

One New Book for the Preacher

O. Benjamin Sparks
Richmond, Virginia

I know that inwardly I shall be really clear and honest only when I have begun to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount. Here is set the only source of power capable of exploding the whole enchantment and specter [Hitler and his rule] so that only a few burnt-out fragments are left remaining from the fireworks.¹

D. Bonhoeffer

Issac J. Bailey, *Why Didn't We Riot, A Black Man in Trumpland* (Other Press, New York, 2020), 173

This is a book of essays; it is also a memoir, a confession of the severity of racism and its insidious influence, even upon the soul of a Black man. Issac Bailey is a graduate of Davidson College, a Neiman Fellow at Harvard, an accomplished journalist with an international reputation, and now the James K. Batten Professor of Communication Studies at his alma mater.

I stumbled onto this book while I was searching for another in the “Black Studies” section at Barnes and Noble. I was immediately hooked by the Davidson connection, which—as depicted here—turns out to be a different school from the one I departed in 1961, when the college was still intentionally segregated. One question raised here is how Davidson, now conscientiously integrated and diverse, has changed.

The overarching theme of these essays is how White people, even we who have the best intentions, seek to make ourselves comfortable rather than accept the soul piercing truth of White supremacy. We organize our lives and institutions with customs and interpretations that keep us from admitting the worst lessons about America and ourselves. Our excuses are endless, and our rationalizations seek to protect us from reality.

In Richmond (and other towns and cities, but we were the Capitol of the Confederacy), the treasonous myth of a noble Lost Cause was enshrined in monuments from 1890 until 2021. Lee's gigantic bronze statue was six stories tall and was removed less than a month ago, which has upset White people from Florida to California. Yet the money to erect it was raised, prayed over, and blessed by Richmond's most prominent Episcopal and Presbyterian ministers in the 19th Century.

Bailey introduces the essays with the description of a scene from the Denzel Washington film *Antwone Fisher*. The title character visits the foster home where he had grown up and where he was repeatedly abused before he escaped at age 14. Fisher is greeted warmly by his abuser, Mrs. Tate, who welcomes him with “Come here, Baby,” her arms outstretched for a welcoming hug.

“Don't touch me,” he snaps. He is no longer a little boy, but a man matured by the US Navy. He asks for Mrs. Tate (the Tates were a deeply religious couple), and she tries to relate to him personally, even tries to hug him, as though she were a long-lost friend, not an evil that nearly destroyed Fisher.” He refuses her overtures and finally says to her, “You couldn't destroy me. I am still standing. I'm still strong! And

I always will be.”

Bailey then declares the theme of this book: “I’m Antwone Fisher to White America’s Mrs. Tate.” The strength of this book is that in essay after essay, Bailey does not let us forget the daily reality of America (and of church, college, and places of employment) as Mrs. Tate.

Every essay indicts and laments, and reminds us that not only is the criminal justice system immersed in racism, but so is the church—evangelical, mainline, Protestant, and Catholic. In addition, even an educational institution like Davidson, which may be trying to atone for its past, still bends more toward comfort than justice, too often shying away from the harrowing discomfort of acknowledging the depth of racial injustice and the infection passed on from generation to generation.

So why will this help preachers? It puts us in touch with Black rage. *Why Didn’t We Riot?* Invites us to walk several miles and several decades inside Bailey’s shoes, and to live in his often broken heart, and then to observe the hard changes that overcame him. As we listen to him, we begin to see in our own lives the long-lasting consequences of what White people (including this reader) have ignored or dismissed, no matter how much we try to change ourselves and our institutions. For too many years, I recall to my shame, I mocked the Confederate monuments on Richmond’s Monument Avenue rather than facing the harm they caused to many Black friends and the fear and despair they instilled.

Reading this short book will expand our hermeneutic. It draws us inevitably to those texts where those whom the world counts as of no account—especially the foolish and the weak (cf. I Cor. 1:18-25)—become God’s agents for the gospel and for transformation. It invites us to reflect upon Jesus, not as triumphal, not even in his resurrection, but in remembering his rejection, the mocking and scorn he endured—and the official lies which led him to be crucified. So much of our pesky scriptures (Hebrew as well as Christian) remind us that it is God who brings healing out of suffering, deliverance out of captivity against all odds, and life out of death. Bailey opens our eyes and hearts to a community of suffering in America which we helped to create and even unwittingly sustain, and into which we are invited for our own healing and redemption.

The book urges us White Christians toward repentance and lament. There is a wonderful quote from Fred Craddock that rattles around in my head: “I draw my breath in pain to preach.” I count it as close to tragedy that I have heard no sermons on American injustice toward Black Americans that appear to have been crafted in pain. I believe we need preaching that invites us to “rend our hearts, and not our garments,” preaching that causes us not to insist that we as communities of faith lament the cruelty, the willful ignorance, and the fear that has bedeviled us White Christians into woeful silence or egged us on into self-righteous indignation toward the denizens of Trumpland, as if they were the problem and we are not. Or preaching that seems to imply that with a little love and social/political action, we can “make a difference.” As Bailey writes, “White supremacy can’t survive in this country without Christianity” (p. 55). In support he documents his experience of twenty years in a White Evangelical congregation that never saw the contradiction in their support of Trump, while professing to be racially inclusive.

What is it, with regard to White supremacy and racial injustice, that we still refuse to see?

O Lord, open my eyes that I may see the needs of others;
Open my ears that I may hear their cries;
Open my heart so that they need not be without succor.
Let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger
 of the strong
Nor be afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.
Show me where love and hope and faith are needed,
And use me to bring them to those places.
So open my eyes and my ears that I may this coming day be able
To do some work of peace for them.²

Alan Paton

Notes

1 From *A Testament to Freedom*, ed. By Kelly & Nelson, as quoted by Laura M. Frabrycky, “The Keys to Bonhoeffer’s House, Exploring the Word and Wisdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer” (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020).

2 Alan Paton, “Spirituality and Practice,” in *Life Prayers from Around the World* by Elizabeth Roberts.