

PRE- POST- RACIAL AMERICA

**SPIRITUAL
STORIES
FROM THE
FRONT LINES**

DAY LABOR
HIRING ZONE

SANDHYA RANI JHA

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“Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.”

—REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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Contents

INTRODUCTION: Complicating the Narrative—Stories of Living Race in America	1
1 The Civil Rights Movement Fifty Years Later	7
2 Border Battles <i>Can We Migrate into the Beloved Community?</i>	23
3 Murky Terminology	37
4 (The Myth of) The Angry Black Man	50
5 Perpetually Liminal <i>The Myth of the Perpetual Foreigner and In-Betweenness</i>	60
6 Isn't It Really about Class?	69
7 Race and Religion Post 9/11	82
8 We Are Each Others' Victims <i>Siblings</i>	96
9 Navigating Privilege	109
10 #Every28hours <i>Dealing with the Grief of Racism in Real Time</i>	122
11 "But I Don't Think of You As..." <i>Navigating Mixed-Race Identity in a One-or-the-other World</i>	127
12 Oppression Olympics, Intersectional Faith, and the Integrated Self	136
CONCLUSION: Beloved Communities	147

INTRODUCTION

Complicating the Narrative— Stories of Living Race in America

“Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with ‘secondly.’ Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.”

—CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE,
“THE DANGER OF THE SINGLE STORY,”
TED TALK, OCTOBER 7, 2009

My parents met at a college dance at Glasgow Tech in Scotland. I like to imagine their first dance was to a Beatles song, although I have no evidence to that effect. I just really love the Beatles, and they met in the fall of 1964.

My father was ten years old when India got its freedom and remembers taking turns with his classmates as night watch, sitting on the roof of the school in his village as they protected themselves against possible attacks in the wake of the bloody partition battles that broke out on August 17, 1947. My mother was born in post-war Glasgow, Scotland, and lived with ration coupons well into the 1950s. Interracial relationships were not much beloved when they met in 1964. My parents weren’t political, and they didn’t have a profound civil rights agenda. They just didn’t care about the potential

2 *Pre-Post-Racial America*

controversy; they liked each other. And eventually they loved each other.

So they weathered my mother being rejected by her family for loving a man of a different race and religion because they loved each other. And they weathered my father's family's deep ambivalence about my mother because they loved each other. (Today the family in India says he did even better than an Indian wife, because my mother has been so fiercely loyal to them.) And they didn't worry too much about the petition to evict them from the neighborhood when they first bought a home together, because they loved each other. And forty-five years since their wedding (fifty years since they met), they still love each other. And, better yet, they still like each other.

So my baseline narrative for race relations is a pretty inspiring one. But it is not uncomplicated.

It's complicated by my family's religious diversity: my father is Hindu and my mother and I are Christian. It's complicated by growing up on the outskirts of Akron, Ohio, where the five kids of color in my class of two hundred all strove to be as "standard American" as we were allowed to be, and since there were so few of us, we were pretty well accepted as long as we didn't claim any sort of difference. My school existence was complicated by hanging out with the Bengali Indian community on weekends, where the kids all ate pizza and watched football while the adults ate curry and talked politics. It's complicated by finding my voice as a South Asian in a suburban Chicago high school when I made friends with other South Asians while simultaneously being light-skinned enough to be mistaken for Greek, Latin@, Middle Eastern, Eastern European, and only very rarely identified as South Asian. And even that is complicated by the fact that for those who meet me in writing first bring a whole set of assumptions about who I am before we meet face-to-face. (This can be messy both in my consulting work and in online dating—you would not believe what some American men assume about South Asian women that meeting me in person cannot seem to disrupt.)

And yet my experience of race is very different than my parents'. My father, raised in a village where he was the

same as everyone else, is sent to Toastmasters by his boss for not being a good public speaker, and when the head of Toastmasters says, “I don’t know why you’re here—you’re a great public speaker,” my father thinks, “Oh well—Toastmasters is fun!” instead of thinking, “That was about my accent, wasn’t it?”

My mother hears a person at the luggage store where she works say, “I wish [all Indians] would go home,” and she thinks it’s a story worth telling over dinner but doesn’t waste her time getting in the face of someone so ignorant in the moment, and doesn’t give it more thought than that.

An Anglo friend of mine calls me an ABCD (American-Born Confused Desi¹), and I kind of want to punch her—partly because I’m a little more radical and a little more antagonistic than my first-generation parents (although my mother’s not exactly polite—subtlety is not a value imparted to the middle and working classes of Scotland—she just doesn’t engage stupid). And partly I get upset because an Anglo person shouldn’t be allowed to say that: I can make fun of my sister, but you can’t. I reserve the right to mock my identity for real South Asians. (Although that hurts too.) But partly I get so mad because I grew up here, I grew up not being part of the norm, and I grew up—however much I tried to fight it—absorbing some of the very subtle messages that I was somehow less than. Being called an ABCD raises my own doubts about my racial identity.²

I also grew up only slowly realizing that race was shaping me at all, because it’s become so darned slippery. So I’m not sure whether I’m allowed to be angry about something that may have been racial or may have had nothing to do with race at all. Did I get into that top seminary because they needed more diversity, even though my GRE scores weren’t

¹Desi is South Asian slang for a person from South Asia—India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

²My friend Lynnette asked that I make sure to acknowledge the hurtful term “banana” used to describe Asians and Asian Americans who “act White.” Similar terms for non-White racial and ethnic groups include oreo, twinkie and apple. They seem cute but can be hurtful whether used by people from other racial groups or our own.

the best, or was I a more impressive candidate than I think I am? Did I get almost no calls when I was in the search and call process to find a congregation to pastor because no one could pronounce my name, even though I was looking for the kind of church in very high supply and very low demand these days (dwindling urban congregation that can't afford a full-time minister), or was that just a coincidence? When I was a toddler and had just moved here, did the neighborhood kids push me in dog doo during hide and seek because they didn't like immigrants or because kids in Akron, Ohio, always pick on the little kid? Part of my anger is in not knowing.

We are one family with three different understandings of how race functions in our lives.

That is race in America: complicated and untidy. It is not knowable through a single story. Whenever we catch ourselves thinking about race as defined by our own experience, or the experience of that one friend we have of another race, we might be looking wrong at race. And yet so often, if we do not have multiple relationships with multiple people from a different race, we only have one narrative for people from that race. It's usually not a complicated narrative, and someone other than us usually constructed it.

As this book goes to print, we have received the grand jury decisions in both the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. In the media frenzy, both stories have been labeled complicated by some and very clear-cut by others. I have fairly strong opinions about these deaths, but regardless of people's opinions, the media illustrated Barghouti's point: "If you want to disinherit a people, tell their story for them, and start with 'secondly.'" The vast majority of narratives about those deaths have been from people outside the communities affected by them, and they do not by and large start with the context that created the grief and anger that poured into the streets. The absence of that voice certainly complicates the narrative, although not in a way that most of us are invited to notice.

And yet within these complicated narratives, I find glimpses of the realm of God here on earth, or what Martin

Luther King Jr. referred to as “The Beloved Community.” For me, those glimpses seem to emerge because I have these conversations with people who are focused outside of themselves; they are instead focused on friends and family and neighbors, so that their struggles with injustice or with identity do not happen in a vacuum. At its best, that is what the life of faith gives us: the chance of becoming that Beloved Community.

I think it is no accident that we as Christians in America have as our primary text a book written primarily by a people who were defined by their religion but also their ethnic heritage. The Bible is saturated with stories of racial conflict, of overcoming, of surviving and of claiming power amidst defeat. These are stories that talk repeatedly about power imbalances and struggles. And they talk about God shining through in the places where men and women are willing to hear the stories of people from the margins, incorporating those stories into their lives in order to build communities of life and love.

The hardest part of examining race is to recognize that people’s stories might actually contradict our own understanding of how things work. And at the same time, God might just shine through if we do not reject those stories but pay attention to the tension between someone else’s experience and our own. If Mourid Barghouti is right that we wield human power over others when we tell their stories for them, then perhaps God’s power emerges when we listen to and hold multiple stories and let ourselves be changed by them rather than seeking to control the narrative.

My purpose with this book is to share stories that help us look at issues of race in America through other lenses: stories of real people today, and stories of Scripture. Maybe these stories can help us reexamine our own stories, taking power away from those who seek to divide us and giving that power back to God. In the process, maybe we will celebrate that in the one race, the human race, we are made richly, gloriously, and uniquely in the image of God as part of one Beloved Community here on earth as it is in heaven.

1

The Civil Rights Movement Fifty Years Later

“The greatest movement for social justice our country has ever known is the civil rights movement and it was totally rooted in a love ethic.”

—BELL HOOKS

“If not us, then who? If not now, then when?”

—JOHN E LEWIS

“I think that the thing that we learned back in the day of the civil rights movement is that you do have to keep on keeping on.”

—CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT

*“Learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow’s cause.”*

—ISAIAH 1:17 (ESV)

In my twenties, I worked in Washington, D.C. A friend of mine worked at a prominent civil rights organization that had been founded in the South at the height of the civil rights movement, in the 1950s and 60s. Its headquarters were now in Washington, D.C.

One day, in a pique of frustration, my friend said to the head of the organization, “Fred,¹ my generation is going to have to pry the civil rights movement from your generation’s cold, dead hands, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” he responded without much humor; “yes, you will.”

As I write this chapter, we are about to celebrate fifty years since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, which was functionally gutted by the Supreme Court last year, the year we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington and Dr. King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

Many activists under the age of forty fear that the civil rights movement has stalled out and that those who witnessed the “I Have a Dream” speech don’t know what to do with the *Dream Defenders*,² far less the *Dreamers*.³ In the wake of Michael Brown’s death on August 9, 2014, when young leaders of color emerged in Ferguson, Missouri (and the Dream Defenders took their skills honed at the state house in Florida after the George Zimmerman verdict and brought them to Missouri), the response to clergy participation in the protests was mixed, and one longtime civil rights pastor was booed when he asked protesters to donate to his church. Cornel West and a cadre of younger clergy were arrested on October 13 for peacefully protesting the lack of due process in relation to the officer who killed Michael Brown, and their actions were lifted up and appreciated, but leadership in

¹Not his real name.

²The young people who staged a nonviolent takeover of the Florida state capitol in the weeks following the George Zimmerman verdict in the summer of 2013 and continue to organize in the wake of Michael Brown’s murder in Ferguson.

³The undocumented college students who advocated for the Dream Act, protesting in Washington, D.C., and across the country, lying down in traffic in Atlanta, and crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and then trying to cross back in to bring attention to the unjust immigration laws that punish people brought into this country before the age of consent who are nonetheless subject to deportation laws that would send them to countries they are in no real way connected to.

the movement is from younger groups such as Hands Up United and #BlackLivesMatter, who do not see the previous generation standing with them or showing up for them.

And even as some Americans talk about two Americas or the New Jim Crow or a culture of anti-Blackness, we're also in an era where some people say we have reached the goal of being a "post-racial America," meaning they believe race as a category no longer matters, that we have achieved equality for everyone who tries hard enough. After all, we have a Black President, and things look very different than they did when people were being attacked by dogs and fire hoses and having crosses burned on their lawns.

As I write this chapter, however, our Black President has introduced the "My Brother's Keeper" initiative,⁴ designed to address the fact that Black and Latino boys are far less likely to graduate from high school than their White or Asian counterparts (depending on which Asian subgroup you're considering) and are far more likely to be the victims of homicide. That doesn't sound post-racial to me. Nor does the fact that every twenty-eight hours a Black man is killed by police or vigilantes, according to Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. There has been debate about this statistic. The report writer's response to these criticisms (on theroot.com) is worth reading.⁵

Cornel West wrote a book in the mid-nineties called *Race Matters*.⁶ He wrote it amidst attempts to repeal affirmative action programs and to completely rewrite food assistance and welfare programs, debates saturated with racial overtones, except that when people of color said race played a role in these conversations, they were accused of "playing the race card."

Twenty years later I think about Dr. West's book and wonder, Does the United States still think race matters? Fifty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act (and the Immigration Rights Act that allowed my family to come

⁴More information available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper>.

⁵See http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/12/_every28hours_author_responds_to_the_fact_checkers.html.

⁶Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

to the United States in the late 1970s, and many other civil rights bills), what does civil rights look like?

I'll be looking at race issues from many different perspectives throughout this book, but when we talk about race in the United States, I would guess that about 80 percent of the time, we're talking about Black-White issues. Sometimes we're talking about immigration, but usually we treat that as a completely different issue than race (even though it's a very racialized conversation). And when we're talking about race, we're rarely talking about Asian, Latin@, Native American, or any other groups. And, frustrated as I can get with being left out of the dialogue, it's not without reason.

There is nothing I can write about the legacy of slavery that can compare to what has already been written. Our modern day understandings of race were formed, I believe, because White indentured servants and Black slaves in the 1600s American colonies came together in rebellion against their ill treatment by wealthy White landowners. In the wake of the rebellion, the pseudo-science of race began to emerge, claiming White intellectual superiority and justifying the rapid expansion of chattel slavery while the role of the less cost-effective indentured servants (usually White) diminished and disappeared. The power of poor Black and White people united was too great a threat to those with power.

Sometimes people say, "Black people need to get over it; slavery was hundreds of years ago." My mother recently said on this subject, "Yes, but a man being arrested in the South for no reason and being beaten to death by a crowd on the Florida border solely for being Black wasn't hundreds of years ago; it was sixty. The last lynching wasn't hundreds of years ago; it was in the late 1960s. People not being allowed to vote wasn't hundreds of years ago; it was fifty years ago. A Black young man being shot for wearing a hoodie, or playing rap music in his car, or for standing on a corner a week before his high school graduation, wasn't hundreds of years ago; it was three years and two years and one year ago." And as a friend of mine said in the wake of the non-indictment of

the officer in the choke-hold death of Eric Garner, “I would tell you what modern-day lynching looks like, but I. Can’t. Breathe,” quoting Garner’s last words caught on tape before he died.

And at the same time, the landscape has certainly changed. I sat down with three different clergy colleagues from three different generations to learn from them what civil rights means today and how that has changed over the years. Rev. Phil Lawson (brother of Rev. James Lawson, prominent leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the height of the civil rights movement) is just past eighty years old and at the height of his movement building work. Rev. Clarence Johnson is about sixty-five years old, just old enough to have participated in his pre-teen years in the March on Washington. Rev. Andrea Davidson is about forty years old, and she was born well after the March on Washington happened.

I wanted to talk to all three of them, because I have worked with them on issues of equality and civil rights today in the Bay Area, and because they are all African American clergy in predominantly White denominations, although they pastor or have pastored predominantly Black congregations. And, for the sake of transparency on my part, I also talked with them because they all engage in civil rights work for the Black community and also in solidarity with people of other communities, whether it be advocating immigration rights or gay rights, fasting with displaced workers, sleeping outside city hall with homeless people, or advocating in Sacramento for jobs and education equality. I wanted to know how these allies of mine understand the arc of the civil rights movement over the past fifty years (or more).

Rev. Lawson (then just “Phil”) grew up in northeastern Ohio, not far from where I grew up. However, the region he grew up in looked a lot different than mine. “I wasn’t *inspired* to participate in the civil rights movement,” he clarifies. “I was propelled. I was pushed. I was driven—because I was born a Black man in northeast Ohio in 1932, at a time of segregation, a second-class citizen, constantly under threat,

in an era when upwards of 100 black men and women were lynched every week across the United States. I was not even safe in my own United Methodist Church, which was segregated in terms of Blacks and Whites.” By the time he was in his early teens, he was involved in the civil rights movement, although he is quick to point out that civil rights was only a step on the way to the healing of the soul of America, and “we were not focused on civil rights; we were focused on saving our nation, with the emphasis on *our*, like when you pray, you pray *our* Father.”

I love Rev. Phil’s ability to be fully and deeply committed to nonviolence (“I had to as a matter of living my faith; if you follow Jesus, you follow the path of love and nonviolence; there’s no other way to read it”) while standing beside people who disagree with him. In 1967, when several student ministers came to work with him in Kansas City, he sent them into the streets to develop relationships with the young men who had rioted and burned down part of the city. They learned that the young men wanted to start a chapter of the Black Panthers: “I didn’t agree with the violence of the Black Panthers, but I supported these young men.” His Methodist church helped the young men start a chapter in Kansas City, and because of the depth of their relationship with one another, he was able to negotiate between the police department and the Panthers⁷ so that their chapter was the only one that did not end up in a stand-off with the police.

While Rev. Lawson was coming into leadership, Rev. Johnson was watching his brother pastor East Percy Street Christian Church, part of the Disciples of Christ denomination.⁸ He was twelve in 1963 when his brother hosted a

⁷The police and Panthers agreed that whenever the police believed illegal activity was happening in one of the Panthers’ three houses, the Panthers would agree to let the house be inspected by the chief of police and Rev. Lawson. This avoided random questionable raids and the escalation that could result (and did result in other cities like Oakland and Chicago).

⁸As proud as we Disciples are of our Christian unity, it is interesting to note that the predominantly Black East Percy Street Christian Church was originally known as First Christian Church of Greenwood, Mississippi, until the predominantly White First Christian Church of Greenwood, Mississippi, across the river sued them for using the same name, although it may well have been the Black church that had the name first.

group of civil rights leaders who inspired and energized him. Also at the age of twelve, he was arrested with a group of people for registering voters in his hometown. I recently delighted my twelve-year-old niece when I told her this story, because he said he was arrested at 10 a.m., and his mother and a leader from the denominational office came to release him at 6 p.m. that same day; his understated comment was, "I've never been so glad to see two people in all my life." (A twelve-year-old can imagine how much you'd want to see your mother at the end of a whole day in jail, even if she doesn't totally understand why a twelve-year-old would get sent to jail for registering people to vote. Come to think of it, neither can a thirty-eight-year-old.) Clarence was also at the March on Washington that summer, and he remembers seeing celebrities such as Harry Belafonte and Mahalia Jackson walk by, although he doesn't remember Dr. King's speech, since he was hanging out by the reflecting pool with friends he had made that day from North Carolina.

By the summer of 1965, his mother had sent him to Youngstown, Ohio, because she thought it was too dangerous for a young Black man walking the streets of Greenwood wearing civil rights buttons as the situation got increasingly violent. However, the movement was too deep in his bones for that to be the end of the story. Rev. Johnson went on to organize the Disciples of Christ's Black Ministers Retreat and many other programs for Black Disciples churches before coming to the Bay area to do union organizing, advocate against apartheid in South Africa, and now pastor Mills Grove Christian Church in east Oakland, where he is recognized as a prominent civil rights leader in the city. He may have had more fun hanging out at the reflecting pool at the March on Washington, but his continued work standing with and praying with poorly treated workers and seniors facing safety issues hearkens back to the official theme of that march: The March for Jobs and Freedom.

Rev. Davidson grew up at about the same time I did, when she was known as Andrea in a working class neighborhood of Long Island that was mostly Black, but also Jewish and Italian. Andrea didn't grow up in a family or church or

community that engaged in issues of civil rights all that deeply in the 1980s. They were incredibly charitable, and they were deeply faithful (in fact, Andrea grew up a preacher's kid at a Baptist church that might be classified as part of the Pentecostal or holiness movement), but they were definitely not political or really oriented towards any sort of focus on systems of justice. It is impossible to grow up Black in America and be unaware of discrimination and different treatment of Blacks compared to Whites. Nonetheless, the message Andrea received growing up was to focus on being her best spiritual self at all times; "fighting the system" just wasn't part of the narrative at home or school or church.

It may have been the era or it may have been the church (although many Americans assume that all Black churches are politically engaged and always have been, which simply isn't true as a universal statement), but Andrea's journey to become engaged in civil rights as a United Methodist minister was a journey of gradual discovery and study on her own, through a Black studies minor in college and through the realization that her profitable corporate job wasn't bringing her fulfillment. So the Rev. Davidson we encounter today is one whose spirituality has been shaped by a loving faith community, learning to integrate civil rights into that spirituality outside of her family and church. I know her through her work as a key leader with Oakland Community Organizations, an interfaith advocacy group working on ending violence and increasing education equity in the city of Oakland.

I've always thought I had a pretty good understanding of the civil rights movement. I studied it extensively, I debated it with my friends, I have personal relationships with both Black and White leaders who were involved on the front lines of the struggle in the South, in Chicago, in Boston, and in Oakland. I know the tensions within the movement as well as the pressures from outside of it. I know the role of the U.S. government's counterintelligence agents (ominously referred to as COINTELPRO) in undermining the Black Panthers.

But then last year I read *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabella Wilkerson about the Great Migration from the South

to the North after the Civil War. It breathed life into what it meant to grow up Black in the South after slavery and before the civil rights movement. Being Black then meant people would steal from you (sharecropping), blame you for crimes you did not commit and murder you, or kill you for looking at them in a way they didn't like, all without any legal recourse. In a recent article on the website *The Daily Kos*, a man talked about coming home from college in the 1980s, radicalized by his Black studies courses and telling his father how Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton, and Malcolm X had it right, and how Martin Luther King was an accommodator. "My father told me with a sort of cold fury, 'Dr. King ended the terror of living in the south.'"⁹

A critical first step in building the Beloved Community is making sure no one has to be in perpetual fear for their lives. I think that we sometimes overlook this step because we take it for granted, although recent attention to the many deaths of unarmed Black men and boys such as John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner make it harder to take for granted, that there are communities that do have to teach their children how to avoid being a target for unsolicited violence, knowing that might not be enough to protect them. And while we continue to address that first step, maybe the next step is making sure everyone has some reason to hope for the future.

In many ways, across generations, all three of the leaders I'm lifting up in this chapter are doing exactly that. All three are deeply involved with the modern day civil rights (and Beloved Community) issue of mass incarceration.

If you haven't read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*,¹⁰ you need to put this book down and pick that one up. What Upton Sinclair's book *The Jungle* did for health standards (and was supposed to do for working conditions

⁹Hamden Rice, "Most of you have no idea what Martin Luther King actually did," *The Daily Kos*, August 29, 2011, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/08/29/1011562/-Most-of-you-have-no-idea-what-Martin-Luther-King-actually-did#>.

¹⁰Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (2010; repr., New York: The New Press, 2012).

in meat packing plants), what Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* did for the environmental movement and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* did for feminism, *The New Jim Crow* is doing for the modern civil rights movement. It is telling a story that many of us in urban communities already know, but it is adding facts to the stories, letting us know we're not crazy and letting us know things might actually be more serious than we thought they were. The book is about the mass incarceration of Black people in America, not simply because they commit more crimes than other people or because poor people are arrested at greater rates than rich people, but because the judicial system has an inherent bias against Black people. (I totally understand if you don't believe me making that statement without any facts; read the book.)

In addition to mass incarceration, Rev. Johnson has established a summer Algebra Institute modeled on a program started by civil rights leader Robert Moses to address the achievement gap particularly between Black (and Latin@) children and White children in schools—studies have shown a difference in the way Black children are disciplined (more harshly) and attended to (less) in the earliest years of school in comparison to White children, even in the same classroom by the same teacher.¹¹ Some Black leaders are stepping up and filling that gap themselves through programs such as the Algebra Institute.

Rev. Davidson had her congregation study *The New Jim Crow* and is engaged in advocacy around more just sentencing laws in California, but she sees another element of the civil rights movement today. Rev. Davidson pastors a middle class Black congregation in a poor (mostly) Black neighborhood. Congregants drive in for worship and programs but do not live in the neighborhood. When I asked Andrea what the civil rights movement looks like today, in addition to the issue of mass incarceration, she said, "Connecting my congregation with this community." Building up solidarity across classes

¹¹For more on this issue, read, "My son has been suspended five times. He's 3," Tunette Powell, *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2014: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/07/24/my-son-has-been-suspended-five-times-hes-3/>.

is a central element of building the Beloved Community, especially when those who have made it might not always want to be reminded that they are connected to those who haven't.

Rev. Lawson works to lift up this issue and the issue of restorative justice (with space for remorse and forgiveness and rehabilitation) in partnership with a man recently released from prison after more than fifteen years. Along with the issue of mass incarceration, Rev. Lawson advocates for pretty much every justice issue imaginable, from immigration to gay and lesbian rights to economic justice. He also encourages young leaders to shape today's movement for justice in their own fashion—one of his critiques of the Occupy movement was that many activists of his generation and mine, shaped by the twentieth century, would not support anything that looked different than what we were comfortable with. If my friend had asked him about prying the civil rights movement out of his cold, dead hands, Rev. Lawson would say, "No, here: make it your own. Just let me work on it alongside you." In fact, a year before tanks rolled through Ferguson, Missouri, Rev. Lawson worked with me and an interracial, intergenerational, and interfaith group working to stop "Urban Shield," a police militarization program in our community. It involved Israeli military training our police in counterinsurgency tactics, and weapons like drones and tanks were available for low-cost purchase by local police departments.

Throughout this book, I look at each story in relationship to a specific story from the Bible. With this chapter, however, I find myself thinking instead about "biblical hermeneutics": *how our location in this moment in history in this country and with our own lived experiences shapes the way we read the Bible*. Each of the pastors mentioned in this chapter entered the world at a different time and in a different state, impacted by different manifestations of racism in their communities. They were also shaped by different gender and educational opportunities. As a result they each read (and experience) the civil rights movement of the past and the present differently.

Jesus, Peter, and Paul experienced God in very different ways, shaped by their lived experiences, their genealogies,

and the communities they grew up in. As a result, all three of them envisioned the movement differently. I understand the impulse to say, "Well, I'm following it the way Jesus meant it to be done." I've said it myself, and my denomination was founded on the same argument. But Paul and, to some degree, Peter heavily mediated Christianity as we practice it today. And both of them practiced Christianity differently than Jesus, at least as the gospels lay out his teachings. Of course, they acted differently because they brought different hermeneutical lenses to their practices. Peter was a thoroughly Judean Jewish fisherman before joining Jesus' followers, and Paul a thoroughly Hellenized Jew who knew how the mercantile world of all sorts of non-Jews worked.

When we read the Bible, we do not read it through the eyes of a first-century Judean. As a result, we miss some of the jokes. Certain names do not evoke terror in our hearts as they would have for the founders of our faith. We are not shaped by the same relationship with God or the same relationship to the Hebrew Bible and its laws. We don't know what it means for our government to humiliate our religion and to view us as a unique threat because we believe God is more powerful than the head of our government.

When we read the civil rights movement, we each read it through our own hermeneutical lens and the same thing happens: we miss some of the jokes. Certain names do not evoke terror in our hearts as they would have for the people who risked and lost their lives before and during the movement.

Civil rights leaders must feel defeated when they have to fight the same battles today that they fought fifty years ago, and have been met with so much apathy by the wider U.S. public, who do not necessarily know or care much about education disparities or mass incarceration. It must feel frustrating to work in communities that struggle with the same issues as fifty years ago, except additionally ravaged by the crack epidemic of the 1980s and the war on drugs that has locked up far more Black people than White people for the same crimes, then sent them back to their communities without a chance at most jobs. (Think about the last job

application you filled out; it probably had a box that said, "Check this box if you have ever served time in prison." Ask yourself, How many people who checked off that box do you think got called back for an interview?) For Andrea, it sometimes feels as if the civil rights movement disappeared during the 1980s, overwhelmed by the war on drugs or by respectability politics.¹² It can feel for many people in Rev. Davidson's generation that we're starting the movement building work from scratch.

Rev. Davidson and I have a lot in common as people from the same generation, neither of us yet born when the March on Washington or the assassination of Dr. King occurred, both women of color shaped by the liberation theology we learned in seminary instead of from the pulpit growing up (and find ourselves minorities in terms of pastors who preach liberation theology from the pulpit today), both of us women in a church that doesn't always know what to do with female clergy and even less what to do with female clergy of color (within our racial/ethnic communities and within our neighborhoods and within our mostly White denominations). When I asked Andrea what shoulders she stood on from the civil rights movement, she paused for a long time, and repeated the question: "Whose shoulders do I stand on? The shoulders of the women in the movement; the shoulders of women who did so much of the work and whose names we were never taught."

I asked Rev. Lawson what he thinks about the notion that we are a post-racial society. He laughed for a really long time, and then said, still laughing, "It's garbage. A characteristic of empire is its ability to co-opt everybody. The Beloved Community is not about good feelings. It is not about whether 'you like me.' It is about demographics. It's about evaluating who's at the bottom of the ladder, and who is not at the table. Slavery was never an issue of, 'Do you like me?' It was an issue of a system that some people are worth more than others. And that has not changed."

¹²Respectability politics is a description of the phenomenon within a movement such as the civil rights movement, which, upon experiencing some success for some members of the movement, creates cultural standards that separate those who have succeeded and adhere to those cultural standards from those who haven't succeeded and don't adhere to those cultural standards.

When I asked Rev. Johnson how he handles the fact that voter suppression is expanding rapidly at the same time the Voting Rights Act has been repealed, he responded as only the heartiest activist and the most faithful pastor could: "But we know we can prevail because we've been here before and we know the victory is already written."

Phil, Clarence, and Andrea approach the civil rights movement of today very differently; their lived experiences are different and the way they articulate their commitments is different. Their hermeneutics are different. When I think of Rev. Lawson, I can almost hear his frustration when I don't always remember that every act of justice is connected to all of the rest of them; it is not possible to draw a circle too wide for him. When I think of Rev. Johnson, I think of someone whose constant and consistent regard for others unconsciously requires you to approach him with the same regard and respect. I have never heard him say a disparaging word about another human being, even while he never shies from proclaiming his values. Rev. Davidson is bold and strong in her public commitments to justice, someone I can as easily picture with a bullhorn in front of city hall as I can see standing in the pulpit in a robe.

It is a real honor to work alongside clergy who are building (or rebuilding, or continuing to build) the Beloved Community today. Their voices are not necessarily one. That is important to note because we often make a mistake of shying away from acknowledging multiple perspectives from communities of color, because issues related to race are already so complicated. But the Beloved Community is strongest when all voices are heard and when we do not impose some sort of uniformity on various groups out of fear of disagreement.

And that's part of the point of this book. If we don't find a way to listen to one another's stories across difference, recognizing that even within racial/ethnic groups we have a broad array of experiences that we need to honor, we'll keep rebuilding the foundations of the Beloved Community over and over again. Why? Because those of us building it will get so frustrated at being ignored or villainized or homogenized

that we'll take a sledgehammer to the unstable foundations and have to start from scratch. It's happened before. And lack of concern about one another's narratives has led to neglect of the load bearing walls.

I want to acknowledge, and I know all of the other clergy in this chapter would want me to acknowledge, two other people I get to work with. Neither of them is an ordained minister, and I've never heard either one of them describe their work as "civil rights work." Rayna and John grew up in Oakland at the height of the crack epidemic's tearing apart of the city. I've stood with both of them as they testified in front of the Port Commission about creating fair wage local hire jobs that give a second chance to people who are formerly incarcerated. Rayna, in her mid-twenties, has testified, baby on her hip, about losing her mother to violence that could have been prevented if our city had any opportunities for young people in the community. (Nothing stops a bullet like a job, says Father Greg Boyle of Los Angeles.) John, nearing 40 like Andrea and me, shares his struggles to find work that will support his family since the only jobs available to people who have been in prison are minimum wage jobs. In California, to afford rent for a family of four, a person paid the state minimum wage has to work 120 hours a week. They are fighting for jobs with dignity and an end to violence in their neighborhoods.¹³ They are my community's Dream Defenders or Hands Up United making a better world for their babies in the face of a lifetime of injustice. The March on Washington was called the March for Jobs and Freedom, and it seems clear that Rayna and John are part of that legacy, demanding that my generation and older join them in the struggle or get out of the way. Their hermeneutic is one of the urgency of the present moment, and I know that Phil, Clarence, and Andrea will not force them to pry the civil rights movement out of their cold, dead hands.

¹³John recently got hired to mentor Oakland youth with a local non-profit. When Oakland passed a 12.25 minimum wage bill that John had been campaigning for, his son asked, "will we have more money now?" and John laughed and said, "Your father's not working at Burger King now. We get to live on a LITTLE more than even 12.25 an hour."

I believe the civil rights movement in America needs to be spiritually grounded and also needs to create a space where the very diverse communities of this nation listen deeply to each other. For White people, this *might* mean letting go of defensiveness, guilt, or maybe even a sense that the narratives of people of color have little to do with them. For people of color who rarely get our stories heard, it might mean pausing, catching a breath, and trying to hear the stories of other people of color and from White people that help us see one another in a new light and allow us to go deeper with one another, to name deep hurts and possibly create real healing. This book won't focus exclusively or even primarily on one particular race or ethnicity, but it was really important to me to begin by listening to some of my African American brothers and sisters. The spoken and unspoken narrative about race in America is shaped deeply by the nation's legacy and laws and practice in relationship to Black people, and I don't know how to do the work of Beloved Community without starting my journey of listening here.

CHAPTER QUESTIONS

1. Discuss whether the civil rights movement was successful—by your definition, and by the definition of the three pastors in this chapter.
2. Is the work complete?
3. What “hermeneutical lens” do you bring to the way you view the civil rights movement? What lenses do the pastors in this chapter bring?
4. Do we need another civil rights movement with a different focus? If so, what should that focus be? What did you think of the pastors' shared focus on prisons in America today?
5. Of what community groups are you a part (church, book group, League of Women Voters, Kiwanis, etc.)? How could your community group participate in a new civil rights movement?
6. What does the civil rights movement have to do with Beloved Community?