

Having the Conversation:

A devotional series for dismantling the
sin of racism and building God's
reconciliation

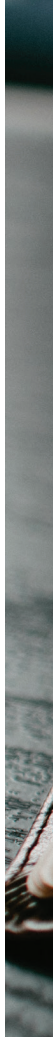




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Having the Conversation

By Rev. Rashim M. Merriwether Sr.

Since May 25, 2020, our nation has faced one of the most difficult conversations surrounding systemic and systematic racism, with the death of George Floyd. Where many have looked to external reasons for the existence of racism, inequality or social justice, it has become clear that this issue is not a locational problem, but a global condition that has affected people of color on every level throughout society including in the church. As we try to unpack, process, and reflect on the issues of systemic racism, many tussle with its effects and the ways it has impacted our own connection as United Methodists.

In the Articles of the Constitution of the United Methodist Church, members confirm we are united by confession of faith in Jesus Christ. We also affirm our belief that as United Methodists, we are part of the universal church, in Jesus Christ as one Body. We also affirm that every person is not only unique, but has sacred worth as a child of God, and we commit ourselves to the healing, wholeness, and inclusivity of all persons. We affirm that racism is a sin, its effects have been destructive and have marginalized people throughout histo-

ry, and it still exists today. We commit ourselves to seek out racism, its varied forms, structural existence and those individuals who have either promoted its perpetuation by action or complicit behavior. We understand the importance of confronting and eliminating racism whenever, and wherever it is found.

As we try and unpack the importance of the past year's events and their connection to a distorted past filled with stories of pain, suffering and structural marginalization enacted on people of color, the reality that racism has infiltrated every platform of society including the church is clear. It brings home the significance of having the conversation about racism and what it means to the Church, and the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church. More importantly, what does scripture tell us about the early church, racism, and how we might find a way to have vulnerable conversations about an issue which has been a destructive ideology that affects us all?

Under the leadership of Bishop Gary Mueller, a task force was assembled to discuss and develop a study aimed to aid congregations in having the conversation about racism and its effects on the

church. Focused on the book of Acts, the hope is that, through this study, conversations on dismantling racism and fostering inclusivity will emerge. You will hear from different authors and blended voices discussing who Jesus is...

JESUS IS...

What do we see when we think about church?

What are some of the images that come to mind?

What are some of your earliest memories of church?

What memories still linger with us today?

These are some of the questions I would like for us to think of as we begin this study on Jesus Is...

The story, “That’s my Jesus”, is set on the backdrop of a small town, representative of many of the small towns throughout the south, where the “Main Street”, is more than a thoroughfare, but a racial dividing line of the community. This normality is challenged with the opening of a new church on Main Street.

That’s My Jesus

It was the first Lenten service where the city came together. For years, the city was divided by a railroad track, whites on one side and people of color on the other. Running parallel to the railroad track was Main Street. It was the main thoroughfare for the town. All businesses could be found on Main Street. The grocery store, the gas station, the KFC, the local auto store, the farmer’s co-op, city hall, the police station, fire department and even the barber were all on Main Street. On an average day, you might see lots of bustling from people across this street as they moved from store to store. However, on Sundays, Main Street was different. The people were not bustling, the stores were not full, but isolated on one side of the railroad track or the other. This was the way of life in this small town; this is the way things had always been.

But today was a new day, and there was bustling on Main Street. Why is this? Cause there was a new church in town and it was right on Main Street. Outside its doors hung a sign,

“This is God’s house, all are welcome.”

And it was this church where people from both sides of the tracks assembled for the first town Lenten service. For as long as people could remember, church was sacred, church was important, and church was separate. People went to a church that was familiar to them and looked like them. Now a new church has come and it was not on one side of the track or the other, and it had a welcome sign for all.

This action created quite a stir in this small town. A church on Main Street, a church that welcomed all people. It caused many to become curious as to what this church looked like. What were some of the decorations inside? Was this familiar to churches they knew? What type of Jesus would they encounter?

Over the next few weeks, the church mailed out flyers of invitation that said, “This is a time where we sacrifice our time, our schedules, and move out of what is familiar to receive what God has for us on Main Street. Come and join us Wednesday, February 17, at 6 pm, for our Lenten service, don’t be late. This is God’s house, all are welcome.”

It was now the 17th and many people were watching as the cars began to trickle into the freshly paved parking lot of the church on Main Street. People sat and watched as cars pulled in. There is Mr. Smith, who owns the auto-parts store; and there is Mr. and Mrs. Williamson who owns the grocery store. People began to file in one by one. Some White, some Black, some Indigenous. There were even people who were from another nearby town, who came to see what was going on at this new church on Main Street. Men, women, children, old and young, all now gathered to see what was different about this new church on Main Street. And as the people entered and sat down listening to the music play softly, some could recognize the notes of the hymn being played. Some began to quietly sing the words in cadence to the melody. As the people sat awkwardly in silence, a mother and son sat on a pew trying to be unseen. As the son surveyed the sanctuary, he looked to the wall on the right side of the church and saw a picture of Jesus and said, “Momma, do you see it? They have a picture of my Jesus. That Jesus looks like me.” In another pew, a man recognizes another picture on the opposite wall and affirmingly whispers, “They have a picture of my Jesus on the

wall.”

Across both sides of the walls of this small church were different pictures, painted in different ways, by different people. But they were all paintings of the same portrait. All were pictures of Jesus. They were White, Black, Native, Asian, each picture, each frame, all were of the same person ... all were of Jesus.

After a short time, the pastor came out and said, “peace be unto you!” And this church of people, from both sides of the track, responded, “And also with you.” The pastor then shifted to a place in front of the congregation and shared from Scripture. (Act 4:32-33)

Acts 4:32-33 New International Version (NIV)

32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Je-

sus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all...

Just like the people in this pericope of Scripture experienced the chaos and pain of many different nations, so too did the people on Main Street. Their leaders and kinsmen created division through hindering the truth of the story of Christ, which is that God’s grace continues to provide clarity and peace for those who would hear, receive, and believe that JESUS IS... Jesus is the message for this hurting world. Jesus is the way for the lost, to be found. Jesus is the promise of God’s love and grace. Jesus is, Jesus is, Jesus is.

As we hear from the authors of this study, I challenge you to see the stories through their eyes. See, and experience, what and who Jesus is for you and I am sure you will find that the picture you have of Jesus is more similar to others than you think. Drawing all believers into one heart, one mind, in one faith, in one baptism. Jesus is...



About the Author

Rev. Rashim M. Merriwether Sr. currently serves on the Arkansas Conference staff as the, Special Assistant to The Bishop on Ethnic Concerns and Initiatives. He has also served as the pastor of Hunter United Methodist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas for the past six years. He is married to his wife Angie of 32 years, they have four sons, Aaron (34), Rashim Jr (30), Mathias (24), and Isaiah (16).

Chapter 1

As United Methodists we believe that our worldview is shaped by the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Tradition, Reason and Experience are three parts of our thinking. But the most important part of all is the Scripture.

As we learn to identify and address racism, we believe that Scripture is our most valuable guide and resource in our Christian journey. In our attempt to find clarity, discernment and examples of how the Gospel of Christ handles issues of racism, inclusion and social justice, let us look through this first chapter, written by Rev. Troy Conrad.

The Miracle of a Mud Puddle

By Rev. Troy Conrad

Acts 8: 26 - 39

26 An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, "At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) 27 So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) 28 He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Approach this carriage and stay with it." 30 Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you really understand what you are reading?" 31 The man replied, "Without someone to guide me, how could I?" Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. 32 This was the passage of scripture he was reading: Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent so he didn't open his mouth.

33 In his humiliation justice was taken away from him. Who can tell the story of his descendants because his life was taken from the earth?

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?" 35 Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. 36 As they went down the road, they came to some water.

The eunuch said, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?" 38 He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Lord's Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing.

When I was a small boy growing up outside of Fort Smith, there was a city park there called Ben Geren Park. It had all the cool stuff like go-karts, a swimming pool, a putt-putt course and a small train that you could ride that was on a miniature track.

It was one of those little trains that ran off of a weed-eater motor and it had six or eight little passenger cars that didn't do anything but go around in a circle. But to my five year old imagination it was like taking the Trans-Siberian Railway. When we went to this park, I couldn't wait to ride the train.

One summer afternoon while standing in line for the train, I noticed something different about it. There was a new Conductor! As he made a turn around the bend, he looked straight at me and scowled.

The Conductor had always been the same sweet little old man in the bib-overalls and engineer's

hat. He would always smile and then slowly work his way into the Conductor's car after opening the gates and yelling, "All Aboard!"

I loved that guy. You always felt like he was an adopted grandparent and were definitely safe in his hands.

But today, instead of the safe and secure grandfather Conductor, it was this really scruffy-looking guy. He had a shaved head and a huge bushy beard. He was wearing a white tank top with tobacco stains all over it. His arms were huge and his belly lobbed over the waist of his pants..

As a little kid, I was scared to pieces.

But when the train pulled into the stop I had made up my mind that I still wanted to take a ride, even though the conductor was different and didn't appear happy to be there. Because of my hesitation, all the other kids had already gotten in the rear cars because those were the seats to have. I ran up and down the line of cars and finally had to resign myself to sitting in the front car. Even though it was right behind this really mean looking conductor guy.

I slid into the seat and did my best to hunker down so he wouldn't see me. And for the first time in my life, I couldn't wait for the train ride to be over.

A typical ride was three times on the oval track. The pace was always a slow and measured speed, just fast enough to be moving. We had made it around twice and I thought I was going to make it through after all. When, in slow motion, the sweaty conductor turned around in his seat and looked right at me. He grinned really big and I could see he was missing a tooth and said, "Hey, Troy! You ready to go fast?"

Ohhhhhh Myyyyyy Gooooodddnnnessss!!!!!!!
HE KNEW MY NAME!!!

I didn't have time to be scared. The back of my head clunked against the seat as the scary conductor dude put the small little train in high gear!

All of the other kids were screaming with glee, except me. The only thing I could think of was if I would break a leg jumping off this train.

Finally the train came to a stop and I jumped



Jesus Is... A Miracle Worker

out and ran to cling to my mom's leg. I was trying to sputter out that the mean looking conductor knew my name but I couldn't even make words come out of my mouth."

Then, I saw the conductor get out of the train and watched him walk over to us. And my mom did a strange thing. She gave this scary conductor a hug, tugged at his beard and said, "What's this, Billy?"

Have you ever watched those time-lapse videos of people being transformed into something else? Like the make-up videos of a famous actor putting on monster makeup? That's what happened to me. As soon as my mom said the word, "Billy" all of a sudden in my mind this big mean looking dude started to morph into my uncle. When I heard his name I hit him on the leg and screamed, "You scared the life out of me, Uncle Billy."

Have you ever wondered why we place such an importance on appearances? We're expected to dress a certain way, wear certain clothes, drive certain cars and live in certain houses. And if we don't do the things that meet expectations, then we're outside of the norm and in our own certain ways marked an outcast.

When God started the first Church, it

wasn't in an organized, neat and tidy way. The Holy Spirit was poured out on Jerusalem and usually when something is poured out, it does one of two things: It either fills the container it's being poured into or it makes quite a mess.

For thousands of people who traveled to Jerusalem to worship, seeking something from God, they were filled to the brim with a new life. But for the Pharisees, it just looked like a big mess. The Pharisees expected people to act, look and behave in certain ways, especially when it came to being the Church. To them, this whole Pentecost thing was nothing but a mess and the other people didn't look like people who could worship God.

Still to this day we are deceived by appearances. We see people who proclaim to be a Christian on Sundays and then on Mondays they will treat co-workers horribly. We see leaders in the church become embroiled in scandals of infidelity. We see some pastors on television and on social media who preach about the sacrifices of giving, but are living the life of luxury on their own yachts. Basically, we witness the idea of "Saturday sinners who become Sunday's ushers." But God doesn't care about appearances. Instead God sees the most important part of us. God sees what's in our hearts.

That day on the miniature train track I was so scared of the big, scary conductor, but when I saw him for who he really was and I loved him for his heart no matter what he looked like. The shaved head, bushy beard, stained shirt and missing tooth all vanished and I saw my uncle who used to pop wheelies with me on his motorcycle and would throw me up in the air like a windmill while I screamed with delight.

The Scriptures give us a few clues about the life of the Ethiopian Eunuch. Although he was a slave, he was allowed to serve as a personal steward for the Queen of Ethiopia and was entitled to all of the diplomatic pomp and circumstance given to visiting foreign dignitaries. This Eunuch was allowed to ride in the carriage with the Queen and this was especially significant in the fact that Jesus and his disciples had to WALK everywhere!

We learn that the Eunuch went to Jerusalem to worship, which would have been quite a feat

Jesus Is... Always Making a Way

since the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Temple, followed all of the Old Testament laws. One of those laws expressly forbids Eunuchs from worshipping at the Temple. (Deut. 23:1)

Because the ruling Pharisees and Sadducees were so strict on following the Law of Moses (after all, they killed the Son of God because of them), chances are that the Eunuch was probably turned away (from the Temple). It was obvious that the Eunuch wanted to become a Jew because he was studying the prophet Isaiah and attempting to worship in Jerusalem. But if he had been turned away at the Temple, it wouldn't have been because of his skin color. It would have been because of the genital mutilation that occurred often to slaves. Simply put, in order to become a Jew, you had to be circumcised. A physical impossibility for a Eunuch, due to their mutilation.

This Eunuch was feeling defeated as he had been searching for answers and looking to God's chosen people to help. He was travelling back home after being refused worship because of the exclusive Laws of the Pharisees. He was still needing God in a powerful way. He had risen to the highest standing he could in life but he wanted something more. He wanted something greater than what he was at that very moment.

It's not hard for us to imagine this lonely man riding in his carriage, trying to understand the Prophet Isaiah and praying to a God that men wouldn't let him worship. His prayer may have been something like, "Great and glorious God. Even though the priests won't let me enter the temple, I still need you in my life. Please help me to understand your prophet so that I may come to know you better."

The Eunuch looked up from his scroll and saw Philip walking along the road. As for Philip, he saw an amazing sight! He saw an actual scroll from the prophet Isaiah. To own one of these scrolls was a rarity only reserved for priests and the rich. Philip probably also saw the confusion on the face of the Eunuch as he read.

And then something miraculous happened:



God brought together just the right people at just the right time in just the right place for God's glory to burst into life!

They were two very different people. Philip had a Greek heritage and bore a Greek name. He also was from the same town as the Apostle Peter and may have been a fisherman. Philip's search for God began with John the Baptist before he traveled and learned from Jesus. Philip was courageous and boisterous and a very gifted preacher and teacher.

It didn't matter what their differences were. The one thing they held in common was an answer to the question of salvation. And the answer is always Jesus!

The Eunuch had been told that salvation could not come to him because of the physical damage done to him. But to God, all souls are precious, and with God, all things are possible.

What seemed like an accidental meeting became an answer to prayer. The Eunuch needed someone to minister to him and Philip needed to minister to someone.

God looks past all of our hurts, sorrows and differences and sees what is in our heart. When we, as the Church, learn to set aside our fears and differences and let the Holy Spirit work miracles, then that will be the day that everyone will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is

Lord!

We talked earlier about how the Eunuch had no hope of being accepted by the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem. The Scripture from Isaiah he was reading, can also speak volumes to his state of mind.

In our reading it says, "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent so he didn't open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was taken away from him. Who can tell the story of his descendants because his life was taken from the earth?"

The Eunuch's body had been broken by people who saw him as a commodity instead of a person. He suffered pain and immense shame. He had no hope of having descendants, children and grandchildren who could tell his story.

He was probably wondering if the prophet Isaiah was talking about him! Rejection and repulsion are things the Eunuch could easily identify with. How often have we read a passage from the Bible and thought to ourselves, "Is God talking about me?" How many sermons have you heard and thought that the preacher was speaking directly to you?

In God's Word we find the overarching story of salvation, but we also find ourselves. We find people, just like us, going through problems that aren't much different than the problems we face.

The Eunuch had no hope of being accepted by the world, but Jesus is always making a way.

When Philip heard the Eunuch's plight and prayer, the Holy Spirit reached out to him. God knew the problems the Eunuch was faced with. The rejection and the pain and the hurt. And in the middle of this emotional epiphany, God worked another miracle: God made a mud puddle.

That may not seem like a great miracle unless you've seen the desert roads that are between Jerusalem and Gaza. There's literally nothing there but rocks and sand. No shrubs. No water. Nothing for miles and miles but miles and miles of nothing. But through some fluke of nature, just the right conditions happened. Just the right moisture floated down from the sea. Just the right clouds formed and just enough rain fell to make a mud puddle along the side of the road.

Our God is the God of "just the right."

In the middle of this emotional and spiritual maelstrom, the Eunuch looked up and saw the mud puddle and then thought, "Could I too be accepted by God? A damaged body and all? Can I really be a follower of Jesus?"

He worked up the courage to ask this stranger that was sent by God.

Philip smiled and said, "Let's go play in the mud puddle!"

(Actually his words were probably a bit more holy.)

There is a reason God chose baptism as the universal sign of initiation into the family of Jesus

Christ. Under the Law of Moses, the sign of covenant was circumcision that prevented half of the population from being initiated into God's family. Through Baptism, however, everyone can become a child of God. Through the waters of baptism, we are given an outward sign of an inward grace. The waters of baptism are the most effective equalizers and symbols of social justice that could have been conceived. Through baptism we are all considered equal. Regardless of our backgrounds, our level of poverty, our nationality or skin color, through baptism, we are all brothers and sisters in Jesus.

It's important for us to understand that it is not the water (or a mud puddle) that saves us in baptism. It is the work of the Holy Spirit which has given us faith in Jesus. The waters of baptism are a symbol of the grace of God. What unites us to Christ is the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit throughout our lives. Through Baptism, everyone is accepted into God's grace. Even a lonely Eunuch.

The story of Philip and the Eunuch shows us that the Holy Spirit is present during a baptism even though the Eunuch had no right of acceptance and Philip thought he was on a very different kind of missionary journey. But when the waters of the mud puddle were poured over the Eunuch's head, the Holy Spirit proved one very important thing: God loves the world and everyone in it and will work miracles to prove it, no matter what their differences may be.

Questions to Consider:

1. Uncle Billy's appearance in comparison to the other train conductor made him seem "scary" to the young author. Can you think of a time when you were afraid of someone who looks different from you? How did you react? Were you able to overcome those feelings?

2. Can you think of a time in which you experienced seeing someone being ridiculed or treated differently because of their appearance? Did you act? Why or why not?

3. For the Ethiopian Eunuch, he had no chance of being accepted into a religion because of his genital mutilation and the religious rules concerning circumcision. Are there any rules in your church that could make someone feel like they can not be accepted for who they are?

4. The author says that Philip's directions from the Holy Spirit were probably

an answer to the Eunuch's prayer. What does this say about the power of prayer?

5. The Holy Spirit puts us on strange pathways. Can you remember a time in which your pathway crossed with someone and you felt that you were guided by the Spirit?

For the Group

One of the first personal converts to Christianity was a person that you would least expect in the Eunuch. This shows that at the very beginning of the Church, diversity was an important component. Why do you think we have lost that importance over the years?



About the Author

Pastor Troy Conrad is an Ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church. He currently serves as the senior pastor of Malvern UMC. He serves on several Conference Boards and takes an active role as a mentor to many pastoral candidates.



Chapter 2

One of the hardest things we face as Christians is change. As the mystery to God's Word is revealed, we struggle with vision, role and purpose. As God reveals, there is also a call to be transformed by the renewing of our mind and our commitment to God's plan. Each of us are unique, whole persons, who come with a context, a culture, and experiences which are not less than, but equally important to the totality of God's plan and the spiritual wholeness of the body of Christ. We can't allow our biases, traditions or preconceived assumptions keep us from sharing, and receiving what God has for the church. Rev. Dr. Naomi Rodgers shares from Acts 11:1-18, rethinking the old ways and allowing a transformation of our minds which will lead to changed lives.

Us or Them

By Rev. Dr. Naomi Rogers

Acts 11: 1 - 18

11 The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him 3 and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

4 Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance, I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. 6 I investigated it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. 7 Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. kill and eat.'

8 "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

9 "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'

10 This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

11 "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. 12 The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. 13 He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. 14 He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

15 "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. 16 Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Changing Minds Changes Lives

Acts 11:1-18 shows God's universal salvation plan for all of his people (every tribe and nation). It provides an example of resources and activities that show us how to dismantle our stereotypes and unhealthy beliefs. God shows no partiality through Christ Jesus' salvation plan for all humanity.

I invite you to enter this discussion with humility and courage as this was written to help reflect

on behaviors and engage in a larger critical dialogue on bias, identity, intersectionality, and privilege with vulnerability.

Our discussion will cover an open exploration of our ingrained beliefs, learning from Peter's example, and how we might increase our self-awareness about what the Bible teaches us about race and racism.

Appoint and delegate people in a small group to

take part in this role-playing exercise.

Roles:

- The Apostle Peter
- Cornelius, the Gentile Convert
- Jerusalem church representatives
- Jewish witnesses

Confession

Start the reenactment with Peter's Confession:

Peter had confessed what the vision taught him: "It is thought unlawful for a Jewish man to visit or associate with one of another nation. But God has shown me that I shouldn't call any man unholy or unclean." (10: 28-29)

"Peter" should share how this statement could be made today and let the church representatives and Jewish witnesses add to the conversation, as if they were hearing Peter in the moment.

Keep the conversation focused on the scripture, but feel free to expand upon the meaning.

Reflection

All: Ponder and reflect on personal experience of racial biases toward self or others. How does Peter's revelation equate with racial disparity in today's world?

Testimony

Peter: "I was also accompanied by these six brothers."

(These were Jewish brothers apparently, so the brethren in Jerusalem had not Peter's word alone, but six of their own brethren to confirm much of the story.)

All: Share and discuss how people may accompany us as we try to dismantle the racial prejudices against us or others.

Affirmation

Cornelius was a God-fearing Gentile. He was a most upright man who had the respect of the Jewish community in Joppa. He had seen an angel who had appeared to Peter.

Cornelius: Share examples of how you think Cor-

Jesus Is... Learning, Exploring

nelius would have lived his daily life in meeting and loving others.

All: Discuss any encounters with any God-fearing people of ethnicity that have demonstrated the ongoing relationship with our living Lord like Cornelius.



About the Author

Rev. Dr. Naomi Rogers is an Ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church. She is currently serving a two point charge at 16th Section UMC and Ward UMC. Rev. Dr. Rogers is a Korean-American and was the first ethnic woman to be ordained in the Arkansas Conference. She received her Doctor of Ministry degree from Memphis Theological Seminary. Rev. Dr. Rogers is married to retired Lt. Col Jerry Rogers and they have two sons, one daughter and 7 grandchildren.

Chapter 3

How do we handle rejection? In chapter three, we find that all voices matter. Each voice brings information, experiences, wisdom and enlightenment to the body of Christ. Each person is valuable and essential in the totality of the experience of the body of Christ. As we seek to discern and find understanding about racism, we must learn to embrace the stories of one another. It is only through the exchange of our stories can we hope to change, grow and transform our lives. In Acts 12:1-17, Rev Jennie Williams, helps us understand the importance of hearing all voices, even those society or culture deem less valuable.

A Voice for the Unheard

By Rev. Jennie McCain Williams

Acts 12: 1 - 17

Jesus Is... Listening

12 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. 2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. 3 When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. 4 After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. 7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

8 Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. 9 Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. 10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

12 When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. 13 Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

15 "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

Slavery was abolished in the state

of New York in 1827. One year later, in 1828, St. Augustine's Episcopal Church completed construction on a brand new Sanctuary. The new space boasted high arches, large windows with beautiful natural lighting, and rows of hand-carved wooden pews. It also included two hidden balconies deemed "slave galleries"

where African Americans were relegated in order to participate in worship. Even though their freedom was written into law, it hadn't translated into hearts or practice. Black folks could be present in worship, but their presence should not be visible.

These types of hidden seating areas were common in American churches for much of our history, and they served as a physical as well as spiritual statement about the fundamental priority placed on some individuals over others in houses of worship. Thankfully, these balconies are no longer overtly utilized to separate men from women, Blacks from Whites, or other subjugated groups. But in many ways the legacy of this separation lives on in our communities of faith based on how we are willing to listen to the experience of other Christians who are not "like us." This is certainly not a new problem in Christianity, as we will see in our story.

God Answers Prayers

God moved mightily in the early days of the Church. When I read stories like this one about Peter, I am amazed. It's not that we don't experience the "miraculous" today, but it seems like many modern miracles are so different from this one: shackles literally falling off of Peter's wrists, a heavenly escort walking him right past the guards and out into freedom! Peter had been impris-



oned by King Herod as part of a broader crusade against the followers of Jesus. It's very likely this divine intervention saved Peter's life, as Herod had already put the apostle James, Son of Zebedee, to death.

Though miracles like this may seem unbelievable, they still give us hope - hope that God will move in amazing ways even now. But don't let the excitement of the night overshadow the layers of social interaction in this story.

After Peter is released from prison by an angel of God, he went to find his people - who at that very moment were praying for his deliverance from imprisonment and death. When he arrived at the home of a disciple named Mary, he quietly knocked on the gates. A young servant girl named Rhoda answered the door and when she saw who it was, she was so overcome with joy that she forgot to let Peter in! Instead, she ran to interrupt the prayer group to tell them the good news. "Peter is here! He's at the gate!" she told them.

But then something strange happened. No one moved. The people didn't rush to the entrance of the house to see for themselves. Instead, they didn't believe her. They simply would not believe what this servant girl Rhoda was telling them. She wasn't credible, she was on the fringes of this small Christian community. Even worse, they called her crazy and told her she was "out of her

mind!"

But Rhoda kept insisting that what she had witnessed was true. The group at Mary's house rationalized that she must've encountered a ghost or an angel. Anything to avoid simply believing her. (Oh, the irony of Christians who cannot accept that God has actually answered their fervent prayers!)

Finally, they heard Peter knocking for themselves, and when they went out and saw that he was really there in the flesh, they were astonished and amazed. Peter told them about how he had been delivered from the prison and encouraged them to tell the other brothers and sisters about what God had done. It was truly a miracle!

Why is this story included in Acts? To remind us of the power of God? Sure, that's part of it. But this story is about more than just Peter's miracle. This story is also about a faith community who would rather call someone "out of their mind" than believe her, because she didn't have the right spiritual or social credentials. This story is about a young servant girl named Rhoda who witnessed the power of God firsthand and was so excited to share it, that she forgot to open the door and let Peter in. When she proclaimed what she had seen to the Church, they completely disregarded her testimony. It wasn't until they saw the evidence for themselves that they believed. This story is about an issue the earliest believers had to confront about themselves: would they truly value and include every voice in the Christian community?

What if this story is about us? What if there's something else we can learn from this group of early Christians? What if we can learn to open our hearts and our minds to the powerful witness of God's work in our world, even from those we assume could never be gospel tellers?

Believing people about their own experiences, even when they differ wildly from our own, is essential to the Body of Christ. Just as some of us are hands, eyes, feet, nose (1 Corinthians 12:1-17) in terms of our spiritual gifts, we also have a variety of essential perspectives, experiences, challenges, and witnesses to strengthen and enrich the Body.

Helping Hands

While I was in seminary, I spent a year as an intern in a community called Helping Hands.

arumc.org

Helping Hands was a ministry offered through the Lexington Rescue Mission that provided a space for worship, discipleship, and fellowship for clients of the Mission. We were an eclectic group. Many of the folks in Helping Hands lived with personality disorders, severe depression, physical or mental disabilities, and food/housing insecurities. It wasn't uncommon for someone to interrupt worship or group time to share very real and often harrowing stories of their own struggle with addiction or mental illness. But in this community, they were able to share. They were heard. No one tried to discount their experiences or minimize their visibility. These people became my community as

Jesus Is... A Voice for the Voiceless

well. They laid hands on me and prayed for me when I needed prayer, and they never made my struggles feel insignificant. I can't help but think if we had been in a more "typical" church setting, this probably wouldn't have been the case.

Have you ever felt like you're invisible? Have you ever heard yourself saying something, but it feels like the people around you just don't hear you? Imagine how frustrating it would be to have someone call you a brother or a sister in Christ, and yet never acknowledge your voice or your experience. It's painful to be overlooked, ignored, or unheard.

The reality is, there are too many folks in our local churches who go unnoticed. Or maybe they are conspicuous, but their witness to Christ's work in the world and in their lives isn't received by the community. The reason these difficult conversations about racial diversity and inclusion are essential in our Arkansas churches is because for far too long people have been silenced, relegated to the back, or hidden in galleries of our making, not God's.

We can't move forward until we repent of the racism in our past. But after we repent, we will begin to see spiritual healing and wholeness, which our faith in Christ promises.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. Rhoda likely felt like an outsider in the house church where she served. Have you ever felt this way in a faith community? Can you think of a time when you felt ignored, unseen, or unbelieved? How did you react? How did you overcome those feelings?*
- 2. Why do you think the church at Mary's house didn't believe Rhoda's witness? We never hear from or about Rhoda again. Imagine what her future in Christianity might look like?*
- 3. The author mentions being a part of the "eclectic" community of Helping Hands. Diversity comes in many shapes and sizes. What does your local church community look like? Is it a place where people of a diverse background would feel comfortable sharing deep struggles?*
- 4. Be honest, are there individuals or groups whose perspective or witness we prioritize over others in our local churches? Are there people you refuse to listen to because you simply cannot believe their testimony or experience?*
- 5. What are some practice steps we can take as individuals and as a church community to make sure we are not silencing the Rhodas in our congregations, or installing metaphorical galleries in our sanctuaries to make sure some people's presence or experience or witness is kept out of sight or out of mind?*

For the Group

Can you share a time in which you have felt like Rhoda? When no one would listen to what you were trying to say or just dismissed you out of hand?



About the Author

Rev. Jennie McCain Williams lives in Elm Springs, Arkansas, and is the pastor of Elm Springs UMC. Jennie is married to Brandon and is mom to Clarke and Ellis. Her passion is to create spaces in the local church where people from different cultures, ethnicities, and social statuses might find commonality and community. She values Maya Angelou's words: "I did what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better."

Chapter 4

Up to this point we have been called to identify, reflect, and embrace the reality of racism. We are being called to see the forms that racism has taken and the need to think, change and transform lives by submitting to the Word, will, and example of Jesus Christ. But, what does this look like? What do your words, conversations and actions show about your relationship with Christ? What does your life show about your understanding of racism? How do we move from discussion to action, and from action to change? Rev. Carness Vaughan leads discussion from Acts 11:19-26, in what being an example of Christ looks like.

Love, Grace and Salvation

By Rev. Carness Vaughan

Acts 11:19 - 26 NLT

19 Meanwhile, the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews. 20 However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. 21 The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

22 When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw this evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. 24 Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.

25 Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. 26 When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

Becoming Little Christs

In 1807, a new version of the Bible was published. It was hardly the first; the initial entirely-English translation of the Bible was in 1535, and many different versions have been printed since then. But it was unique, as it was the first Bible written exclusively for slaves. Commonly known as, "The Slave Bible," its full title was, "Select Parts of the Holy Bible, for the use of the Negro Slaves in the British West-India Islands."

This Bible is known not for what's in it but for what's not in it. It was intended for use by missionaries who were working with African slaves in the British West Indies. The slave owners did not want the slaves to learn anything that could incite rebellion, so this version of the Bible removed any verses, passages, chapters, or even in some cases entire books, that had to do with freedom, liberty, or equality.

According to Anthony Schmidt, associate curator of Bible and Religion in America at the Museum of the Bible in Washington DC, "About 90 percent of the Old Testament is missing [and] 50 percent of the New Testament is missing. Put in another way, there are 1,189 chapters in a standard protestant Bible. This Bible contains only 232."

The omissions include the entire account of Moses freeing the Israelites from Egypt, the entire Book of Revelation, and many key New Testament verses such as Galatians 3:21, "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus."

These slave owners knew then what we know now: The Bible is life-giving, freeing, and full of liberty and equality through Jesus Christ! What they saw as a danger for their livelihood, we know as hope

for the world. From its first pages to its last, the Bible reveals a completely new way to see the relationship with God and one another.

The Bible reveals the inclusive message that every human being is created in God's image; that every human being is loved by God, and called by God to steward the earth and care for it; that every human being is not only equally lost because of the fall, but that every human being is equally offered the gift of salvation through relationship with Jesus, who went to the cross not for one race or people but for all: "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

This message of inclusive love, grace, and salvation extends into the Book of Acts, and my guess is the Slave Bible omits many of its chapters too. Luke's account of the early church in the years following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus is full of powerful examples of the Gospel message being shared not just with Jews but with Gentiles (any people or nation or ethnic group that were not Jews from Israel). For this chapter of our study, we're going to be thinking in particular about the city of Antioch and its place in dismantling racism.

Following the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7, we see these words: A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison. But the believ-



ers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. Acts 8:1-4, NLT.

Luke then shares how Philip, Peter, and John went to Samaria, and later Philip and then Peter went on to Caesarea. Incredible ministry happened in those places, including the seminal passage in Acts 10 where through Peter's testimony the Gentiles there received the power of the Holy Spirit. Then we get to our scripture in Acts 11.

As you read the scripture, do you see what is happening?

The message of Jesus Christ is preached in Antioch to the Gentiles, and many people came to faith in Christ! A community of believers was formed, and it was so powerful that when Barnabas saw it, he couldn't wait to share it with Saul (Paul), bringing him there to witness it for himself. The two of them stayed there in Antioch for a full year, preaching and teaching and essentially pastoring this new community of believers. Then

Jesus Is...

The Good News

v. 26 gives us this really important word: “It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.” Before Antioch, groups of believers would have been called saints, brothers, or followers of the Way. But here in Antioch, people started calling this Jesus-community “Christians.” Have you ever considered why that was the case? What was it about these people that led to this name?

To fully answer that, we need to learn something about Antioch, and then something about the church at Antioch. In the first century, Antioch was one of three great cosmopolitan areas of the world, the other two being Rome and Alexandria. According to an article in Relevant Magazine from 2013, Antioch was referred to as, “All the world in one city.” The article then states,

It was where you could see all the world’s richness and diversity in one place. And the marketplace was its hub. Antioch was designed like most cities of that day: A circular wall on the outside, a marketplace in the center, with the interior of the city walled in a way that divided different people groups from one another...Enter Christ-followers.

Enter the Gospel. The Church came to Antioch and began breaking down the dividing barriers in a way that upset the society’s existing categories. People from all parts of the city—Jews and Gentiles alike—were suddenly coming together. This group of people was redefining community in a radical and unprecedented way, so much that a new word was needed to categorize what in the world was happening.

We see clear evidence of this in Acts 13. Here’s what Luke tells us about the church in Antioch: The church at Antioch included prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon (nicknamed Niger), Lucius from Cyrene, Manaen (a childhood friend of Herod the ruler), and Saul. Acts 13:1, CEB.

Why is this significant? Well, consider this leadership team. You have Barnabas, from the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean; Simeon from sub-Saharan Africa; Lucius from Cyrene which is in Northern Africa; Manaen from Rome and later the Middle East; and Saul from Tarsus, in Asia Minor.

These men, who were different races with different backgrounds and different cultures, all came together to lead this community of believers. This was a community where racism and prejudice was dismantled in the name of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. This was a community where people took seriously the call of God to love one another – not a select group, not a select race or ethnicity, not a select class or creed, but all.

When the people of Antioch saw this group of believers, this community that was so different, so counter-cultural, so loving and grace-filled and hopeful and Spirit-filled, there was only one name they could come up with to describe them: Christian. (For a more in-depth discussion, see John Ortberg’s sermon, “Is Christianity Pro-Slavery?” from which this insight regarding the Antioch Leadership Team comes from). “Christian” literally means follower of Christ, one who professes Christ as Lord and Savior and lives as Christ would have them live.

C.S. Lewis defined Christian this way in Mere Christianity:

The whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. If we do, we shall then be sharing a life which was begotten, not made, which always existed and always will exist. Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. We shall love the Father as He does and the Holy Ghost will arise in us.

He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has — by what I call “good infection.” Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.

To become Little Christs is the goal of every believer, and only as we become more and more like him will we be able to have an impact in this world on his behalf.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. Slave owners purposefully created a separate Bible for slaves. Have you ever witnessed the purposeful suppression of opportunity or knowledge as an act to control the actions of people?*
- 2. As you read and study Acts 11 and Acts 13, what do you think God wants you to know? How can the message of Antioch be brought into the church of today?*
- 3. Were you surprised by the diversity of the leadership team in Antioch? What message did this diversity send to the church community as a whole?*
- 4. What message did the diversity of the leadership send to the city of Antioch and the non-believers there? What message does it send to us in today's church?*
- 5. C.S. Lewis defines Christians as, "Little Christs." Do you like this definition? What does it mean to you? If Christians lived out this definition in the world, in our communities, and in our churches, how would things be different?*

Jesus Is... The Way, Truth and Life

For the Group

When Barnabas saw the powerful group of Christians at Antioch, he couldn't wait to share it with others. What do you think a "powerful group of Christians" should look like in today's world?



About the Author

Rev. Carness Vaughan serves as the Senior Pastor of St. James United Methodist Church in Little Rock. He has been a pastor in the Arkansas Conference for 25 years, serving churches of various sizes in various settings. He and his wife Ashley have been married for 28 years and have two children, Katherine (24) and Jack (22).

Chapter 5

We are all made in the image of God. We are called to be the light of the world, to not let the light be hidden, and to put the light on a stand and be shared. As we continue to learn and grow, we realize that the love of Christ is a natural progression of the transformation from the Holy Spirit. It may seem strange and sometimes abstract, but it is part of the transformation for allowing His light to shine through us.

In Acts 16:1-5 Rev. Dr. Ulysses C. Washington and Clarence Trice show us how Jesus truly is Lord of all.

Jesus Is...Lord of All

By Rev. Dr. Ulysses C. Washington
and Clarence Trice

Acts 16:1 - 5

1 Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

We Are All Made In the Image of God

Nevin Martell is a noted author who has written extensively on parenting. He shares this story about an encounter he and his son had with a stranger while grocery shopping.

“Is that your son?” the man suddenly asked, without any preamble, and with an aggressive edge to his tone.

I was sitting in the dining area of a local Whole Foods after finishing the weekly shopping with my 3-year-old son, Zephyr. We were both eating and laughing about something silly, simply enjoying a Saturday morning together. The unexpected question was from a 30-something African American man who had been giving me odd, furtive glances since we sat down. I figured that he thought he recognized me and was trying to jog his memory. I was certain we hadn’t met, so I was bracing myself for one of those semi-awkward, “No, sorry, I’m not who you think I am” conversations.

“Yes, this is my son,” I answered, a little warily.

“Hmph,” he snorted. “I didn’t think so.”

Now my defenses were fully up. “Why not?” I shot back.

He scrunched up his face, like he had just taken a bite of something distasteful. “There’s just something off about you two,” he said. Frankly, I wanted to knock him senseless, but I restrained myself. Who says such a thing to a complete stranger? How could he not see — for any number of reasons — that Zephyr and I were related? In my mind, there was only one reason why he would draw that conclusion.

“Is it because we don’t have the same skin color?” I challenged. You see, I’m white and my Ghanaian wife is black, so our mixed-race son is golden brown.

Now he was on the defensive. “Why would you say that?”



(cf. 14:20). Luke tells us young Timothy had a good reputation in the city of Lystra and that he was the product of a mixed marriage, an important point in understanding the circumcision of verse 3.

Give this consideration! “But he was of mixed parentage” (16:1). His father, possibly deceased (the tense in 16:3 may be taken to indicate this), had

“Because he has been calling me ‘Poppa’ since we arrived, he looks like me, we’re clearly very close and I’m obviously his caregiver,” I replied. “There’s nothing else.”

He huffed and he puffed, but I knew my verbal punch had landed. I left with Zephyr a moment later, unwilling to spend time around such negativity. It was not until I was sitting in the car that I realized how upset I was. I was angry that this stranger would question my paternity of my son because he couldn’t see past his own biases and stereotypical visions of a family. I was heartsick he could not see the love and connection between Zephyr and me. And I was outraged that anyone would think they had a right to confront a parent in such a way. Unfortunately, my experience is in no way unique...”

1st Century Cultural Issues

According to plan, Paul proceeded northward, this time on foot, through the Cilician gates to the cities where he and Barnabas had established churches on the first mission tour. This time they went from east to west and so reached the towns in the reverse order from their first visit—Derbe first, then Lystra, and finally Iconium.

At Lystra they found a disciple by the name of Timothy. Evidently Timothy’s conversion dated back to Paul and Barnabas’ first witness in that city

evidently refused to permit Timothy’s circumcision. Paul took steps to formalize Timothy’s Jewish status by encouraging him to get circumcised. In this way, he removed Timothy’s impediment to evangelizing unbelieving Jews of the region (cf. their previous hostility, 14:5, 19). At the same time, he reinforced the “cultural respect” component of the Jerusalem decree.

During Timothy’s life, the marriage of a Jewish woman to a non-Jew was not recognized as a legal marriage. In all instances of non-legal marriages, the lineage of the child was reckoned through the mother.

Culture, heritage and perhaps ethnicity were all in play. Paul never abandoned his own Jewish heritage. He probably wanted Timothy to be true to his heritage as well (cf. Rom 3:1f.). Thus, Paul had Timothy circumcised. It is important to remember however, that even though his mother could not convince Timothy’s father to allow him to be circumcised, she still taught her son how to love God. Timothy did not bear the sign of the covenant as a young man, but she made sure he did not lack the faith that circumcision implied.

Racial Disharmony

The racial disharmony that we observe today is not a new condition; skin color has long divided people. Our country is made up of many people

who are only a few generations removed from immigrant status. Though we all live among people of different skin colors, many look down on interracial marriages. Some even believe that these “mixed marriages” are prohibited in the Bible.

The Bible does speak to this in numerous instances. In Numbers 12 we read that Moses’ siblings, Aaron and Miriam, spoke out against him because he had married a Cushite woman. We know that Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest. Did Moses have two wives? Has Zipporah died and Moses remarried? Or is “Cushite” just a curious way to describe Zipporah? The answers to these questions are unknown, but in this passage from Numbers we read of Aaron and Miriam criticizing Moses because of his Cushite wife.

Cush was a region south of Ethiopia, in the same location as the present-day Sudan. Picture for a moment the prophet Moses with his staff in one hand, and the hand of his dark-skinned African wife in the other. Does this image surprise you? Aaron and Miriam were very disapproving, and they spoke out against Moses’ Cushite wife. God admonished them and caused Meriam to be afflicted with leprosy.

How did Moses react? He was filled with love and forgiveness and he prayed for his sister to be healed from leprosy. Moses understood that the people of Israel, including his brother and sister, needed more forgiveness, openness, empathy, and acceptance if they were to reach the Promised Land. Today, we need more of these same qualities.

Until 1967, interracial marriages were prohibited by law in the United States. At that time, the Supreme Court ruled that “the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual, and cannot be infringed by the State.” It took us over three thousand years to catch up with Moses. But even today, many share the outlook of Meriam and Aaron.

Author Nevin Martel tells another story about an Ecuadoran friend, Ana Maria, whose husband is white with a touch of Puerto Rican. When she began taking their interracial son, Luca, to the library, other mothers and nannies assumed she was a nanny. One nanny even asked her how much she got paid an hour. At first Ana Maria patiently corrected them, but she grew frustrated



and offended as time went on, as the same people kept making the same incorrect assumption. She began to dress up — goodbye yoga pants, hello pearls — before going out with her son in an unconscious effort to set herself apart from the nannies. Once she realized what she was doing, she was shocked and quit making these subtle adjustments to her appearance. This experience made her realize how much she was hurt by people’s assumption that she could not possibly be the mother to her own son, simply because her skin color was darker than his.

It is depressing to hear that mixed-race families are still subject to such short sightedness and bigotry. Though such families are becoming more common — a 2015 Pew Research study found that multiracial babies accounted for 10 percent of births in the United States in 2013, up from 1 percent in 1970 — this reality still has not sunk in to some segments of society.

This lack of enlightenment seems to give “nosy” strangers — who lack decorum, delicacy, and decency — the perceived right to question people’s choices, or to make assumptions that are deeply upsetting to the parents.

To be clear: It does not.

Paul - A Mentor to Timothy

In Acts 16, Paul is visiting Derbe and Lystra, “where there is a disciple named Timothy...” Paul had recently parted with his companion, Barnabas, and needed assistance to help him spread the Good News.

N. T. Wright, a New Testament scholar and an Anglican bishop, shares this story of a time when he was seeking to hire an important assistant:

There was a time when I had to choose a new close colleague to work with. It was difficult. There were some splendid people to choose from. Together with trusted friends and wise advisors, I prayed for God’s guidance, I did as much homework as I could, and I prayed some more. I called some key leaders together and we prayed for wisdom. We met some of the likely candidates. There was much talent, much giftedness, so many possibilities. We could see ourselves working with this person, with that person, with the other one too. Eventually responsibility for the choice came back to me.

I went for a long walk, praying as I went. Step by step, I found to my surprise that one applicant kept coming to my mind. I could see myself working with him, praying with him, laughing with him. I felt as though I would be able to trust him in the complexities of the work we are trying to do. I challenged myself. Was I just making it up? Was I just secretly hoping it would be him and forcing the decision? Back came the answer – No, this was not the case.

There was something special about this, a matter of shared vocation. And if you pray for wisdom about a particular decision, and then find that your mind starts making itself up in a way you had not expected, you either go with it or you imply that you did not really mean that prayer in the first place.

Perhaps Paul went through something like this before he chose Timothy as a travel companion and assistant. He may well have met Timothy and his family earlier. According to one of the letters to Timothy, both his mother and grandmother were believers (2 Timothy 1:5), and there couldn’t have been that many Christian families in Lystra, even by this stage. Paul knew he would need

help of various kinds and at various stages, and after his previous experiences he knew he had to have someone he could totally trust. He had become convinced of that in Timothy’s case. When, several years later, he mentioned Timothy in one of his most personal letters (Philippians 2:19-24) it was clear he had been right.

But there was a problem. Paul’s missionary practice was to go to Jewish synagogues immediately when first entering a new town. This meant that he and his companions would have to be acceptable as full-fledged Jews – acceptable to move freely among the Jewish community. Timothy had Jewish “credentials” – his mother was Jewish. But because Timothy’s father was Greek, he had not been circumcised.

Paul had just participated in a great conference in Jerusalem with apostles and elders to discuss the practice of circumcision and its requirement for the conversion of Gentiles. After much debate it was declared that “...we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.” (Acts 15:19). Paul and others were sent out to deliver the message to Gentiles that “...the Holy Spirit imposes no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols...and from fornication.” There was no longer a requirement for circumcision. (Acts 15:25-29)

Still, we read in Acts 16:3 that “Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and had him circumcised...” This was not because it was required to become a full member of God’s people. Rather, Timothy’s circumcision would make it much easier for him to assist in advancing Paul’s mission. (1 Corinthians 9:12, 19-23).

Conclusion

A product of a first century interracial marriage, Timothy represents the coming together of the whole world under the unifying confession that “Jesus is Lord.” For Luke, these ethnic labels were important, but not a determining factor in the composition of God’s people.

Timothy traveled with Paul spreading the Good News. He became a powerful symbol of the movement of the Holy Spirit in the last chapters of Acts. As a result, “...the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily (Acts 16:5).” What a wonderful result! Would it have been possible for an uncircumcised Timothy

to reach the people in the same way? Paul decided the observance of this ancient covenant was necessary in this instance so that Timothy could successfully assist in spreading the Good News among the Jewish people.

Jesus Is...A Friend

Questions to Consider:

- 1. Paul insisted that Timothy become circumcised. Why was this so important?***
- 2. Would an uncircumcised Timothy have been successful in ministering to the people along his travels?***
- 3. How might the Christian experience of an interracial couple or children of an interracial couple differ from the Christian experience of same-race families?***
- 4. Do you know any interracial family units? What positive impact does an interracial family add to faith communities?***

For the Group

When Barnabas saw the powerful group of Christians at Antioch, he couldn't wait to share it with others. What do you think a "powerful group of Christians" should look like in today's world?



About the Author

Rev. Dr. Ulysses C. Washington serves as Senior Pastor of Highland Valley United Methodist Church. He has decades of teaching, counseling and community development which enables him to reach others with compassion, warmth, transparency and love. He has a heart for social justice and working with marginalized communities and people. He is an anointed preacher of the Word and a gifted teacher.



About the Author

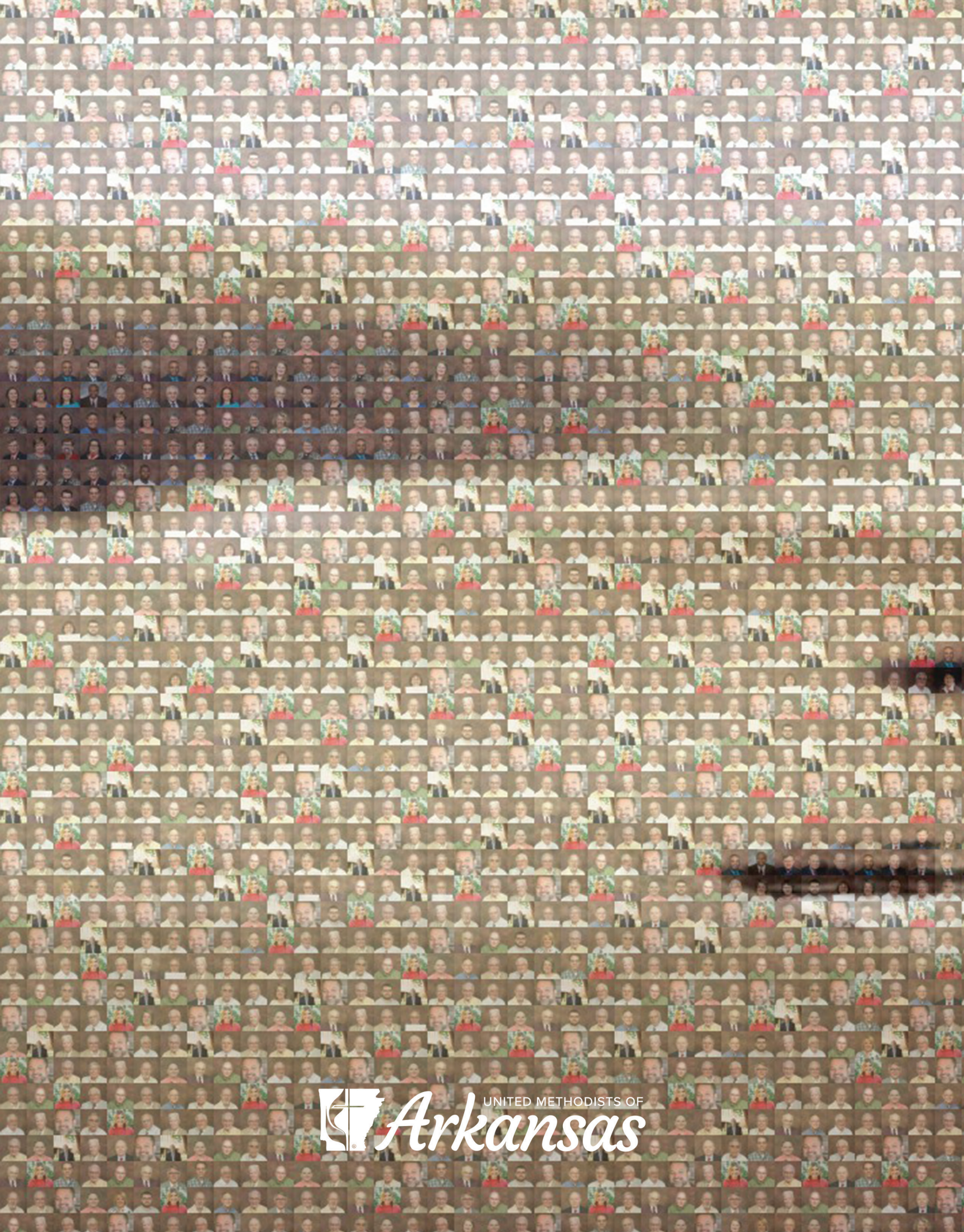
Clarence Trice is Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer of The Methodist Foundation for Arkansas. He and his wife, Kimberly, are members of Highland Valley United Methodist Church.

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