered the house and made our way up onto the porch, but God has been busy. This is prevenient grace, a manifestation of God’s outreaching love and unmerited favor. It’s that love, the kindness of God, that leads us to repentance (Rom 2:4).

A Wesleyan understanding of salvation is grace centered. God’s love manifests in “waves of grace,” meaning while not divided, grace is experienced in various forms.⁹⁶ First, God’s relational love is seeking us, calling out “where are you?” (Gen 3:9). Saint Augustine was the first to speak of “preventing” grace, arguing against Pelagius, that the first move in salvation is initiated by God.⁹⁷ Preceding conscious awareness, God is after us, relentlessly pursuing us, protecting us. Realizing that great love moves us to accept our brokenness and engage God’s transfiguring grace (Rom 2:4; 1 John 4:19).

Jesus launches his ministry with the announcement to “repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, indicates a complete turnaround. Once awakened to God’s love, we enter a state of repentance. An “inward change” of heart and mind starts to take place. A Wesleyan emphasis on repentance involves a continuous intentional effort. We confess our sin, face our guilt, accept powerlessness, make amends, and cooperate with God’s perfecting grace. Repentance is the starting point of our journey toward restoration. We acknowledge that we are *all* in a process of recovery from sin (Rom 3:23). Once we realize God has already acted to save us “while we were yet sinners,” we dive headlong into the ocean of God’s grace (Rom 5:8). Christ the “friend of sinners” makes room for us through “His bleeding heart” and “open side” and invites us home.⁹⁸ In 12 step fellowships, we capture this process in the first three steps, using the prodigal son’s story of coming “to his senses” (Luke 15:11-21).

⁹⁶ Jones, Scott. *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 148.

⁹⁷ Saint Augustine in *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999, 60).

⁹⁸ “Christ the Friend of Sinners” quoted in *John & Charles Wesley: Selections from Their Writings and Hymns--Annotated & Explained* (Woodstock, Vt: SkyLight Paths Pub, 2011), 100.

We therefore receive justification through what Christ has accomplished for us. We can thus sing, “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.”⁹⁹

Regeneration, the restoration of our full humanity made in the image of God, begins with God’s prevenient grace and spans the whole journey of salvation in increasing degrees.¹⁰⁰ We have now been “born from above” (John 3:7). With our hearts awakened by God’s initiating love, we now reorient our lives around God, our new center.

Yet we refuse to stop there! In our justification God does something *for us*; we are indeed forgiven and can claim our regeneration as “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), but God has work yet to do *in us*. We call this work “sanctification,” the process of renewal into the very image of Christ. Bishop Willimon states this understanding of grace is a major Wesleyan distinctive: we believe in *transforming* and *perfecting* grace.¹⁰¹

Wesley refers to repentance in the language of “poverty of spirit” or a disposition of the heart, in which we acknowledge the reality of our inward and outward sins, feel the weight of guilt, and our powerlessness to affect our own condition.¹⁰² Our humility and courage to come to terms with this opens us to the possibility of *metanoia*.

When we respond to God’s prevenient grace, we repent and move towards God, we find ourselves on the front porch. There we stand at the door of God’s house of love and we must make a decision to enter inside, or turn around and high tail it out of there. We enter the house by *faith*, that is by believing in Jesus and accepting the invitation to be in a relationship with him. It’s as if the door has swung open before us, and Jesus offers us his nail-scarred hand, welcoming us inside. If we accept his hand, we experience *justification*, which Wesley described as pardon or the forgiveness of our sins.¹⁰³ In some mysterious way, Jesus’ death on the cross has canceled out or wiped the slate clean. Jesus has conquered the power of sin and death through his crucifixion and resurrection.

⁹⁹ “And Can It Be that I Should Gain” (no. 363) in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, st. 4.

¹⁰⁰ *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: 1994), 159

¹⁰¹ *Willimon, William H. United Methodist Beliefs: A Brief Introduction* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 72.

¹⁰² Clapper, Gregory S. *As If the Heart Mattered: A Wesleyan Spirituality* (Wipf and Stock, 2014), 23.

¹⁰³ Clapper, 39.

However, we feel like this understanding stops short of the depth of what faith and justification actually make possible. Faith is indeed, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

Faith is also a *relational* word. It doesn't just denote intellectual assent—it means entering into a new relationship, or even entrusting our lives to a new master. It is also a journey of self-death and resurrection, in which the believer is reintegrated “in Christ” into a new community.

People in the recovery community innately get this. The first three of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous are really what we would call repentance and faith that open the possibility of justification. First, we admit we are powerless and that our life is unmanageable. In Step Two, we “come to believe that a power greater than us can restore us to sanity.” In Step Three, we make a decision to turn our will and life over to the care of God as we understand him. This third step is actually the *faith* step. We are not having faith in a system of beliefs... we are putting our faith in a person. If then we, “believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” we are acknowledging that Jesus is alive, present, available, and extending to us a relationship which we enter by faith.

Perhaps for me (Michael), my own experience shapes how I view this “door of faith.” I had a supernatural encounter with Jesus in the darkest point of my life. I did not come to Christ by going to church and memorizing a set of beliefs. I met a person. So, standing at the door of my house of faith is a living being who was crucified for my sins and raised up from the dead and is alive now and inviting me to be a subject of his kingdom. My life is under new management. That is what faith means to me.

But faith in Jesus is indeed the *only* requirement. There is no work on our part. When we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, our salvation enters new depths, “For one believes with the heart, leading to righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, leading to salvation” (Romans 10:9-10). With that we enter inside the house.

The rest of our Christian life is exploring the rooms beyond the door. Going ever deeper toward the interior castle of God's presence, moving inward towards God in love and devotion, and outward in selfless love for others. The house is large, we will never really explore the whole mansion in this life, but in our intent to do so, we are made holy, or according to John Wesley we can become “entirely sanctified.” This is a state of union in God's love, in which that love flows through us into others.

Coming back to the 12 Steps to illustrate this further, the rest of the steps (4-12) are the sanctification aspects of the journey. We make an inventory, we confess our sins to God, ourselves, and another human being (James 5), we make a list of everyone we've harmed, and we start making amends. As we continue to grow spiritually through ongoing inventory and confession, prayer and meditation, we start sharing the message of hope and healing with others. Sadly, many lifelong church attendees never have such a clear-cut path for discipleship as the 12 steps provide.

The "Sin" of Racism?

So where does the sin of racism fit into this analogy? Is it something we leave behind on the porch? Does it magically slide off of us as we walk through the door of faith? Or is it something we deal with in the inner room?

Fortunately, God does not bar access to the house if we cling to racist thoughts, behaviors, or support racist policies. If that was the case, very few people would ever make it inside. We experience the kindness of God that leads us to repentance. We feel the weight of sin and repent, coming onto the front porch. And racism will often be one of those "isms" where we realize we have fallen short. As we see the brokenness in ourselves and the racialized systems of the world, we may be grieved to realize how we have thought and acted in racist ways and perpetuated racist systems.

Yet, many people may not acknowledge that in their initial repentance. In fact, we might not even be aware of it. We see that we have been wrong in many ways, we acknowledge we need the salvation that Christ is offering us, and we step towards the door, where his pierced hand awaits.

In Wesley's words,

And, first, how are we justified by faith? In what sense is this to be understood I answer, Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of justification. It is the condition: none is justified but he that believes: without faith no man is justified. And it is the only condition: this alone is sufficient for justification. Every one that

believes is justified, whatever else he has or has not. In other words: no man is justified till he believes; every man when he believes is justified.¹⁰⁴

Again, faith alone grants us access to the house, “You are saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8)... period. Now unfortunately, this doctrine has led some to stop here. A whole theology is built up around getting people to “make a decision for Christ” and we pray them through the “sinner’s prayer.” In doing so, we have saved their soul from hell. Through the “Romans Road” path we will now float off into some post-mortem destiny. But this is not what the Bible means by salvation. Salvation is not about where we go after this life, it’s about living an eternal life here and now. Stephanie Crumpton reminds us that “Salvation is about restoring balance, affirming the image of God in all human beings, and working toward micro- and macrolevel encounters that support this affirmation.”¹⁰⁵

Sanctification as Healing Grace

Salvation is about healing, shalom, peace in our hearts toward God and each other, and the kingdom of God come, his will being done on earth as it is in heaven. This includes the liberation of the oppressed.

If you can think of the irony of a bunch of folks crowded around the door of a house and making a whole life out of that, you can see the parody of the Christian church in the past centuries. Churches are built on this idea, that we accept Jesus by faith, and we become members of an institution. We may or may not feel compelled to make amends for the harm we’ve caused others. We may or may not see our Christian life as involving helping those in need, loving people different than us, or challenging systems of injustice. As a church member, we have the golden ticket to the pearly gates. But this is like stopping at the door of God’s house and never entering into the wonders he has in store for us.

Racism is often what we confront once we are inside the house. As we move around room to room, we begin to see the places where we have not loved God and neighbor. Perhaps we can envision racism, as a dirty and ransacked room in our soul that we are going to spend a great deal of our time repairing, little by little. It’s a dark place in our hearts, that Christ wants to touch and heal, but it’s like a wound that can

¹⁰⁴ Wesley, John. *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, III. 1.

¹⁰⁵ Crumpton, 20.

only be treated one day at a time and in community with others. As we bang around inside the house, sometimes we break things, or make a bigger mess. This is when we commit those sins of omission or commission, we think or do something harmful towards our neighbor, or we don't do something healing that we could do.

If we were a thief before entering the house, once we come in, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Ephesians 4:28). We learn a radically different way of being and doing from what we knew prior to entry.

Sanctification is a process that can only take place gradually in the process of living. God gives us just the grace we need for each pillow-to-pillow adventure. Imagine for example, we have had a problem with foul language, we feel convicted about it, and we are trying to stop cursing. We go for a period, but then we slip in a moment of road rage, or by stubbing our toe in the dark. We go from saint to f-bomb, from zero to 60! If we are honest with ourselves, all of us have these setbacks.

Perhaps it's something more blatantly harmful, like sex addiction. We are hooked on pornography and spending the family savings to fuel our addiction. Or we commit adultery in a moment of failure and destroy our marriage. Does this mean we are no longer "saved"? By the grace of God, thankfully, *no*. But these are major problems that we will need help from others to heal from. We will also need to enter a process of restoration to make whatever amends possible and to try and make these situations right, but we don't get evicted from the house of salvation.

We have failed to grow in our love for God and neighbor. We have even gone backwards in our spiritual growth. But by grace, we can start again. This is the ongoing journey of sanctification. Now these are extreme examples for some, but in our experiences of pastoring congregations, these are not unusual ones.

Racism belongs in the category of ongoing growth in sanctification. Racism is a form of sin that harms us and others. We cannot rightly "love God and neighbor" while hating his fellow children. We cannot love another person, if we assume we are superior to them in some way. We cannot rightly love God when we despise our brother and sister (1 John 4:20). Keri Day reminds us that "love is not merely an ideal sentiment but a concrete revolutionary practice."¹⁰⁶ And once we know that one race has benefited unjustly from a racialized system, we cannot pretend that we don't see it. We must give ourselves to the work of reconciliation and equity.

¹⁰⁶ Day, Keri. *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 16.

To continue to hold racist ideas, exhibit racist behaviors, or support racist policies, these are sins of commission... we are actively committing sin that harms others. To not lend our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness to creating a more just and equitable society is to commit sins of omission... we are allowing others to be harmed by our silence and inaction. We cannot grow in loving God and neighbor if we are sick in these ways. It's like carrying infected wounds that will only make us more toxic until we finally succumb if they go untreated.

This is why racism is like a deadly virus that rots our souls. Every day, we must continue to receive the dose of God's healing God wants to provide for us. Like a patient that takes the lifesaving medicine provided by our physician, we are receiving the treatment of God's grace for our racism. It's not a one and done scenario. Ibram Kendi explains that racist and antiracist are not fixed identities, rather, minute by minute we have a choice to be racist or anti-racist.¹⁰⁷ Just as in the journey of sanctification, every thought and action is accumulative towards loving God and neighbor, so are our intentions and actions about healing from racism. We are either growing in love for God and neighbor or not.

Just as sanctification is not an individual endeavor, it involves relationships with others, so does our ongoing healing from racism. We don't mean that this is solved merely by making friends with people of another race, we have tried that approach for decades in the church and it has been found lacking. We need those relationships because they make us more fully human. We need them because there is reciprocity and mutuality, in the ongoing flow of God's love in and through us. Yet we must move beyond just the personal and intimate sphere of these relationships and look at the systems that enforce and sustain racialization.

Again, John Wesley was an ardent opponent of the slave trade, even before William Wilberforce came along. He held together in creative tension the equal importance of works of piety (ways we grow in love with God) and works of mercy (ways we grow in love with neighbor). For early Methodists, sanctification included a focus on social justice. In the underbelly of a time of immense suffering and evil, the people called Methodists "worked against electoral corruption; structured systematic distribution of food, medicine, clothing, loans, and money; and organized temporary employment for the destitute."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Kendi, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Sweet, Leonard I. *Me and We: God's New Social Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 33.

For them, living a life of holy love included these dimensions. They sought to see Jesus' reign come on earth as it is in heaven. When Methodism jumped over to the US, campmeetings were an essential aspect of the movement. These gatherings were instrumental in catalyzing the first "mixed race" congregations in a context of slavery and oppression. Campmeetings radically upturned racist norms of social relationships. There was a dynamic of power sharing as persons of color, women, slaves, and the unlearned—now claimed leadership alongside those with positions of power.¹⁰⁹

Campmeetings openly defied ecclesiastical standards of time, space, authority, and liturgical form. African Americans, both freedmen and slaves, participated as equals alongside White people. The message of personal holiness cut across racial, social, and economic lines, and Black leaders were encouraged to become preachers.¹¹⁰ Harry Hosier, was one of those who responded to the call and became the most popular orator of his time. Indigenous peoples found a place in the movement, like Turtle Fields who in 1833 became the first ordained indigenous Methodist Episcopal Church minister.

Unfortunately, as Methodism began the process of institutionalization we reverted to racist and segregationist tendencies.

So how did the church get where we are today? Largely, segregated, and with racism being a "divisive topic" that is seen as something disconnected from our spiritual lives? Or worse yet, a "political issue" that is inappropriate to be spoken of in church?

In a world that was not racialized in the ways we have described above, this might possibly be true. But in a system of racial hierarchy in which people are categorized and treated unjustly based on in King's words the color of their skin rather than the content of their character, racism is a pervasive aspect of every dimension of human life. Racism is at the heart of our journey of sanctification and the transformation of a racialized and broken world.

In the next section of the book, we want to explore a pathway that involves four ever widening circles of inclusion that expand towards healing a racialized world.

¹⁰⁹ Jeffrey Williams, *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism: Taking the Kingdom by Force* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 111.

¹¹⁰ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 77.