

Resurrection and the Courage to Confront Racism

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Ta-Nehisi Coates begins his riveting *Between the World and Me* by announcing that he is an atheist.¹ *Between the World and Me* is an honest but brutal, sorrowing, eloquent, hopeless lament over the intractability of American racism. Coates castigates those African Americans who speak of hope and forgiveness. Eschewing metaphysics or any possibility of God, Coates is unable to find much reason for hope of deliverance from the evils of racism. He says that for those like him who “reject divinity,” “there is no arc... we are night travelers on a great tundra... the only work that will matter, will be the work done by us.” Coates’ despair is justified: facing racism without God—with no hope but the work “done by us”—is hopeless. Then he equivocates, saying, “Or perhaps not.”²

If Easter is not true when it comes to racism, there are only four options: 1. Deny racism’s existence and refuse to talk about it (millions of white Americans); 2. Do what you can to get your own soul in order on this issue, keeping racism personal and subjective (evangelicals and pietistic liberals); 3. Rage and resigned despair (Coates); 4. Optimistic appeals to “make American kind again.”

When Paul said, “If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is useless and our faith is useless” (1 Cor 15:14, CEB), Paul suggests to me that without the resurrection, we preachers have little to say about the defeat of American white supremacy that can’t be heard as well elsewhere.

The first Easter sermon was not “A dead body has been raised from the dead; now you’ll see your loved ones in heaven when you die.” The first word was homiletical, “Go, tell!”

Tell what? “God has raised the (brown-skinned) body of crucified (lynched) Jesus from the dead! Now we know what God is up to, whose side God is on.” God rejected our violent rejection of Jesus not through violence, but by resurrection and triumphant, vindicating undying love—and then commissioned even those who betrayed and fled Jesus (disciples like us) to give the world the news about Jesus’ return to us.

The Unmentionable Sin

A powerful policing stifles conversation about race. In 2004, at the Democratic National Convention, then state Senator Barak Obama gave an address that introduced him to most of us. “We’re not Black America or white America or Latino America or Asian America,” said Obama, “We’re the United States of America.” The applause was thunderous; white America is desperate to believe that what Obama said is true.

While race is a humanly constructed fiction, white supremacist racism, bias and privilege, is a continuing fact. White supremacy—birthed in the godless European Enlightenment in support of European colonialism (with Christian complicity), cultivated to support American slavery and subsequent racial segregation—is an evil set of ideas and practices that continues to infect our economy, educational systems, and church polity.

Racism is not the only problem in the world, not the only way that privilege is

justified—there is privilege based upon gender, education, and class too. And yet, white supremacy is distinctively *our* historic American, Christian, white problem that continues to be consciously and unconsciously used by white people to maintain our power.

For Christians racism is not primarily an historical, sociological issue; racism is a problem *because of the God we are attempting to worship and to obey*. In the gospel, we are given the means to be color courageous, to talk about matters our culture would rather keep silent. Courage to stand up to demonic white supremacy is not self-derived. Paul says that in God's Realm, Jews and Greeks, slave and free, "these many are one in Jesus Christ" (Gal 3), a baptismal call not for color blindness or arguing that gender or race are inconsequential, but rather a theological affirmation that resurrected Jesus Christ enables a new eschatological community where conventional, worldly signifiers don't mean what they meant in this culture.

Race is a socially constructed, psychologically rooted, rebellious attempt to name humanity through human designations rather than through the name of Jesus. The defeat of racism is a call for more robust theologizing. This sort of sin requires a God who not only creates and loves, but also judges, converts, defeats, and triumphs.³ "Throwing this kind of spirit out requires prayer" (Mk 9:29).

A preacher is somebody called by God and the church to talk about matters that many folk would rather have left unsaid. Perhaps it takes a preacher to note the widespread fiction that racism is still a problem because a few people insist on talking about it. Imagine someone saying, "Hunger would be solved if nobody mentioned it."

In *Nobody Knows My Name*, James Baldwin quotes Malcom X ridiculing white America's unwillingness to talk about race: "If I know that any one of you has murdered your brother, your mother, and the corpse is in this room and under the table, and I know it, and you know it, and you know I know it, and we cannot talk about it... we cannot talk about anything.... And that kind of silence has descended on this country."⁴

The resurrection induces, enables, Christian conversation about matters the world lacks the means to discuss. Because of God's great Easter victory which signaled God's forgiveness, church is a community of truth where we are given the courage, even the responsibility, to say *sin*. The first step is for somebody to love the truth enough to call things by their proper names. Even in a society of vast denial, knowing the Easter truth about God (namely that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, 2 Cor 5:10), we are given the means to speak the truth about us.

The Power to Preach

Christianity is training in trusting the same God who raised brown-skinned, lynched Jesus to do the same for us. If any preacher stands up and preaches on race before a white congregation, it is a public demonstration that even in our conscious and unconscious sin, even in our evil actions and complicities, as in Christ's resurrection, God does not abandon the people who, in our sin, have attempted to abandon God. To paraphrase Paul,

If God is for us, who is against us? He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for both Black and white.... It is Christ Jesus who died, even

more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us. Will our racist sin separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment...or danger, or sword, our long sad history of racism, or its present ugly form? No! We win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. (Rom 8:31-35, 38 CEB, paraphrased)

On the Damascus Road, Paul had his life turned upside down by encounter with the risen Christ. That resurrection appearance forced Paul to review everything he thought he knew for sure about what was going on in the world:

At one time you were like a dead people because of the racist things you did against others, which were also offenses against God. You lived with the same racism that infects everybody else. You weren't even aware that you were disobeying God because of your bias and the way you looked upon people of other races. Just like other white people in this culture, you were on your way to self-destruction.

However, God is rich in mercy. God brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of our racist sin. God did this because of God's great love for us. You are saved by God's grace!...

You have been rescued from our racist bondage by God's grace because of your faith that God loves everybody, even you. This salvation is God's gift, not your achievement, not something you can boast about. Instead, we are God's grand accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do grand things for God, in spite of the way we were brought up. We are now free to live our lives the way God intended for us to live.

You were like Gentiles...outsiders who had no part in the promises of God to Israel. Though you tried to act like you were special because of your white skin, you were without Christ, strangers to the promises and plans of God because of your racist thoughts and deeds. In that world of white supremacy, you had no hope and no God. But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away from God and one another have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Christ is our peace. He made Jews and Gentiles, women and men, whites and Blacks into one group. With his body, he broke down the hateful barrier that divided us. (Ephesians 2:1-14, paraphrased, CEB)

This affirmation of miraculous reconciliation is also our vocation: the people who have heard this good news are elected, commissioned, and summoned by God to live this news, to speak up and to embody God-wrought reconciliation in their congregations and their daily lives. God has elected the church to be a showcase of what a living God can do for the world.⁵

Nobody but God can do the work for us and in us that reconciles us to God. Therefore *preaching that confronts racism begins with God*, focusing upon who God is and what God is up to in the world. A number of theological moves typically precede repentance in Jesus' name:

We hear that God is in Christ, reconciling the world to God and people to one another,
that Christ welcomed and died for sinners, only sinners,
that Christ, in his cross and resurrection defeated sin and death,
that Christ is the sure sign that God has, from all eternity, elected to be God for us and has elected even sinners like us to be for God,
that there is a place where repentance is promised, rituals of repentance are offered, and regular, continuing *metanoia* is encouraged (*i.e.*, church),
and that our future is not wholly determined by our history and our sin.
We are miraculously bound to one another in a new family, a holy people, God's politics, (*i.e.*, church).⁶

Preachers are not permitted to acquiesce to our racism or that of our congregations because God in Christ has not given up on us. We preach about race as those who believe that we have seen as much of God as we hoped to see in his world when we look upon a brown skinned Jew from Nazareth. To us has been given the truth about God, truth that we are commanded to give to the world.⁷

In the Resurrection Christ is more than a model for better preaching; he is the unsubstitutable agent of proclamation. We work not alone. Christ wants us to succeed at our evangelistic task, helping us in our weakness. "My Father is still working, and I am working too" (Jn 5:17). Our assignment as preachers is to invite, cajole, and welcome people into "the kingdom he has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races," as we say in our Service of Baptism. Preaching "works" because Jesus Christ—in the power of the Holy Spirit—works.

Many Americans, white and Black, tire of talk about race. People of faith who care have been butting their heads against this wall for a long time. And yet, Christ commands us not simply to think, to listen, and to include, but to *love*. White Christians have got to love our Black sisters and brothers enough to talk, to listen, to repent, to grow. Black Christians have got to love their white sisters and brothers enough to be patient, to explain, to teach, and to risk relationship.

I understand "racism fatigue," yet after Easter we are not free to grant sin sovereignty. No evil is safe from the incursions of a living Christ who is not only our Savior but also our reigning Lord, who demands not only love but also obedience. The keepers of the status quo have a stake in our believing that in regard to race, our histories enslave us, our psychologies determine us, and "people don't change," an attitude that Tony Campolo and Michael Battle scorn as "the politics of resignation."⁸

Gary Wills once said that if you are a white male, over fifty, and from the South (I'm all three), there is no way to convince you that people can't change. You have experienced such radical change in your world, your family, and your friends, and in your heart that you really believe the possibility of radical reorientation of heart and hands. Preachers will understand why I worked that Wills quote for all it was worth when I was bishop in Alabama.

When President Obama spoke at the fiftieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, he not only attacked those outposts of racist hate that produced the violence on that bridge. He also chided people, white and Black, who intimate that "bias and discrimination are immutable, that racial division is inherent to

America.” Obama countered, “If you think nothing’s changed in the past fifty years, ask somebody who lived through the Selma or Chicago or Los Angeles of the 1950’s.... To deny this progress—our progress—would be to rob us of our own agency...our responsibility to make America better.” Once again Obama demonstrated that he can preach.

When my extravagant Wesleyan assertions about the operative power of God’s grace are challenged, I respond, “I’m not the best person in the world, but trust me, you wouldn’t have wanted to know me before Jesus intruded and, despite my desires, commandeered me. By the grace of God, I’m so much better than I was bred to be.”

The closest I have come to Paul’s Damascus Road experience was when I was a youth. Even as Christ came to me before I came to Christ, I was the beneficiary of ministry from African Americans before I was able to receive them as Christ had received me. I grew up in the segregated South; I’m a product of an unashamedly racist culture. Every day I boarded a Greenville bus with a sign: *South Carolina Law: White Patrons Sit From The Front. Colored Patrons Sit From The Rear*. Nobody I knew questioned that sign, especially no one who sat next to me in church each Sunday.

My conversion came when my church sent me to a youth conference at Lake Junaluska and I was assigned a room with another sixteen-year-old from Greenville. When I walked in, there he sat on the bed opposite me, better prepared for me than I was for him. We had never met, even though he went to a school four blocks from mine and played on ball fields where we never ventured. He was Black.

I recall nothing from the conference sessions, but I’ll never forget our conversation that lasted until dawn. He told me what it was like to go to his church and not mine, his school rather than mine, his world to which I was a stranger. In a paraphrase of Langston Hughes, your Greenville was never my Greenville. By sunrise, I had my world skillfully cracked open, exposed, and also infinitely expanded, ministered to by another who was kind enough to help me go where I couldn’t have gone without help.

It was Easter all over again.

Notes

1 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Random House, 2015), 48. How can Coates be sure that his atheism, which he presents as an act of intellectual rebellion, is not capitulation to the mores of white supremacy?

2 Coates interview quoted by Benjamin Watson with Ken Peterson, *Under Our Skin: Getting Real About Race—And Getting Free from the Fears and Frustrations That Divide Us* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2015), 165.

3 Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove speaks of the “double miracle of the Black church in America”: “The first miracle is that a people torn from their homes and brutally enslaved in a land not their own would learn the gospel from their white oppressors and hear it as good news. But the second miracle is even more profound: that after centuries of oppression and disenfranchisement at the hands of white folks, Black Christians would pray for us, love us, and invite us to come and learn from them what it means to plead the blood of Jesus. *There are some things that nobody but God can do*. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Free to Be Bound* (Nav Press: Colorado Springs, CO, 2008), 133. (My italics)

4 James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name; More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dial Press, 1961), 89.

5 I work the theme of Barthian election in *How Odd of God: Chosen for the Curious Vocation of Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2015); Willie James Jennings makes divine

election a theological conviction that has been criticized for being a source of separation and division central in his work on racism. Willie James Jennings, *Theological Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Racism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

6 Cleophus LaRue says that African American preaching and worship gathers people in order to reassure them that God not only cares but *acts*, “God has acted and will act for them and for their salvation.” *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 69.

7 James Cone says that “the norm of Black theology must take seriously two realities...the liberation of Blacks and the revelation of Jesus Christ.” James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986), 37.

8 Campolo and Battle, *The Church Enslaved: A Spirituality for Racial Reconciliation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2005).