ASK, SEEK, KNOCK TOOKS FOR BUILDING RACIAL EQUITY



A Letter from the Editors

Welcome, we are so glad you're here! Whether you're reading the ASK newsletter for the first time or you've been with us each issue over the last few years, we welcome you in and urge you to read with intention, contemplation, and resolve. While this issue is coming out around the time of Easter, we are writing and working on assembly during the Lenten season. Lent in the Christian tradition consists of the time from Ash Wednesday through Easter, which is the climax of our Christian faith, Christ's victory over death. Through Lent, however, we spend time in reflection, contemplating the ways in which our own sin has led to the death of Christ. It is a time for mournful reflection of the ways in which we have not measured up.

What is so beautiful about this season in the Church calendar is that we don't do this alone. For if we were to venture into this season alone, it would most likely end in one of two ways. We would spiral into self-pity and shame, and that is of no help to anyone. Or, we would say, "This is too difficult, I cannot do this," and that also is of no help to anyone. The beauty of doing it alongside others is that we can offer the gifts of compassion and forgiveness to one another. Being heard and offered a chance to repent, or to do differently, we are given the chance to climb out of the pits of shame and apathy. It is through true confession and repentance that we can find ourselves in the light once again.

Part of what is so compelling for us about Lent is the time given to contemplation and reflection. If we don't adequately take a look at ourselves and the ways in which our sin deals death to ourselves and those around us, we cannot begin to find new ways of flourishing in the world.

As Maya Angelou once said, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better." How can we do better if we do not first spend time knowing better? And we cannot know better if we do not ruthlessly interrogate the ways in which we have caused and are causing harm. This is precisely where anti-racist work begins - the ruthless interrogation of our own complicity in the death-dealing system that prioritizes Whiteness over and above any other.



Portrait of Maya Angelou by Christina Carmel.

While the Lenten season has come to a close, we hope that the reflection we have done during this time will continue in the season to come. Our hope is that we all will look more closely at the ways in which White supremacy shows up in our daily lives. We pray that every resource, every book read and every podcast listened to will continue to help us, as Maya says, to "Know better," and with all of that knowing we will continue to "Do better."

Editors: Jake Apple • Tim Burge-Lape • Kristina Heckelman • Caleb Romoser

The Third Way: Christ in our Context

BY: CALEB ROMOSER

Matthew 5:38-42

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

The Third Way— we talk about it a lot here at Newsong. We hold it up as the ideal in approaches to conflict, as the hope of navigating disagreement, as the call of Christ to all His followers in this world. But, what is it, really? How does it work? How do we know when the Third Way has been achieved or when we're just being neutral? In a world that can be so split down the middle, so politically and ideologically polarized, so bent towards us versus them, what are we supposed to do? What does the Third Way look like right now?

The short answer is: I have no idea.

The longer answer, I think, can be found in the stories and choices of those who have gone before us. The longer answer, the truer answer to the question of what is the Third Way will require me to honestly look at myself as I am in the world today. It requires me to see my race, my gender, my sexual orientation, my socioeconomic status, my ability and to hold in mind all the privileges that these realities carry. When I look for myself in the verse above, the truthful answer is that I am not the person being slapped and ordered, being reminded constantly of my secondary place in society. I have more in common with the occupying Roman soldier than I do with the oppressed Jewish people of Jesus' day.

When Jesus taught the passage above from the Sermon on the Mount, what we see as the basis for the Third Way, he wasn't asking the Romans to do anything differently— he was speaking to his people, the Jewish communities who lived under the thumb of Roman rule day in and day out. The Jewish people who suffered under unjust economic law, military brutality, and anti-Semitic racism were being asked by Jesus to meet their violent oppressors not with equal violence or even passive acceptance, but rather with creative, humanizing resistance. In 1998, theologian and scholar Walter Wink released a book entitled *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. Wink highlights the original situation of Christ's first listeners, pointing out that by turning the other cheek, by giving the coat as well, by going the extra mile, the people living under imperial Roman rule forced their oppressor to wrestle with their humanity. These actions, without violence or the return of harm, forced the oppressor to interact with their victim as an equal and not someone beneath them.

Jesus taught this radical, revolutionary idea that the oppressed, the victim, can assert their own humanity without dehumanizing themselves or others, and then he lived that ideal out when faced with his own death in the form of a religious-political public execution. Jesus' example inspired and inspires people and movements around the world and throughout history, and the fact of the matter is that I, the Roman soldier of today's world, am not the one who has the answer of what this Third Way looks like today.

Just like Jesus spoke to and from the margins of his society, I believe that we in the center must look to and move toward the oppressed for what it means to be a people of the Third Way. While there are innumerable examples in the world of oppressed people's nonviolent resistance, I would ask us to turn our lens on our own history here in the United States.

The Third Way: Christ in our Context

Here we can find what I think is perhaps the most powerful embodiment of Christ's teaching on the Third Way in modern American history: the Civil Rights movement.

In 1960s America, times were different than now. Black Americans faced segregation and unjust treatment in every realm of shared society. Black families and individuals lived in purposefully segregated neighborhoods that were underserved and overpoliced. They faced public discrimination and humiliation from the open acceptance of racist ideas and practices, including segregation of public services. They were prohibited from their full democratic privileges as American citizens through restrictions to voting access as well as racist electoral maps. The US government spent less money on educating Black children than their White peers, and Black families had a much harder time changing their socioeconomic status than their White counterparts.

Come to think of it, maybe times weren't that different than they are now.

Nevertheless, in light of this unjust treatment and policy, Black leaders, preachers, and activists like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, Asa Philip Randolph, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and many, many others organized over years to create massive change in the American system. These leaders and their actions in the face of nearly insurmountable evil and violence are worth our time and our attention, but for the sake of this moment, I want to look at the wave of sit-ins that started in Greensboro, North Carolina and eventually led to the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee by Ella Baker.

Many of us are familiar with sit-ins; we've seen the photos of the stoic young Black folks seated at a counter designated for White customers only.



Students demonstrating peaceful resistance at the Woolworth's lunch counter in 1963. (Jackson Daily News)

These incredibly brave young people would sit for hours, enduring verbal and physical abuse in their silent declaration that they were human and that the refusal to serve them was unjust. These sit-ins took place throughout the country and helped highlight the cruel and violent realties that many Black folks were facing in a segregated society, paving the way to systemic change.



Before sitting-in, protesters practiced nonviolent tactics and trained themselves to endure abuse and assault. Image courtesy Civil Rights Memorial Archive.

When I look at the photos of these remarkable people, the words of Christ come to life. These folks embody the call of Christ to not return evil for evil, but rather to assert their own humanity in the face of discrimination and dehumanization. By radically refusing to accept unjust laws and treatment, these protestors helped to restructure the very nature of American society. From their example and teaching, and in their spirit, I want to draw out for us some concrete ideas of what the Third Way of Christ looks like (and doesn't look like) for us now –

The Third Way is disruptive. These sit-ins were a form of protest, and designed and planned to disrupt the regular ins and outs of everyday life.

The Third Way: Christ in our Context

They are meant to stop the powerful in their tracks and force them to reckon with how they have used and abused that power As Dr. King wrote in his letter from a Birmingham jail, "I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. ... so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood."

The Third Way is non-violent. We cannot harm our neighbor and claim to love them at the same time. We cannot force another to see in our full humanity while simultaneously refusing to act in a humane way towards the other, even our enemy. Simultaneously, we must remember that violence can take many forms, not just physical. After all, our own scriptures tell us that whoever hates his brother is a murderer.

The Third Way takes practice. The protestors at these sit-ins didn't wake up one day and have the stamina, patience, and grace to endure abuse in their pursuit of justice. No, they practiced and practiced for hours, building communities and coalitions around their work, encouraging one another. Likewise, we cannot expect to simply happen upon a Third Way of living with each other, or one day decide we know how to embody Christ's call. We must commit ourselves to the practices of Christ– love for our neighbor and our enemy, solidarity with the oppressed, patience, kindness, etc– in our everyday lives.

The Third Way is not a tool to avoid conflict. The young people who engaged in these sit-ins dealt with violence and harm at every single protest. While they worked in the long term to create powerful change, the angry White customers didn't walk out radically changed. They often walked out angrier and more violent than they had come in. Similarly, when Christ asked his followers to engage their oppressors, we can assume that the Roman soldiers and powerful leaders of the day also met their resistance with violence and anger. The conflict created by the sit-ins, and their ancient Jewish predecessors, is not a disruption of peace, but rather an unveiling of the lack of peace that has always existed.

The Third Way is not neutral. Jesus was not looking at his followers and condoning their abuse at the hands of the Romans. He was not taking "both sides" into account and trying to find a middle ground. Jesus was asking his followers to remember and proclaim their own humanity—he was on the side of the oppressed. Again, I quote Dr. King who wrote, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler

or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom;" The protestors at those sit-ins saw the unjust, evil nature of their reality and engaged it with hope and love.

These five points, while not a definition, help me to imagine what the call of Christ looks like for my life today. This call to the Third Way is so challenging and so powerful that I sometimes wonder if too tidy of a definition wouldn't belittle it. I know that even writing about these sit-ins feels almost disrespectful to the work, the effort, the grace, the power of those who participated. I believe that what they chose to do brought the very Kingdom of God closer to earth, and that is not something trivial. As we move forward in a country that has still not achieved racial equity, that has still not set right the wrongs of hundreds of years of racist discrimination, my prayer for us is that those of us who are White will, like the Apostle Paul, let the scales fall from our eyes so that we can see the humanity of those we have persecuted. So that we can see Christ in our neighbors who model for us, even today, what the Third Way really is.

I want to leave you with one last photo of the Third Way. This one is more recent, from 2016, in Baton Rouge after the death of Alton Sterling. Ieshia Evans, a nurse and mother, stood in the street and enacted the call of Christ to be seen as human in the face of violence and power. My friends, will we have eyes to see her today?



For the Family

WATCH

Miss Katie Sings



Miss Katie is a children's songwriter, performer, and teaching artist based in Chicago. She creates content to support kids in social-emotional learning, imaginative play, and community care.

YouTube.com/@MissKatieSings

READ

Swim Team by Johnie Christmas

This graphic novel blends fact and fiction, exploring the history of why many Black individuals do not know how to swim. The book also delves into themes of friendship, bullying, kindness, and familial expectations that will resonate with middle grade readers.



LISTEN

Who, When, WOW! Podcast: Shirley Chisholm

Meet Shirley Chisholm who brought her leadership skills and fighting spirit to Washington D.C. as the first elected Black Congresswoman of the United States. As a Congresswoman, Shirley continued her lifelong work of fighting for civil rights and women's equality, even when she was met with criticism and discrimination from her peers.

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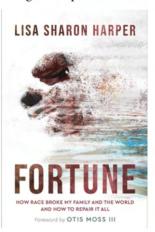


Britt Hawthorne is an anti-bias anti-racist teachereducator and an Elementary Montessori Guide committed to equity, knowledge, and peace education. She hosts an online anti-racist book club and writes about building community in classrooms.

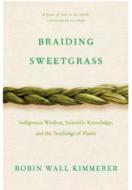
Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World and How to Repair it All by Lisa Sharon Harper

In this powerful examination of race and power in American history, Lisa Sharon Harper, author of The Very Good Gospel, walks the reader through her decades of research on her family history in America. Through her personal and

family histories, she exposes the racist and violent structures that many of our enduring systems and practices were built on. Sharon Harper doesn't leave the reader hopeless, but finishes the book with a powerful vision for a future that looks like the Kingdom of God, and a call to action for all of us to bring that vision forward.



Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer

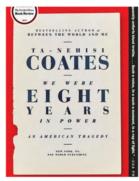


As a botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer has been trained to ask questions of nature with the tools of science. As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, she embraces the notion that plants and animals are our oldest teachers. In Braiding Sweetgrass, Kimmerer brings these lenses of

knowledge together to show that the awakening of a wider ecological consciousness requires the acknowledgment and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world. For only when we can hear the languages of other beings are we capable of understanding the generosity of the earth, and learning to give our own gifts in return.

We Were Sight Years in Power: An American Tragedy by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Coates, a National Book Award winner, is a journalist, a cultural critic, an author of fiction and comic books, and more. In this collection of essays written during the presidency of President Barack Obama, Coates examines the realities of race, class, and power in America today. As we are currently in an election year, now is an

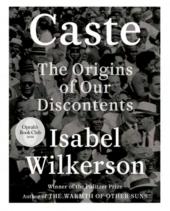


opportune moment to reflect on where we've been and how we got to where we are, and Coates is an incredible guide to that reflection.

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson

"Caste is the bones, race the skin." says Pulitzer Prizewinning author Isabel Wilkerson. In *Caste*, she gives us a deep look into an often unseen phenomenon in America as she explores, through an immersive, deeply researched narrative, how America today and throughout its history has been shaped by a hidden caste system, a rigid hierarchy of human rankings. Using riveting stories about people—including Martin Luther King Jr., baseball's Satchel Paige, and many others—she shows the ways that the insidious undertow of caste is experienced every day. She documents how the Nazis studied the racial systems in America to plan their out-cast of the Jews; she discussed why the cruel logic

of caste requires that there be a bottom rung for those in the middle to measure themselves against; she writes about the surprising health costs of caste, and the effects of this hierarchy on our culture and politics. Finally, she points forward to ways America can move beyond the artificial and destructive separations of human divisions, toward hope in our common humanity.





This fantastic and delightful show is not only an Emmy award winning comedy, but also a heartfelt love letter to public schools and urban communities. Quinta Brunson stars as Jeannine Teagues, a young Black teacher in a predominantly Black school whose optimism and love for her students both annoys and inspires. Each episode is guaranteed to bring both laughter and maybe even some tears as you watch this faculty navigate caring for kids and caring for each other in their school community.



Caroline J. Sumlin @carolinejsumlin

In her own words, Caroline says she is an "author, speaker, and educator on a mission to help you break free from toxic, oppressive systems that have destroyed our collective humanity." She fills her social media with helpful graphics explaining the way racism infiltrates a multitude of spaces in our lives, from our work ethic to motherhood to body image. She educates about the ways in which White Supremacy culture has been normalized and celebrated in our lives today. While the topics of her posts are heavy, she balances hard truth with an unshakeable joy that permeates everything she does.



Bisan Owda @wizard_bisan1

Bisan Owda is a Palestinian filmmaker and social media content creator. Since the beginning of Israel's attacks on Palestine, Bisan has documented her experience and the experiences of her people as they face what many experts are calling a genocide. Her on the ground reporting of the violence and loss in Palestine is heart wrenching and incredibly brave. In a conflict that can feel so complicated and so far away, Bisan's work allows us to remember the humanity of the over 30,000 Palestinians that have been killed since October.

FAMILY READING NIGHT

Keep an eye out for an upcoming reading night for the whole family

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we'd be honored for you to join us

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