

“As I read Carolyn Hessel’s important new book for preachers of all faith communities, I kept repeating the same thing: ‘Wow. That chapter alone was worth the price of the book!’ I felt that for the Prologue, and again with the list of myths in chapter 3, then again with the summary of racial identity theory in chapter 4, and . . . basically, with every chapter in the book. Hessel gets what so many preachers — and the predominantly white congregations they serve — so desperately need in these critical times.”

— Brian D. McLaren, author/speaker/activist

“Hessel provides an indispensable guide to help white preachers re-translate the Christian story in light of the biblical, theological, and historical research of scholars of color. This book is not a primer on preaching about racism: rather it shows you how to center everyday anti-racist practices into your weekly sermon preparation. Becoming anti-racist is ongoing work, and Hessel cares for the reader without sacrificing her prophetic claim that to follow the way of Jesus is to take part in dismantling racism in the United States today.”

— Dori Baker, Forum for Theological Exploration

“If you want your faith community to keep or regain a truly credible public testimony, read this book. Carolyn Hessel lays out a straightforward imperative for preaching about racism and leading congregations in ways that counteract the poisonous effects of white supremacist assumptions. The book provides the guidance we need to face an often daunting task. Our current historical moment provides the urgency for this kind of prophetic leadership. May God provide us the courage to follow through.”

— Matthew L. Skinner, Luther Seminary, and cohost of *Sermon Brainwave*

“Despite frequent discourses on race/racism and the awareness of its tragic history in our country, the lack of knowledge among Euro-Americans about the roots and manifestations of racist ideology in our society is shocking. This lack of awareness is prevalent on many levels, including individual, political, and institutional. Racism in the church has devastating effects upon its victims, as well as upon church ministries. Carolyn B. Helsel is courageous and prophetic in tackling such a controversial subject. . . . It is incumbent upon faith leaders to preach on issues of race and racism in genuine and practical ways if we are to reach our congregants. Toward this goal the book is a must-read.”

— Samuel Cruz, Union Theological Seminary

“As a pastor, professor, and preacher this book gives me courage, strength, and a determination to preach to the dried-up bones we call the church. It is my prayer that faith leaders will find here in this book fresh hints of God’s unfolding future, along with a charge and challenge to confront the great issue of our time: racism. Carolyn Helsel has masterfully crafted a book that engages today’s preacher and allows us to find our own voice in the pulpit. I find this book a hope-filled account of God’s unwillingness to give up on God’s preacher and Christ’s Church. This work of homiletical art should be read and consumed by all.”

— Robert W. Lee IV, Appalachian State University, and author of  
*A Sin by Any Other Name*

“Perhaps no subject is as fraught for the preacher as race. And yet perhaps no subject is as vital for churches to grapple with theologically today. Helsel expertly guides preachers and communities into a homiletical imagination that can help transform these communities by centering and embracing the good news that Jesus has delivered us from the multifold sins of racial superiority. Eschewing facile calls to unity masquerading as privilege while embracing the complexities of the witness of scripture, theology, and proclamation, Helsel is both unflinching about the need for such transformative preaching and honest about its challenges. In this way, she offers preachers and laypeople alike a path toward the kind of repair our world yearns for most today.”

— Eric Barreto, Princeton Theological Seminary, and coeditor of  
*Reading Acts in the Discourses of Masculinity and Politics*

PREACHING  
ABOUT

A GUIDE FOR  
FAITH LEADERS

CAROLYN B. HELSEL

RACIAL  
JUSTICE  
MATTERS



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*Dedication*

*For my parents,  
Jeanne Amacker Browning and Robert Browning.  
Thank you for loving all six of your children equally,  
seeing the gifts in each of us.*

# Contents

<b>Prologue:</b>	1
A Quick Guide for Busy Religious Professionals	
<b>Chapter 1:</b>	9
Preaching to Ourselves: Beginning with Gratitude	
<b>Chapter 2:</b>	15
The Role of Interpretation and Recognition	
<b>Chapter 3:</b>	25
Communicating What Racism Means	
<b>Chapter 4:</b>	43
Talking about Racial Identity with White People of Faith	
<b>Chapter 5:</b>	55
Biblical Preaching about Racism	
<b>Chapter 6:</b>	69
Theology for Preaching about Racism	
<b>Chapter 7:</b>	85
Strategies for Preaching and Beyond	
<b>Appendix:</b>	97
Preaching about Racism in Context—Sample Sermons	
Notes	113
The Work Continues: Select Bibliography	125
Acknowledgments	131

# Prologue

## A Quick Guide for Busy Religious Professionals

You're busy. I know. Meetings to attend, people to visit in hospital rooms, a sermon or message to write. The relentless coming of holy days when your community of faith expects you to have a word ready. Expectations on you to inspire. To bring glory to God. To proclaim a word from God to the people. To bring hope. To make meaning of the most recent tragedy or international crisis. To call people to action. To calm fears. To evoke gratitude and kindness. To point listeners to the neighbors in our midst, the neighbors across town, the neighbors of our own faith tradition, as well as those of other faiths, the neighbors around the world who we are called to love as we love ourselves.

You have a lot to think about, and heavy thoughts weighing you down. Your call to ministry is a call to do hard things, and preaching is one of them. I do not want to add another heavy load to your burden. I know the concerns that make your job challenging enough as it is.

However, there is another challenge that has nagged you in the back of your mind that you may not give voice to very often. It goes by different names, though it tends to lurk in the background, trying to go unnoticed. Some call it "bias," others "racism," perhaps "white privilege,"—even "white supremacy." It may be stated as a demographic observation: "*predominantly white.*" Or, "segregation." It shows up in the form of white nationalism rallies, and also in political language about immigration. It appears in discussions of criminal justice: racial profiling and police brutality, practices of "stop and frisk," the "school-to-prison-pipeline," and mass incarceration. In some communities, there is talk of racial reconciliation. In others, an insistence that reconciliation cannot happen without reparations. Or, in some communities, where whites are becoming the racial minority, there is growing fear and resentment on the part of whites toward nonwhites they see "taking their jobs." And with that, a door in your mind shuts. Your brain closes off this nagging idea that is too complicated and too divisive.

If you are white, there may be times when racism remains utterly hidden from your consciousness. However, that is starting to change. That is why you are reading this book. You have a lot of other things

to attend to, but you have chosen to pick up this book and read what it has to say—because you are sensing that this is something you need to understand, that needs to be part of your own spiritual growth, that you need to incorporate into your preaching in order to be faithful in your own calling.

As a white Christian, as a preacher, and as a professor of preaching, I have been thinking about this issue for more than 10 years, and I spent several of those years in full-time studies to try and come up with ways to help other preachers like myself be able to preach about racism in white congregations. My journey began in seminary when I first awakened to the reality of racism, and I felt ashamed that my Christian upbringing in white communities had sheltered me from this reality. It was also a stressful part of our country's history: I began seminary in the fall of 2001, with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 occurring only an hour away from my seminary. In the aftermath of our national grief and shock, Muslim Americans and other citizens of Arab descent became targets of hate crimes and new forms of racism. After seminary I worked on the U.S.-Mexico border as a hospital chaplain and witnessed firsthand the deadly risks persons take to seek refuge in this country. A year later I was ordained to serve in a church that was home to many military families, with members being called away to serve in the new wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Over these years, in the news and in my reading, I saw the complicated intersections of race with militarism, our national debates on immigration, and the fear of strangers, but I struggled with how to talk about it without offending these men and women who had made significant sacrifices already for their country and who continued to serve their community with loving faithfulness. Add to this the fact that from my own experience, talking about racism was always uncomfortable and made me feel ashamed. How could I preach about racism in predominantly white congregations without simply making listeners feel ashamed or guilty?

I answered that question through returning to school and getting a Ph.D., but then I had to re-translate what I had learned from an academic tone to one in which I could communicate to an audience broader than the five people who read my dissertation. My first book, *Anxious to Talk about It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully about Racism*, was written for people in the church. I tried my best to write without academic jargon and from my heart, modeling a kind of dialogue that can build relationships with people across different backgrounds. In *this* book, written for you, fellow preachers and religious leaders, I still will be writing from my heart; I also will be bringing to the forefront some of the theoretical foundations I have found most helpful in framing my own preaching and teaching about the subject to others.



I also want to broaden the audience: I write not only to other white Christian leaders, but to *all* faith leaders. After publishing my first book, I heard from members of other faith communities who said: “Why is your book just for Christians? People in my faith tradition need to talk about this too.” Communities of faith are locations ripe for compassionate service. White Christians are not the only people wanting to learn more about how to have these conversations. People of color read my first book and participated in workshops I led, and they told me they needed ways for talking about racism too. Persons of faith of all colors who have identified that racism is a problem in our society want tools for talking about racism in their own communities. I write as a Christian with a particular view of scripture and theological perspective, and so I know that not all Christians will agree with everything I offer here, but I hope if you are reading this from another perspective, you can make use of what you find here in your own context.

Knowing how busy you are caring for your community, I have made summary suggestions at the end of each chapter, enabling you to pick up this book when you have time and gain some ideas for preparing thoughtful and sensitive sermons or messages on this important subject. I also have included references and footnotes in this book so that you have other resources to turn to when you want to learn more and suggest studies for your worship community. My last chapter focuses on the process of preparing talks and ways you can work beyond the pulpit or lectern to engage your congregation in the hard work of addressing, understanding, and taking action against racism. My main goal is to make it as easy as possible for you to talk about this truly difficult subject in your congregation. I hope you agree we need as many people as possible talking about this and trying to find ways to work together in the world today.

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## Responding to Questions about This Work

To navigate the potential objections to preaching about racism, you’ll want to be prepared with responses to the following common questions.

### ***1. Aren’t you perpetuating racism by talking about race? Why do we have to make such a big deal about it? It will go away if we stop bringing it up!***

Racism *IS* a big deal, a bigger deal than we would like to believe. Not talking about race and racism has been a strategy our society has used in the past, but it has not worked. People continue to have biases that they act on, with the biggest impact falling upon communities of color.

If religious leaders do not talk about it, and if our congregants are not able to talk about it, our biases will continue to harm others. Also, by not talking about it, we are discounting the stories of men and women of color who experience their race as having a daily impact on their lives. If we do not talk about it, it feels as if we are ignoring their pain. As people of faith, we are all called to attend to the suffering of one another. In order to attend to this suffering, we need to first acknowledge that it exists. Racism continues to exist, and refusing to name it will not make it go away.

## ***2. Shouldn't people of color be the ones to bring up this subject?***

This question addresses my own racial position as white. Since I do not experience racial discrimination, how can I talk about racism? Here is how I answer: Racism began with white people using it to justify enslaving African peoples, and it was white Christians who argued for slavery on biblical grounds. White people as a group continue to benefit unfairly from a racist system. This is why white people need to take responsibility to do our own work, to learn about the struggle against racism, and to teach one another.

People of color are frequently expected to speak on behalf of everyone of their race or ethnicity, or to represent the experiences of *every other* black or brown person—when, in truth, they can only speak from their own experiences. It is exhausting and emotionally draining to do this work; people of color have other full-time jobs they need to attend to, without having the added responsibility of always being the educators of white people. In many settings, people of color become the “token” diversity members, sitting on extra committees to ensure adequate representation of minority groups within an organization. This too, comes at an emotional cost. While representation is important, it is unfair to expect a small number of people to do extra work so white people can feel like we have taken into consideration their diverse perspectives. We need to do our *own* work, not only in educating ourselves, but also in educating other white people.

Faith communities are ideal places for these kinds of conversations. Persons know one another and tend to trust each other. In this atmosphere, we can accompany one another in our discomfort. Communities of faith are often still the most segregated groups within our society: you are more likely to be surrounded by persons of the same race when you are worshiping than when you are in school or at work. So if you are in a predominantly white congregation, it is especially important that white people take responsibility for educating one another, since there are few

people of color in your midst to share their experiences, and those who are present are probably not eager to be the “token race person.” We need to do our own work, and we need to do it in our faith communities.

### **3. What kind of accountability do you have to communities of color?**

I have been asked this question before, and it comes from a place of appropriate suspicion. The suspicion is this: there is a long history of whites “speaking for” other groups, without fairly or honestly representing their views. How can you, the reader, trust that I am not going to perpetuate racism by unfairly representing the real struggle people of color continue to face?

For asking these questions, I say, “Thank you.” Thank you for knowing about the challenges and pitfalls of whites talking about racism without actually committing to doing the work to dismantle racism and white privilege. Thank you for holding me accountable.

I also am continuing to grow and learn. I am part of a group of scholars who mostly come from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in Texas. We are working on an Oral History Project to record personal stories of racial discrimination. I read the work of scholars of color who write and research racism and who write about the experiences of people of color in the U.S. Other scholars of religion and homiletics who are people of color have read my first book, heard me present at conferences, and support my work.

However, none of this makes me immune to racism or to perpetuating harmful stereotypes, or making mistakes that hurt others. So I ask for your prayers as I continue this work, that I will remain open to the discovery of new ideas, and remain grateful for the moments of repentance and conversion that I continue to have along the way.

I encourage the same of you, dear reader. If you are white, continue to develop relationships with persons of color and seek out their advice and counsel. A pastor friend of mine said that she realized talking about racism meant she needed to be in more places where she felt uncomfortable, being the minority in spaces where people of color were the majority. She expressed the feeling that she couldn’t share stories with her congregation if she was not present with others who are experiencing these stories. If we are isolated, we cannot offer ways of bridging the divide within our own communities.

At the same time, do not turn to people of color to help you feel like a “good white person.” We have to keep doing this work even when no one is there to tell us: “You’re doing this right.” As a character in Chimamanda Adichie’s novel *Americanah* has said: “Racism should never have happened

and so you don't get a cookie for reducing it." So please do not turn to people of color as a way of validating your work. At the same time, allow for people of color in your life to call you into a deeper engagement with the subject. Accountability is another way of saying: we are all in this together, and we need one another in order to make a difference.

#### ***4. How can I avoid sounding political?***

Religious professionals have told me that their congregations are tired of the political divisiveness they see throughout the country, and their congregants do not want them to bring up "politics" in their preaching. Talking about racism in sermons sounds like taking a political stance. They wonder, "How can I focus on preaching about racism when members may leave if they think I'm 'too political'?"

Politics are never value-neutral nor faith-neutral. Persons making political decisions base those decisions on their own values as well as on their beliefs about faith. People who share the same faith tradition can vote very differently from one another and support different policies based on what they value. Key for religious leaders who live in "purple areas," where there are numbers of people on both sides of the political spectrum, is to focus on values shared in common. Rather than telling persons to vote a certain way on candidates or policies, encourage conversations about who is impacted by the decisions of political candidates and their policies. Listen to perspectives that share different values.

At the same time, scriptures from all the world's religious traditions are clear about caring for those who are suffering, those who are oppressed, those who have been treated unjustly. When having these conversations in your congregation, are persons who have been treated unjustly represented? Do they have voice in these conversations? The goal is not to try to make members vote a certain way, but rather to build bridges toward greater understanding.

Racism is always political. It impacts the "*polis*," or the "body of citizens," of a society. Political decisions to legalize slavery and segregation had to be overturned and outlawed by other political measures. A presidential order from Franklin D. Roosevelt forced Japanese American citizens to relocate to internment camps during World War II, and later presidential action by Presidents Carter and Reagan tried to make amends to the survivors and their heirs. It took political moves to grant citizenship to African Americans, women, and immigrants who were deemed "not white." The Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s addressed ongoing practices of discrimination, but there are still ways people are treated unjustly today. Invite your congregation into deeper conversations, not about political parties or candidates, but about the history of how political decisions have

impacted communities in your area. Who has been negatively impacted? What role has race played in these outcomes?

It is not easy to discuss racism in congregations. Calling it “political” is true, but it is also a way of saying, “I’m uncomfortable talking about this.” Invite members of your congregation who feel this way into conversation, listen to their stories, and, with compassion, invite them to stay engaged amidst their discomfort.

### ***5. Are you crazy? I could lose my job!***

This is a real fear, and I do not want to minimize the risks you take. As a minister, you are often facing immense pressure to meet the expectations of your congregants. When ministers fail to meet those expectations, either through inadequately fulfilling the duties of a pastor or upsetting the members, they have been let go or sent to other (and perhaps less desirable) church positions, depending on the polity of the denomination. Taking on a controversial subject you know may make listeners upset with you can be a very daunting task.

That is why I want to help you do this. I want to support you in this difficult work and to give you strategies for preaching about racism in your congregation. I want to encourage you, to help you muster your bravery, and to suggest that there may be more people in your congregation who are wanting you to address this subject than you may yet realize. You may be surprised. I have encountered persons who have grown up in the Deep South, who I would have never guessed would be receptive to talking about racism, come up to me with tears in their eyes, grateful I spoke about it.

I know this is hard. And yet having responded to the call to ministry, you have already been doing hard things for a long time. I’m grateful to you for continuing the conversation. My prayers go with you on this journey.

# Chapter 1

## Preaching to Ourselves: Beginning with Gratitude

In light of your busy schedule, dear preacher, let me cut to the chase: preaching about racism needs to come from a place of gratitude.

Not shame, not guilt, but gratitude.

Gratitude is what motivates us to preach about racism: we do this work to share with persons we love the ways they can know more fully the breadth of community God is calling us to experience, and to point to the work of God already in our midst, redeeming the brokenness of the world.

Gratitude as our motivation means we engage in these conversations in the same way that we tell people about the best aspects of our faith. Sharing this good news comes from a place of gratitude: God has redeemed us, and we are still being redeemed. And we want to tell the world about this good news.

It seems counterintuitive to speak of gratitude and good news when you're talking about something as terrible as racism. And gratitude is complex: in the history of race in this country, whites told enslaved Africans to "be grateful" for the kindness of their slaveholders. More recently, persons of color have been insulted with the words such as: "You should be grateful we even let you into this country!" Demands for gratitude or expectations for others to be grateful are oppressive. Demanding gratitude is not "good news."

Instead, I place no demands on you to "be grateful," and I encourage you *not* to tell your congregation to be grateful, but I will also *invite you* to see how gratitude can help people envision talking about racism in new ways.

As a Christian preacher, I have been called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. But as a *white* preacher, I have a special calling—to name the sin of racism that has plagued white Christians for hundreds of years, to help other preachers do the same, and to help white people find ways of living that acknowledges their whiteness, and yet no longer allows

subconscious assumptions of white superiority to go unchallenged in themselves or in others.

For the past 10 years, I've been mulling over this question: How can white preachers preach about racism to predominantly white congregations? The question followed me as I graduated from seminary and entered ministry, serving first as a hospital chaplain on the U.S.-Mexico border, and then as an associate pastor in a majority-white congregation in Texas. The question kept demanding my attention as I became associate director of admissions for Princeton Seminary. The question became so persistent that I enrolled in an additional master's degree program, studying part-time while continuing to work full-time as a seminary administrator. I focused on the history of African American preaching traditions and white preachers' attempts to address racism in the past, as well as black theologians' responses to racism. I felt like I was just scratching the surface. By then, the question was so loud I could not deny that I was being called to find an answer: How can I help other white pastors like me talk about racism? So in 2010 I left a good job with benefits to pursue a Ph.D., just after the major economic recession, when voluntarily giving up a good job to enter academia (where the jobs are already scarce) was considered *crazy*. But the question kept calling, and I had to answer.

As I moved into my Ph.D. studies at Emory University, I began finding more interdisciplinary approaches to understanding racism, drawing from linguistic anthropology, philosophies of justice, theologies of sin, and narrative theories. Consistent themes that emerged include how the word *racism* has changed over time, and that racism is hard to understand if you are not a person of color. These two themes developed for me into the challenge of recognizing racism and the challenge for whites of recognizing ourselves as white within a racist society.

As I approached the dissertation-writing stage of my program, I discovered a book by Paul Ricoeur, a hermeneutic philosopher whom I had studied during a seminar taught by my Ph.D. advisor, Tom Long. Ricoeur's book *The Course of Recognition*, a published series of lectures delivered shortly before he died, centers on the challenges of *recognition* in three senses: cognition, identity, and gratitude.<sup>1</sup> These three forms of recognition gave me a framework for describing the challenges I saw white people encountering when talking about racism.

Focusing on recognition as having a *cognitive* component put a label on the challenge of different definitions and understandings of the word *racism*. At the same time, simply understanding the word *racism* did not clear things up. Definitions of racism may not translate to a deeper recognition of racism's ongoing presence in the world. In my experience, it often took listening to how racism impacts real people to recognize it: hearing and seeing that, yes, racism is real, and much more prevalent than we previously thought.

The *identity* aspect for whites, recognizing ourselves as *white*, and needing to change personally and as part of a larger unjust system, also proved challenging, creating discomfort and a sense of identity-disorientation. If we are to recognize ourselves within the history and legacy of racism, we have to talk about how racism has impacted *all* people in society, and confront the distortion of our identity resulting from the racial violence that has given priority to whites and dehumanized persons of color.

For those of us who are white, the recognition of our white identity creates significant challenges for talking about racism. This is where racial identity development theory<sup>2</sup> can be a tremendous help. The theory, developed by psychologists, clarifies the predictable *emotions* that emerge when learning about racism. The stages of developing a racial identity point a way toward a healthier self-understanding for whites, even while learning how to challenge racism in society.

Ricoeur's third element of recognition includes a turn toward *gratitude*, since recognition's definition includes this "unexpected guest" of a meaning. Gratitude is often expressed as recognition—"I want to recognize everyone who helped me get to where I am today." Recognition points us outward in gratitude toward others. This final element of the framework became a radical discovery: What if, instead of preaching toward guilt, our preaching on racism could move us to *gratitude*?

But what could gratitude have to do with talking about racism?

Here is where the light bulbs started going off for me. I felt the connection between gratitude and the good news I'm called to preach. The text known as the "great commission," to "go...and make disciples" (Mt. 28:19), which is in many ways the first Christian call to go and preach, takes place after Jesus' resurrection. We preach because of the good news of Jesus Christ, the news that God did not let sin and death have the final say, but instead raised Jesus from the dead, declaring victory over sin and death. If you are a religious leader from a different faith tradition, what is the "good news" that you share with your members? And how does gratitude play a role in the communication of that good news?

For me, awareness of sin and God's response to sin had been a central part of my religious formation as a young person, attending youth group and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and other high school campus ministries. From scripture, I learned that humans are sinners—that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23)—and yet Christ died for us. Christ rose for us. And Christ reigns for us. That is *good news*; I don't go out and try to live differently because I feel guilty for what Christ has done. The shame of sin does not motivate us to live new lives. We let our love for God drive us. Our gratitude for what God has done gets us excited to live humbly and to work for justice. Gratitude is what motivates us.

Within liberal Christianity, preachers have tended to avoid *sin* language because of the ways it has been used harmfully in the past.<sup>3</sup> At the same



time, deeper reflection on our theological language can be a helpful way of communicating the large-scale societal and spiritual effects of racism. The idea of “original sin,” that all people are born into sin before they have committed actual “sins,” may not be a popular theological concept in mainline Christianity; however, after learning about the history and legacy of racism, the concept of sin as being inherited makes more sense to me. Even Calvinism’s seemingly draconian notion of “total depravity” (the idea that sin infects all of us and all of society) helps me articulate how racism can keep showing up in even the most well-meaning people and places. And the sense of shame and guilt that I once felt when talking about sin resonates with how I feel when confronting the reality of my complicity in racism.

Language about sin can help us describe with greater accuracy the widespread harm that racism inflicts upon *all* people. It also points to the source of our hope, in that our faith declares God’s redemption of sin. Because sin language leads us to talking about redemption, it does not leave us in despair. Talking about sin points us to God, toward our hoped-for-futures, and the *telos* of how God created us to live in community with one another.

### Not Recovered, but in Recovery

For many white people, there is a lot of discomfort in talking about racism. Some of that discomfort stems from the fact that we cannot change the color of our skin. We can’t just repent of racism and say we are no longer “white,” because society still sees us as white. Even if we name our “white privilege,” that privilege still continues to follow us whether we want it to or not.<sup>4</sup> Examples of this include the kind of treatment white kids receive from their teachers in school.<sup>5</sup> If we go to get a mortgage, we are more likely to be approved and get the best interest rates.<sup>6</sup> If we want to live in a “nice” neighborhood, we don’t have to worry about someone telling us the house we want to buy is suddenly “off the market,” and wondering if it was because of the color of our skin.<sup>7</sup> We will not be asked to show proof of our citizenship, forced to carry around our papers wherever we go lest we get thrown into a deportation holding center.<sup>8</sup> When we get upset, we don’t have to worry about someone calling us an “angry black man or woman.”<sup>9</sup> When we get pulled over for speeding, we don’t have to worry whether we will make it home alive.<sup>10</sup>

We can’t change the color of our skin. If you’re white, you cannot *stop* being *white*. But as sinners, we never stop being *sinners*, either. We never get to the point where we can say: I am sinless. As persons who have gone through recovery programs for alcohol or drug addiction may say: “We are *in recovery*, not *recovered*.” As persons of faith, we never reach perfection. As white people, we need to remember that we can never get to the point

of being totally anti-racist or free of racism. This is important because too often we assume we are innocent and that we are not racist; we assume we are not to blame for the problems of racism. But as persons living in a society still divided by race, benefitting unfairly from these social divisions, we need to acknowledge that we will continue to be part of the problem even when we try our best to work against racism.

However, here is where our gratitude comes in. This is also where the language of faith helps me articulate the personal impact of learning about racism and how it impacts our relationship with God. Confession leads to gratitude, when we recognize God's continual work and presence in our lives.

Gratitude emerges when we realize that, while we still fall short of our religious ideals, while we who are white still benefit from unfair advantages, God is still working in us and through us. God continues to use us to do good work, even if imperfectly. We give thanks for the lives of men and women who have gone before us, who have shown us how to courageously stand up for what is right—even while they themselves were far from perfect. Gratitude that God is still working in us and through us gives us the courage we need and the humility to go out and try again and again at our feeble attempts to make this world a better place.

Gratitude also flows from us when we recognize the gifts this journey brings us. When others share their painful stories with us, when someone tells us a story of how they have experienced discrimination, we feel deep gratitude, knowing that sharing such stories can often feel like reopening a wound. We look at the history of segregation, and we are grateful that community and communion is happening across racial lines even in spite of this dreadful past. For the loved ones in our lives who call us to greater awareness of racial discrimination, we give thanks.

Gratitude is also a process, an invitation to stay engaged. When strong emotions of others make us feel threatened or defensive, we may not automatically feel grateful. But we can remind ourselves that sharing in a difficult conversation is a gift, and, instead of responding defensively, we can ask ourselves, "How can I respond with gratitude? What am I thankful for in this interaction? How is what this person is sharing a gift to me?" We can create new habits in ourselves of cultivating gratitude, even in the midst of painful and challenging conversations.<sup>11</sup> This happens across racial lines, as well as when we are talking with other white people who do not share our same perspective. Staying engaged in difficult relationships can result from our commitment to gratitude.

Gratitude also involves our own participation—recognizing that we have gifts to share with others. We feel grateful that God has given each of us individual gifts, placing us in particular spheres of influence where we can have these conversations with others. We are grateful because we have been called to work and to participate in God's continuing kin-dom

building.<sup>12</sup> We express gratitude for being called to live differently, to live into the new life God has for us, and to celebrate the relationships and community God is preparing for us.

For all this, we say, “Thank you!” Gratitude starts with you, faith leader, accepting that you have gifts to offer the world in addressing this challenging subject. I am thankful for you, and I hope you hear this message as a sermon to yourself (as I hear it speaking to me) that you have gifts to share; so thank you.

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### **Strategies for Preaching: Start with Gratitude**

1. Find your own place of gratitude: What are the gifts you have received along the way that have prompted you to preach about racism?
2. What are the gifts you are being called to share with others?
3. What are the gifts of your congregation that they bring to these conversations?

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