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The Living Stone and a Chosen People

Reflections on I'm Black. I'm Christian. I'm Methodist.

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**4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but
chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones,
are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood,
offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus
Christ.**

1 Peter 2:4-6 New International Version (NIV)

Recently, I was blessed to take part in an open panel webinar sponsored by the United Methodist Foundation in partnership with the Arkansas Conference's work on dismantling racism. The webinar centered on a recent book titled **"I'm Black. I'm Christian. I'm Methodist,"** edited by the Rev. Dr. Rudy Rasmus. The panel consisted of a few of its contributors, Rev. Dr. F. Willis Johnson, Rev. Dr. Lillian Smith, Rev. Justin Coleman, Rev. Dr. Erin Beasley, Rev. Dr. Tori C. Butler, and Rev. Dr. Vance P. Ross.

I enjoyed listening to each of the panelists as they shared from their chapters in the book, and provided the audience with wisdom and reflective thoughts, spoken through the lens of each of their unique and insightful perspectives. I found the challenge to webinar participants, along with other individuals, communities, churches, and greater society, summed up in a few reflective questions:

- Are you merely looking for additions in pigment, content or prophetic leadership?
- Are you willing to be? Are you willing to be the transformed Church?
- What are you willing to offer to create positive black content in our churches?
- Are you willing to support initiatives to include and strengthen black churches whether it means starting fresh or retrofitting existing churches to become positive, vibrant, essential black churches?

As the panelists asked these questions, I found myself reflecting on the title and its prophetic implication and reality to people like myself.

Rev. Dr. Johnson, led the conversation, setting the tone and with extreme intention prophetically sharing some inescapable realities that need to be considered and kept in

context as we made use of this and any future moments of reflection. We must realize we have a responsibility to hear the voices of the past, then learn and finally mature into the Christians, leaders, teachers we are supposed to be. Things like entitlement, whiteness, whichever way it is identified, is a reality in the landscape of our existence. It is as sure as each breath that there will be a residual deposit of countless years of oppression, hate, and systematic or systemic racist processes tethered to each moment lived.

Understanding, identifying, and knowing this is the beginning of living into a transforming opportunity.

However, we are responsible for the narrative, the work, and the future of what the world and the Church will become. Honest dialogue to the ugliness of systemic racism and its impact on every level of society is important, but only half of the conversation. There also has to be intentional work to become prophetic witnesses. We are called to be reminders of how things were and how they ought to be. So, my blackness is not and should never be the issue, but the witness, perspective, and experience I have to share should be the focus. As Rev. Coleman began, he went a little deeper to address one of the underlying identities associated as a pre-curse maker to African American people in this country: "Blackness."

I was moved by how Justin identified and quantified the term "Blackness"; How his encounters and unique perspective challenge us to view "Blackness" as more than social identity. It is a statement of cultural, theological, and historical significance to both individual "Blackness," and its contributory, irreplaceable part in the conversation of race and anti-racism.

In short, "Blackness" is a gift, not a mark. When identified, expressed, and shared, it is a gift that adds to the development of a larger, brighter picture in the vision of self, community, and yes, especially the church's life. The imagery of superheroes with a mission to use their powers of "Blackness" to protect, add meaning, and offer cultural, spiritual growth to every situation, every conversation, every collective that had the opportunity to experience the power of "Blackness" from these superheroes.

However, I saw the importance of keeping an eye on the ball. These days, real lifelong engagement is essential and a vital part of the equation for real transformation. Too often, as people face the reality of the ugliness of racism, it makes a person begin to question their trajectory, discussions, input, and longevity. But Rev. Dr. Smith says that engaging the issue is only one part. One has to allow themselves to lean into the uncomfortability which comes through this work.

Then she said something I have had to bite a lip, close my eyes, kneel and pray over so many times: "Trust the process." It is only in our resolve and "sold-outness" we can live out the expectation of answered prayer and transformation. Nothing can change if somebody doesn't offer themselves as a holy living sacrifice to God. But this leads to some uncomfortable places and realities.

Rev. Dr. Beasley reminds all that these wounds run deep. To begin the process is also to take ownership of your part in this conversation. No one is immune or excused from the conversation. Each person has a role and a responsibility; that is a fact. Rev. Dr. Butler continues this conversation by calling for people to lament and be intentional in the work on “self” and how we stay true to the honesty of the story. To make sure that this is not a checkmark box moment, but one of true transformation. All the things spoken, the lenses and the thoughts made for a real watershed moment. But I think some of the last ideas shared that day were important; ideas that take place after all the identifying, naming, and processing are complete.

Rev. Dr. Ross called everyone exposed to the issue of racism, its history, its forms, its constructs, and presence in our current narrative to a greater call and responsibility. That role will never be easy to accept, but as a doctor explains the health status of a patient and offers a prescription to foster healing, recovery, and transformation in the patient’s future health, so too must the church receive the prescription for healing and future health.

“Receive, take and commit to the prescription...” This idea means dedication to the processes and changes to assure the future health of the church. This is our call, this is our responsibility, and this will become our legacy.

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