

## ANTIRACISM AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE III: HEALING

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**Text: Matthew 14:22–33**

Hello everyone. It is an honor to be in conversation with you again. This is the third and final part of a summer sermon series in which you and I sit and wonder together about the ways in which doing the work of antiracism can be a spiritual practice, and which practices we have at our disposal already. In June we talked about deepening our compassion to make antiracist decisions in our lives. In July we discussed contemplative practices as important in the work of releasing our need for control, because control is the foundation of colonization and whiteness.

I know that this conversation can be difficult. I may be saying things that we do not want to hear. Believe me, I don't want to hear them either. I also wish this wasn't true. I wish that there were another way out of this, but I have been convinced that the only way out of this is through it. To avoid this conversation is to perpetuate it.

These conversations are uncomfortable for me as well. They are getting a bit easier the more that I have them, the more that I listen and read, the more that I practice, but I too don't want to have them. I am not an expert on this and do not claim to have answers. I have wonderings and curiosities, ideas and beliefs, but I do not have answers. I do believe that deepening our spiritual practices, whatever they might be, is important. I believe that contemplative practices deepen our compassion and resilience and self-understanding, and that is essential for justice work in the world. I believe that our non-white siblings are telling the truth even when—especially when—I don't want what they say to be true.

And I am a racist. I don't want to be, but I was born into a society that has built itself around dominance based on skin color. I am a racist and I am working hard to change this and practice antiracism in my actions and decisions. I am still a good person, I am still a loving father and husband, I am still a good son, brother and friend. I am still a good pastor and citizen, but I am a racist because this society has raised me up to be one. I am a racist because you and I haven't yet changed the system to remove this label.

My colleague in Chicago, Methodist pastor Lindsey Long Joyce, recently said something like this in a meeting we were in together: All of us are stuck in the cage of racism, but since white people built it, we have been trained to love it. But it is still a cage. We are all still caged in this.

Theologian James Cone, best known for his Black Liberation Theology, once said “Christian theology is for the liberation of all humanity, and it could never be neutral in the fight against oppression.” That means all of us. None of us are exempt from the need for liberation and healing when there is systemic oppression involved. It matters not whether you benefit from or suffer from the effects of racial oppression, it is essential that we break the system and heal ourselves from it.

In 1971, the Stanford prison experiment used college students to simulate a prison. Roles of guard or prisoner were assigned by the flip of a coin. Some “students quickly embraced their assigned roles, with some guards enforcing authoritarian measures and ultimately subjecting some prisoners to psychological torture, while many prisoners passively accepted psychological abuse and, by the officers’ request, actively harassed other prisoners who tried to stop it.”<sup>1</sup> Six days later the whole experiment was shut down. Both the prisoners and the guards needed to be liberated from the experiment. Both needed healing. While the effects were more hurtful and acute on those acting as prisoners, the students playing the guards also needed to be released. No matter which side of the coin you are on, being part of a system that oppresses anyone is harmful everyone.

We are all in the same boat. We are bound up in this together. As Indigenous Australian artist Lilla Watson has wisely said: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

The ways that we participate in the world do not end with us. In ways that we often never know or see, our lives are deeply entwined with the lives of others whom we may not even know. In the still-powerful and relevant *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” We are all in this boat together. It is true that none of us built this boat, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t keep us safe and afloat.

So, what can we do? How can we help others and ourselves in this need for healing from a system that cages us all? We step off the boat. In our story that Jennifer read moments ago, Peter asks Jesus to command him to step off the boat. Jesus does and Peter steps off. And he sinks, but he takes the risk of leaving the known safety of the boat for the unknown waters of Jesus.

We are being asked to step off the boat, to take the risk away from what is familiar and known and safe. We are asked to step into the thing that we know is different, that is uncomfortable, that is probably scary. We are being asked to leave behind the predictability of the known structure and step out into the water. We are being asked to step away from the story that began with stolen land, genocide and enslavement and step towards the person who tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind and to love the other as you love yourself. To step out of the boat is to take the risk to walk towards the one who calls blessed the poor, those grieving, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers. To step out of the boat is to go towards the love of God, who loves us just as we are and not because of the way that our society commoditizes our worth.

What is astounding here is that we don’t get to walk on the water. We sink. We get wet, we become afraid, we lose our perception of control. Just like Peter, we sink. But Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter. To step out of the boat is to trust that we will be caught, that the radical and all-encompassing love of God will not let us go. This is a risk and is frightening. Our society has tried to teach us that sinking is the only option and all consequences are inevitable and cannot be changed. But God through Jesus works to counter that narrative and love us abundantly merely for being a beloved child of God.

I don’t know what happens next in this analogy. After we step out of the boat and sink into the water, then what? Do we float with Jesus forever? Do we find land? Do we build a more equitable and just boat? I don’t know. Maybe knowing this is unimportant right now. We don’t need to know the end of the story in order to begin a new one. To step out of the boat is not an end but a beginning.

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<sup>1</sup>“Stanford prison experiment,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford\\_prison\\_experiment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_prison_experiment) (accessed August 12, 2020).

In the superb book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem writes this: “In today’s America, we tend to think of healing as something binary: either we’re broken or we’re healed from that brokenness. But that’s not how healing operates, and it’s almost never how human growth works. More often, healing and growth take place on a continuum, with innumerable points between utter brokenness and total health.”<sup>2</sup>

We are all stuck in a cage of racialized trauma in this country. Even though some of us may thrive more in this cage than others, it is still binding. And to try and release any of us from this is to release all of us since we are all bound together in “a single garment of destiny.” Beginning this healing for ourselves and for all of us is a risk, but this story illustrates that if we choose to take this important step out of the trauma and into healing, we will be loved abundantly. As Menakem says, healing takes place on a continuum, but we need to choose to begin it. We must step off the boat.

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<sup>2</sup>Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017).