

Preaching Racial Justice

Edited by

Gregory Heille,

Maurice J. Nutt,

and Deborah L. Wilhelm



ORBIS BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York

Preface

Gregory Heille

“Maybe it really is like it says in the Bible,” I offered. “God is a shepherd and we’re his flock and he watches over us.” . . .

Finally Albert whispered, “Listen, Odie, what does a shepherd eat?”

I didn’t know where he was going with that, so I didn’t reply.

“His flock,” Albert told me. “One by one.”¹

In the novel *This Tender Land*, as quoted above, two teenagers in a non-Catholic residential Indian school in 1930s southwest Minnesota talk about God. Their view of God aligns with the same sort of personal and culturally wounded experiences that, for many, still put the credibility of the church (and God) in an untenable position today. In the institutional Petri dish of this fictional residential school, racial prejudice and sexual abuse are all mixed together—and in the eyes of many, nothing much has changed to this day.

The authors of this book are preachers, teachers, catechists, and pastoral ministers who have worked to make a Catholic response to racism that is intelligent, pastoral, and prophetic. Though we can hardly be surprised to hear when our colleagues in church ministry find themselves in a reluctant, anxiety-producing, or seemingly untenable position regarding preaching or teaching about Christian responses to racism, we say: Do not give up! Our

1. William Kent Krueger, *This Tender Land* (New York: Atria, 2019), 53–54.

vocation to God's mission challenges us as disciples and ministers of the Good News of Jesus to learn how to hold in creative tension the competing values at play in society, our lives, and the church—for the sake of the gospel. Together we can make a difference.

Our listeners have different expectations about our teaching or preaching or even talking together about such hot-button social issues as racial justice. While many preachers and teachers want to address complex social problems, they understandably are concerned about appearing too political or polarizing or losing listeners.² Young adult and adult formation about the church's social teaching is thin, and many listeners are adamantly opposed to hearing social issues mentioned from the pulpit. Other listeners, especially the historically and culturally oppressed among us, consider it our Christian responsibility to confront these social issues.

Like our listeners, we preachers and teachers also diverge, differ, and argue about the politics of today's racism, why the church would involve itself, and whether we can meaningfully respond. We might do well to listen to Martin Luther King Jr.'s teacher at Boston University, Howard Thurman, who, in his iconic *Jesus and the Disinherited*, writes: "Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall."³

After the 2014 death of Michael Brown, the Ferguson Commission in St. Louis called upon civic and church leaders to serve as catalysts for the uncomfortable conversations, alignment, and empathy needed to effect positive change. The report, "Forward through Ferguson: A Path toward Racial Equality," also calls for applying a racial equity lens, asking who is disproportionately impacted or left out. These questions and these conversations are

2. See Leah Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), Chapter 2, "Preaching about Controversial Justice Issues."

3. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949; Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 1.

acts of leadership. They can and should happen in the church—in local congregations and neighborhoods and on a diocesan and national scale.

In this book, we authors believe this dialogue can be a source of tremendous creativity for mission in the church. This challenging work of gospel reconciliation can measure how we participate in God’s mission, a reign-of-God mission that, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., has to do with person-to-person transformation into *beloved community*. We preachers and our communities can become “a living sermon.”

Can we, the church, say *presente* and find a way forward?

The Church’s (and God’s) Credibility Is at Stake

How can we pastoral ministers, church theologians, and the entire baptized community courageously talk about the anti-gospel values that feed the institutional racism, sexism, and elitism that so pervasively infect our popular culture, our churches, and our homeland? Can we effectively represent an experience of God and religious institutions in which, to use Pope Francis’s image, the church is a field hospital? As the authors of this book think and talk about Christian responses to racism, we aspire to truth and reconciliation. We believe that God has sent a *good* shepherd. In Jesus’s name, our goal is to help heal the trauma by charting some paths toward preaching and teaching in the beloved community.

To achieve the goals of truth and reconciliation, we believe it will help if church ministers and academic theologians consult together to bring the tentative insights of dialogue to the problem of the church’s response to racism. One voice from the theological side of this conversation is Katie M. Grimes from Villanova University. In “Breaking the Body of Christ: The Sacraments of Initiation in a Habitat of White Supremacy,”⁴ Grimes makes a disturbing assertion about the abuse of baptism in the practice of

4. Katie M. Grimes, “Breaking the Body of Christ: The Sacraments of Initiation in a Habitat of White Supremacy,” *Political Theology* 18, no. 1 (February 2017): 22–43.

slavery: “Baptism served slavery in the following ways: it severed the kinship ties of the women and men it helped to enslave, it re-branded their bodies with marks of white ownership, it coerced slaves into Christian community, it served to infantilize enslaved adult women and men, it aggrandized white women and men as masters of both heaven and earth, and it helped to make and maintain race.”⁵ Katie Grimes writes that “black slaves were incorporated into Christ’s body not so much by eating the body of Christ, but by being eaten by it.”⁶

In this view, if white-bodied church folk unknowingly or unintentionally engage in segregationist practices that effectively bless white bodies over and against all others, then the church’s sacramental signs are corrupted. In all probability, the gospel is no longer preached or heard. Grimes argues that the church cannot save itself if it takes white flight from the otherness in its midst. Grimes correctly argues that there can be no social redemption for a segregationist church with white supremacist ritual practices without a more porous understanding of the wall of apartness separating the church from the larger culture. The church is part and parcel of the larger culture and remains deeply influenced by America’s original sin of racism.

Theologian M. Shawn Copeland from Boston College also has looked at racism through the lens of baptism, though she has done so differently. In a lecture on “Memory, Emancipation, and Hope: Political Theology in the Land of the Free,” twenty years before Katie Grimes’s article, Copeland responds to the original sin of five hundred years of slavery, racism, and white-body supremacy in the Americas with a theologically direct invocation of the core message of the Christian gospel (the kerygma):

What sort of Church are we? What sort of Church must we become? We cannot live authentically—that is, attentively, intelligently, reasonably, responsibly—under the aegis of the

5. Grimes, “Breaking the Body of Christ,” 24.

6. Grimes, “Breaking the Body of Christ,” 31.

reign of God and sleep through the distortion and deformation of the whole people of God.

In rethinking ways of being Christian or ways of being Church, we must begin by taking up a place before the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. It is here that we grasp the enormity of the human suffering and oppression of the Indians, Africans, and mestizos. It is here that we grasp the meaning of a triumphal church's collusion (intentional or not) in that suffering and oppression.⁷

Shawn Copeland acknowledges the political and theological challenge of claiming hope and agency for change in the face of the cooption of our sacred practices by impersonal systemic sin:

Thus, the incarnation, that is to say, the concrete, powerful, paradoxical, even scandalous engagement of God in history, changes forever our perception and reception of one another. Jesus of Nazareth forever changes our perception and reception of the human other, of humanity. For humanity is his concern, neither merely, nor incidentally; rather, humanity is his concern comprehensively, fully. It is for the full and complete realization of humanity, for our full and complete realization, that he gave his life.⁸

As church people, we invoke the power of the Holy Spirit to guide our efforts to disempower and heal the effects of slavery, institutional racism, and privilege corrupting our communal and sacramental experience. Shawn Copeland reminds us of the iconic stumbling block of the cross. How, in Word and Sacrament, can we authentically invert this "experience of contrast" that is racism?⁹

7. M. Shawn Copeland, "Memory, Emancipation, and Hope: Political Theology in the 'Land of the Free,'" *The Santa Clara Lectures* 18 (Public lecture, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA, November 9, 1997), 10.

8. Copeland, "Memory, Emancipation, and Hope," 15.

9. "Experience of contrast" is an expression of theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, OP.

A past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and author of the much-acclaimed *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Father Bryan Massingale is a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and Professor of Theological and Social Ethics at Fordham University. In his book, Massingale correctly asserts, “Racial solidarity is a *paschal* experience, one that entails a dying of a false self and a renunciation of racial privilege to rise to a new identity and a status that is God-given.”¹⁰ He then speaks to the “radical equality conferred in baptism” and the “social egalitarianism at the heart of the Lord’s Supper.”¹¹

We, the authors in this book, aspire to believe as Massingale believes: “The faith community thus serves as a kind of incubator for new life. Through its rites and sacred story it offers the assurance of new life and identity on the other side of loss and transition. In this way, it can sustain the journey undertaken to a fuller and more authentic racial identity, once purged from the set of meanings and values that justify racial supremacy and white privilege.”¹²

The challenge for preachers and teachers is to put pastoral flesh on these theological bones. The church’s pastoral-theological conversation can be difficult when competing interests come into play. Just as stepping from one foot to another makes possible the controlled falling that we call walking, it is okay and even necessary—however awkwardly—for practitioners and academics to engage the topic of racial justice and the church. This thoughtful, tentative, and heartfelt articulation and dialogue can be halting, scary, upsetting, and, at times, exciting, inspiring, and transformative. We are resurrection people who believe that Christ is alive in us individually and corporately, calling us to be about God’s mission in the world. This mission bridges the racial divide and announces salvation and healing for all of God’s people.

10. Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 121.

11. Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 123, 124.

12. Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 122.

***Christ Calls Us to Be Prophets,
Pastors, and Practical Theologians***

This book contributes a Catholic voice to the literature of preaching about race. In vetting contributors, each of whom participated in a community of practice over nine months of online dialogue and during a one-week writing retreat in St. Louis, the editors sought multiple voices and perspectives to model the core values of dialogue and inclusion constituting authentic values of catholicity. The editors have kept in mind three voices traditionally understood to contribute to theological conversation and reflective practice—the scriptural and liturgical tradition and teaching of the church, the traditions and voices of culture, and the *sensus fidelium* or thoughtful understanding of the believing community.

The book includes three sections of five diverse authors each: The Preacher’s Journey, Black Lives Matter, and Ancestors and Stories. Please search for evidence of the tradition, culture, and believing community in the book’s interplay of chapters and sections.

To consider how the voices of tradition, culture, and the believing community contribute to preaching or teaching about racial justice, we can do well to consider the possibilities presented by the insights of Kenyatta R. Gilbert, who teaches preaching at Howard University School of Divinity. In *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching*, Gilbert speaks of African American preaching in ways that also apply to preaching racial justice. He says preaching “is truly catalytic, holistic and most completely actualized only when marked by three consecutive orientations—the scriptural voices of *prophet*, *priest*, and *sage*, which, theologically, follow a trinitarian pattern,” and he describes this as “*trivocal preaching*.”¹³

We encourage our readers to consider Gilbert’s following definitions of these voices. When preaching and teaching about racism or other hot-button social issues, we encourage our readers to draw upon and employ all three voices.

13. Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 11.

The prophetic voice is a mediating voice of God's activity to transform Church and society in a present-future sense based on the principle of justice. The prophetic voice speaks of divine intentionality—what God demands and expects of God's own human creation. The basic biblical feature of this discourse is that it opposes idolatry, particularly self-serving and self-deceiving ideologies. It refuses the temptation to absolutize the present; it drives toward a new, unsettling, unsettled future. It is a word that speaks to the predicament of human suffering from the perspective of God's justice. This speech, at all times, assumes a critical posture over and against established power. Last, the prophetic Word is a word of relentless hope.¹⁴

The priestly voice is a sacramental mediating voice of Christian spiritual formation that encourages listeners to enhance themselves morally and ethically by integrating elements of personal piety . . . and abstention from cardinal sins. . . .

The priestly voice of Black preaching emphasizes the importance of congregational worship, . . . intercessory prayer . . . [and] the "ministry of presence."¹⁵

The sagely voice is a wisdom-focused, dialectical, communal voice of both preacher and hearer. Sages interpret the common life of a particular community of worshippers.¹⁶

We recommend these ministerial voices of the prophet, pastor, and practicing theologian as indispensable to preaching a social gospel. However, consider Kenyatta Gilbert's caution that a long-term preaching strategy that privileges any of these voices at the

14. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise*, 12.

15. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise*, 12–13.

16. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise*, 14.

expense of the others is impractical and may lead unnecessarily to polarization.¹⁷

*What Is a Holy Saturday Spirituality
for Witnessing to the Trauma of Racism?*

Two vocabulary words proving helpful to those who read widely to learn about the history and effects of racism are *trauma* and *caste*. As behavioral counselor Resmaa Menakem points out in his discussion of white bodies, Black bodies, and police bodies in *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Minds*,¹⁸ racialized trauma touches each of us. To understand this, we can systematically explore the trauma of racism, as done so well by Isabel Wilkerson, the author of *Caste*.¹⁹ In a *New York Times* article a month after the killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Wilkerson described America as an old house. She writes: "Like other old houses, America has an unseen skeleton: its caste system, which is as central to its operation as are the studs and joists that we cannot see in the physical buildings we call home. 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 400-year-old social order. Looking at caste is like holding the country's X-ray up to the light."²⁰ Later in the same article, she writes: "Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure

17. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise*, 61.

18. Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017).

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

20. Isabel Wilkerson, "America's Enduring Caste System," *New York Times*, July 1, 2020; updated online, January 21, 2021.

that holds each group in its place. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity.”

Resmaa Menakem’s insights about the trauma of racism also can be considered theologically, both in the academy and by preachers and teachers in the field. Shelly Rambo, a theologian at Boston University School of Theology, has been strongly influenced by the writing of Resmaa Menakem. In her *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, Rambo refers to a question posed by Swiss theologian and priest Hans Urs von Balthasar in a radio broadcast on Easter Saturday, 1956:

He asks them to take a step back and to think about the day between the account of the passion and the resurrection: Holy Saturday. Positioned between Good Friday and Easter Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar, Holy Saturday is often overshadowed by the two days and remains, in many traditions, a day that merely marks a turn between the events of Jesus’ death and resurrection. . . . Holy Saturday, if attended to theologically, provides the key to interpreting Christian redemption.²¹

As you read, we invite you to meet Jesus in the tomb, in the “already and not yet” in-between place from which we struggle to understand and negotiate our Christian life. What is a Holy Saturday spirituality for preachers and teachers giving witness to the trauma of racism?

The authors of this book are not looking for a naive and easy fix to racism. Instead, we wish for our readers to witness the trauma of systemic racism, to testify to the relevance of the gospel in teaching and preaching about a Christian response to racism, and together to find ways forward to beloved community.

The authors wish to express a word of gratitude for the support of the Lilly Endowment Initiative to Strengthen Christian Preach-

21. Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 45–46.

ing. With this book, we also reach out to the extended ministerial community of Aquinas Institute of Theology and give thanks for Aquinas Institute's mission: "Impelled by the Catholic faith and the Dominican mission, Aquinas Institute of Theology educates men and women to preach, to teach, to minister, and to lead."