15

# Baptism and Holy Communion: Affirming that Black Lives Matter

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## My trip(s) to the Holy Land: the Jordan River and Jerusalem

Through the generosity of a Baltimore civic group, I traveled to Israel in 1997. I have touched the Jordan River, the location of Jesus's baptism. While there, I gazed at Golgotha which is also known as Calvary, the site of Jesus's execution in Jerusalem.

My United States passport facilitated the trip to Israel. Close inspection of my "spiritual passport" reveals that I traveled to the Jordan and Jerusalem long before 1997. Concerning nationality, I am a grateful citizen of the United States. Concerning spirituality, I am a grateful citizen of the commonwealth of emancipatory African American churches that Delores Williams calls the "black church invisible."

Williams employs the illustrative phrase "black church invisible" to delineate the liberating practices of African American religious communities from the oppressive practices in those communities that promote, for example, sexism, heterosexism, and classism:

> The black church is invisible, but we know it when we see oppressed people rising up in freedom. It is community essence, ideal and real as God works through it in behalf of the survival, liberation and positive, productive quality of life of suffering people.[1]

Decades before my feet touched Zion in 1997, the "black church invisible"—as manifested at the First Baptist Church in Salem, Virginia—strapped wings on my soul and transported my religious imagination to the Jordan and Jerusalem. In this loving congregation, where my father served as pastor and my mother as a lay leader, African American Christians practiced baptism and Holy Communion with grace-filled gusto.

## Baptism and Holy Communion: the terms of engagement

The word "baptism" comes from the Greek word *baptizō* meaning "to dip or immerse in water." For Christians, baptism affirms a person's relationship with God

through Jesus Christ. While often associated with John the Baptizer in the Bible, baptism is—in the most radical sense—a willingness to join Jesus in death (e.g., Mark 10:38; Rom. 6:3). John's baptism anticipated the Messiah to come. Christian baptism honors the Messiah who has come and awaits the Messiah who is coming again.[2]

My childhood spiritual community transported me to the Jordan River through baptism. More than forty years have passed since my father baptized me. Yet, I still hear the voices surrounding that moment. The choir sang about the Jordan River that was "chilly and cold," and its water "chilled the body but not the soul." As the choir lowered their voices, my father raised his: "On the profession of your faith, and in the presence of God, the angels, and this company, I now baptize you." He lowered me into the water and lifted me into a new life of Christian discipleship.

Holy Communion is a Christian ritual meal consisting of the simple elements of bread and wine (or grape juice). Yet, the meal possesses a complex constellation of theological meanings.[3] The ritual commemorates Jesus's last meal with his disciples on the evening before his execution. The meal enables believers to partake ritually in Jesus's death, thereby reminding them of the promise of everlasting life. Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder remarks:

> The various designations of Holy Communion include: the Lord's Supper, the Last Supper, and the Eucharist. The term "Eucharist" is derived from a Greek verb meaning "to give thanks" (*eucharisteō*). Across the centuries, Christians have come to the Communion table with great gratitude for Jesus's ultimate sacrifice at Calvary.[4]

My childhood spiritual community transported me to Calvary through Holy Communion. On Holy Communion Sundays (every first Sunday), the lay leaders dressed alike, with men in dark suits and women in white dresses. My father donned a gleaming, white clerical robe with crimson velvet panels. On the wings of spirited Communion hymns, the choir lifted the congregation and placed us "down at the cross where my Savior died."[5]

The lay leaders handled the Communion elements with priestly precision. After retrieving the Communion elements, people waited so that the entire congregation could eat and drink together. The grape juice in the thimble-sized glasses was barely enough to wash down the chalky residue from the white Communion wafers. Nevertheless, the community approached this sacred meal with heightened zeal, believing that this monthly, mythic trip to Calvary made all the difference in this world and in the world to come. As the meal concluded, the congregation sang exuberantly the chorus of the hymn "At Calvary":

> Mercy there was great and grace was free,
> Pardon there was multiplied to me,
> There my burdened soul found liberty—
> At Calvary.[6]



## Ritual renewal: ancient practices in contemporary contexts

Rituals are a powerful language. By rituals, I mean ceremonial, symbolic actions by which people express their deepest convictions.[7] Yet, rituals can lose their efficacy if they are not conversant with contemporary social issues. As African American Christians practice baptism and Holy Communion, what contemporary issues must be engaged so that these rituals can speak afresh to the present?

Many recent events have impacted local and global cultures. Notable examples include the historic election and re-election of President Barack Obama, the Great Recession, and the rise of international terrorism. The emergence of another recent phenomenon—the Black Lives Matter movement—provides salient opportunities to renew baptism and Holy Communion.

Social activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created the social media hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in 2013. The hashtag was a response to the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager in Florida, and the 2013 acquittal of his armed killer George Zimmerman. These activists were seeking to raise public consciousness concerning the protection and valuing of black people.[8]

This social media hashtag has become a rallying cry of a new movement, especially in the light of the recent onslaught of lethal interactions of black people and law enforcement. The infamous and growing list includes, but is not limited to: Rekia Boyd (Chicago, Illinois); Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri); Tanisha Anderson (Cleveland, Ohio); Eric Garner (New York, New York); Freddie Gray (Baltimore, Maryland); Sandra Bland (Prairie View, Texas); Alton Sterling (Baton Rouge, Louisiana); and Philando Castile (St. Paul, Minnesota).[9] The seeming inability to compile comprehensive lists of black people recently killed by law enforcement is "damning evidence of the level of violence against black bodies in America."[10]

We must add to this grim social portrait "black-on-black" violence. Baltimore, Maryland is an epicenter of this epidemic. In April 2015, Freddie Gray, a twenty-five-year-old African American, was killed while in the custody of Baltimore police officers. This event blazoned Baltimore onto the national consciousness as both the site of another police-related black death and the site of significant civil unrest that engulfed the city for several weeks.[11] In the three years since these incidents, Baltimore has struggled with escalating homicides, and most of the victims have been black people.

In addition to leading a research center at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, I serve as the founding senior pastor of The Open Church of Maryland, a theologically progressive and predominantly African American congregation in Baltimore. A recent front page story in *The Baltimore Sun* remarked about the locale:

> Baltimore suffered 343 homicides in 2017—the second most in a single year, and the most per capita in city history. More than 1,000 people were shot last year.[12]

In Baltimore, and many other American cities, there are passionate conversations—from social media to barber shops and beauty salons—about the ugly dilemma of violence, especially violence involving black people.

## Embodiment: embracing the body

We must not ignore embodied realities such as violence or economic impoverishment when considering the contemporary relevance of baptism and Holy Communion. When we fail to embrace the body, we eviscerate these rituals of their social potency. These rituals were, and are, bodily.

In Jesus's baptism, John immersed Jesus's body in the Jordan River. Bodies also are involved in our diverse baptism practices, whether through sprinkling water on babies' foreheads or immersing adults in baptismal pools. Additionally, the final meal that Jesus shared with his disciples was a bodily affair, involving the ingesting of bread and wine. Likewise, the contemporary administration of Holy Communion is bodily. Beyond the obvious ingesting of bread and wine, Holy Communion in some traditions incorporates additional bodily gestures.

Some gestures are modest, such as congregants tracing a symbolic cross on their heads and torsos using a hand. Other gestures are more majestic, such as congregants genuflecting noticeably before high altars, washing their hands in basins of water, and wiping their hands on white towels to ensure that pure hands handle the holy elements.

These pious gestures to "sanitize" the meal, while rooted in sincere piety, also might reveal a subconscious attempt to avoid the ghastly details of Jesus's execution. Neil Elliott depicts the grotesquery of ancient crucifixion:

> As a means of capital punishment for heinous crimes, crucifixion was the "supreme Roman penalty" yet "almost always inflicted upon the lower class". . . . Crucifixion was "the typical punishment for slaves". . . . In the Roman practice, "whipping, torture, the burning out of the eyes, and maiming often preceded the actual hanging."[13]

The New Testament depicts the mob mentality and brutality that surrounded Jesus's arrest and trial before Pontius Pilate (e.g., Mt. 26:36-27:23). The four Gospels also provide glimpses of the torture inflicted upon Jesus during the crucifixion. While it had psychological dimensions, Jesus's fatal suffering was undoubtedly bodily.

The Gospel of John supplies a unique detail about Jesus's crucifixion. This Gospel depicts a Roman soldier lancing Jesus's side, allowing blood and water to flow from Jesus's dead body (Jn. 19:31-37). Some patristic and medieval thinkers interpreted this graphic detail as a symbolic allusion to Holy Communion (blood) and baptism (water).[14] In other words, Jesus's execution was the spiritual fountain for these rituals.

While this interpretation is theologically plausible, it underscores a problematic tendency in the ritual imagination. Some religious communities move too rapidly to "symbols" without also adequately embracing the embodied "substance" upon which many rituals are founded. Deeper and different symbolic meanings might emerge from our rituals if we paid more attention to embodiment.



By embodiment, I mean a robust appreciation for the full dimensions of corporeal existence. In the example above from the Gospel of John, an interpretation rooted in embodiment might attend more carefully to the tangible details surrounding this gruesome, state-sponsored execution of an innocent, African Jewish man in approximately 30 CE in a colonized outpost of the Roman Empire.[15]

Embodied interpretation would notice the four courageous women at the cross including Jesus's "mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene" (John 19:25, NIV). In the violent, male-dominated world of this ancient empire, the presence of female witnesses at an execution should not be ignored. Another noteworthy feature is the embodiment of intimate relationships as the dying Jesus implores his mother and one of his closest disciples to embrace each other as family (19:26-27). The juxtaposition of tenderness and torture is palpable. Embodiment enhances symbolic analysis by anchoring interpretation in the tangible specifics of human experience.

At Calvary, a body—a young, black, male, economically vulnerable, Jewish body made in the image of God—was decimated. In the eyes of the empire, Jesus's black life did not matter.

Before examining pragmatic ways that embodiment can enhance baptism and Holy Communion, a brief exploration of political theology will be helpful.

## Political theology: politics in the pews

Baptism and Holy Communion can affirm embodiment, especially when these rituals are interpreted in the light of political theology. For some persons, the phrase "political theology" is oxymoronic and joins two supposedly separate worlds: politics and religion. Instead of being oxymoronic, political theology critiques the ironic nature of versions of Christianity which seek to domesticate, if not eradicate, the political symbols and semantics of Christianity.

The Roman Empire executed Jesus on a charge of political sedition. This crucifixion, like countless other Roman crucifixions, conveyed a tangible warning to political pretenders: Rome was intolerant of insurrection. Yet, upon the news of Jesus's resurrection, his earliest followers cast their gospel proclamation in overtly *political* language: Christ is *Lord*!

Early Christian leaders such as the Apostle Paul defined religion in ways that included politics. N.T. Wright suggests that, when some earliest Christians affirmed that Jesus was Lord, they simultaneously were affirming that Caesar was *not* Lord.[16] Wright imaginatively accentuates the political nature of early Christianity: "Since Paul's proclamation clearly carried a political message at its heart . . . Perhaps Paul should be taught just as much in the politics departments of our universities as in the religion departments."[17] While some might question the inclusion of early Christian beliefs in a university politics course, I, as a proponent of political theology, want to heighten the political consciousness of people sitting in church pews.

William Cavanaugh and Peter Scott characterize political theology in this way:

> The task of political theology might then be to expose the ways in which theological discourse reproduces inequalities of class, gender or race, and to reconstruct theology so that it serves the cause of justice.... What distinguishes all political theology from other types of theology or political discourse is the explicit attempt to relate discourse about God to the organization of bodies in space and time.[18]

Political theology avoids "pie in the sky" rhetoric in favor of serious analysis about how God talk empowers or disempowers bodies on earth. The embodied rituals of baptism and Holy Communion can raise awareness about just or unjust political arrangements and the ways those arrangements devalue or value black lives.

## The politics of baptism

I reflect below on Matthew's account of Jesus's baptism. These reflections will be followed by pragmatic observations concerning how baptism can affirm that black lives matter. In Matthew 3:13-17, Jesus's baptism declares his readiness for the revolution represented by the "kin-dom" of heaven.[19] In the synoptic Gospels, only Matthew presents a curious dialogue between Jesus and John prior to the baptism. Recognizing Jesus's "superiority," John urges a role reversal, protesting that Jesus should baptize him. John eventually concedes and baptizes Jesus.

Matthew likely uses this dialogue to address a "messianic embarrassment" troubling some followers of Jesus. Some early Christians may have inquired, "Why would Jesus, a sinless messiah, submit to John's baptism which was for the repentance of sins?" According to Matthew, Jesus is baptized not to repent of sin but rather to "fulfill all righteousness" (3:15).

The word "righteousness" evokes thoughts of personal piety. Some Christian traditions have emphasized the *personal* dimensions of righteousness to the exclusion of its *political* dimensions. Therefore, the politically provocative characteristics of John and Jesus are often ignored.

The Greek word for "righteousness" (*dikaiosunē*) can be translated as "justice." Righteousness encapsulates God's passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong in society.[20] Thus, righteousness also is a matter of *social justice*. Through baptism, Jesus says in effect: "I join this populist, political movement whereby God's justice will be manifest for *all* God's children, not just the powerful and the elite. I am ready for the revolution because my life, and the lives of people like me, matter!"

The emphasis on repentance in the preaching of John and Jesus also indicates their radicalism. Sentimental moralizing has blunted the sharp edge of the word "repentance." Repentance involves more than an admission of wrong. The Greek word for "repentance" (*metanoia*) connotes a change of mindset and the embodiment of a new identity.

Perhaps, this is why the heavenly voice after the baptism refers to Jesus as the "son" and "the beloved" (3:17). This is not an announcement of Jesus's divine



uniqueness but instead a divine affirmation of his political boldness.[21] God is pleased with Jesus's attachment to a radical political movement that calls for radical repentance.[22]

Repentance is a revolutionary action creating new ways of imagining the world. Both John and Jesus assert that only those who embody new mindsets will be fit for the new "kin-dom." Furthermore, the means by which John and Jesus meet their deaths should convince even the most hardened skeptics about the revolutionary nature of their ministries. Neither prophet dies of old age or natural causes. Both are the victims of government-sponsored execution.

## The practice of baptism: troubling the waters

The Negro spiritual "Wade in the Water," sung often in African American baptism services, insists that God is "gonna trouble the water." In the spirit of this troublesome God, our baptism services should be more politically provocative. In other liturgical moments, we can soothe people's "souls" with images of God, the eternal shepherd, who leads us beside still waters (Ps. 23:2). Baptism, however, is an opportune time to remember a God who champions oppressed people and struggles alongside them. This God troubles the waters of the Red Sea in order to enable the oppressed to be free. James Cone poignantly characterized the God of the oppressed:

> Unlike the God of Greek philosophy who is removed from history, the God of the Bible is involved in history, and [God's] revelation is inseparable from the social and political affairs of Israel.... Yahweh is known and worshipped as the Lord who brought Israel out of Egypt, and who raised Jesus from the dead. [Yahweh] is the political God, the Protector of the poor and the Establisher of the right for those who are oppressed.[23]

To baptize people in the name of this God is to immerse them in politically turbulent waters. Baptism services should not be polite. On the contrary, they should create a guttural awareness in those about to be baptized, and in those already baptized, that following God will at times be costly. A major currency for payment of that cost is struggle, and this struggle may exact a toll from our bodies.

When baptizing children, and especially when christening babies, I congratulate families for their desire to inaugurate a child's life with a spiritually significant ritual. Yet, baptism is vacuous if it morphs into a genteel moment to acknowledge godparents, provide a gilt-edged baptism certificate with filigree font, and share an after-church baptism brunch for family and friends at an upscale restaurant.

It is incumbent upon me pastorally to puncture the politeness of the moment with politics. I remind families, or the candidates for baptism if they are old enough to comprehend, that when Jesus stepped into the Jordan River to be baptized, he signed his death certificate. I then tell the families, or the baptism candidates, that in addition to baptism certificates, we also should provide them with death certificates. To serve God is to be willing to struggle for our freedom and the freedom of others, even to the

point of death. Baptism is not a cleansing of our souls from sin; it is a marking of our bodies for struggle!

At baptisms, we should call the names of those who have been martyred in movements for righteousness, and especially in the arduous, ongoing movement to affirm that black lives matter. Imagine a baptism service where, before the baptism occurs, the names of martyrs are interspersed throughout the spirited singing of "Wade in the Water."

The roll call obviously would include names such as John the Baptizer and Jesus. The roll call also might include the names of Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. These four, precious black girls were attending Sunday school on a September morning in 1963 at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, when a terrorist bomb revealed that America was still savagely judging black children by the color of their skin and *not* by the content of their character.[24]

In that same baptism service, it also would be fitting to call the names of the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, the Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lance, Susie Jackson, Depayne Middleton Doctor, the Rev. Daniel Simmons, and Myra Thompson. These nine African Americans were slaughtered by a white supremacist on June 17, 2015 at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina as they read Scripture in what they thought was a sacred, and safe, place.[25]

The Birmingham Four and the Charleston Nine are embodied reminders that in the fight to make black lives matter, "we have come over a way that with tears has been watered; we have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered."[26] Salty water flows in our baptism fonts and pools. The water contains the saline tears shed by those who mourn the martyrs of the movement. God's tears also are mixed in those baptismal waters. We present our bodies in baptism in the hope that one day God will wipe away all our tears, and that we will wipe away all God's tears. When we finally put an "end to the very culture that has declared war on innocent, young black bodies," God will weep no more.[27]

## The politics of Holy Communion

I reflect below on a scandal during Holy Communion in 1 Corinthians. These reflections will be followed by pragmatic observations concerning how Holy Communion can affirm that black lives matter. The Corinthian church included Jews and Gentiles, as well as social elites and economically vulnerable persons who were enslaved or recently emancipated (1 Cor. 1:26-28, 7:17-24). First Corinthians depicts a community encountering the opportunities and challenges of diverse bodies attempting to coalesce into "the body of Christ."

In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, divisive social stratification is occurring at Holy Communion. Paul's indignation is evident:

> [20]When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. [21]For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. [22]What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!



Economic inequity is at the root of the schism. The inequity manifests itself ironically during Holy Communion, the community's sacred meal symbolizing a shared history and destiny. More specifically, as the community gathers for Holy Communion, certain wealthier members also bring elaborate "picnic dinners" and eat in front of the poorer members who lack resources for such meals. The flaunting of class differences demonstrates an inexcusable lack of concern for the community.

Chastising this classism, Paul recalls Jesus's institution of Holy Communion (1 Cor. 11:23-26). By remembering Jesus, Paul hopes to "re-member" the body of Christ, which is always "dis-membered" when one part of the body exerts power and privilege over other parts of the body.

In 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, Paul implores the community to engage in discernment that will restore solidarity among believers from different economic classes:

> [27]Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. [28]Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. [29]For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

By parading their social status before the rest of the church, these wealthier Christians are liable to the judgment of Jesus, who died so that barriers among diverse people might be dismantled.

Pietistic interpretations have obscured Paul's searing, social critique in this text. Many Christian traditions have fixated narrowly on identities or behaviors that constitute taking Holy Communion in an "unworthy manner." Consequently, sanctimonious gatekeepers have placed "fences" around Communion tables, barring "unworthy" people from sharing the meal. Across the ages, the "unworthy" deemed unfit to share the meal have included persons from different denominations, divorced persons, unmarried mothers, and LGBTQ persons.

In an attempt to create a "rigorous Christian purity system" enacted liturgically at the Communion table, many Christians have unwittingly defiled the body of Christ by exclusion.[28] If we connect Paul's words about taking Holy Communion in an "unworthy manner" (v. 27) with his exhortation about communal discernment (vv. 28–29), the theme of inclusion and social cohesion is abundantly clear.

Paul urges the community to engage in probing self-examination (v. 28) and warns about the danger of not "discerning the body of the Lord" (v. 29). The body of the Lord is the gathered community. The unworthy partaking of Holy Communion occurs when the ritual disregards or excludes sisters and brothers. If we share this meal without concern for who is present—and concern for who is absent because of our exclusion—we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves.

Believers should examine themselves at Holy Communion. The examination should include more than personal piety. The belief that "sin" is primarily a matter of individual piety is a symptom of the sin of classism. Donna Langston observes:

> Preoccupation with one's self—one's body, looks, relationships—is a luxury working-class women can't afford. ... The middle class has the leisure time to be preoccupied with their own problems, such as their waistlines, planning their vacations, coordinating their wardrobes, or dealing with what their mother said to them when they were five—my![29]

At the Communion tables of middle-class African American churches, have we become so preoccupied with our class-based privileges that we have failed to "discern the body of the Lord"? The body of the Lord—not white wafers on the Communion table, but black people in underserved neighborhoods struggling to put food on their kitchen tables. Discrimination based on class status and social identity is a violation of the inclusive principles of the kin-dom for which Jesus lived and died.

## The practice of Holy Communion: creating welcome tables

The Negro spiritual/folk song "I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table" is often sung at Holy Communion services in African American churches. One stanza declares:

> All God's children gonna sit together.
> All God's children gonna sit together one of these days, hallelujah.
> All God's children gonna sit together.
> All God's children gonna sit together, one of these days, one of these days.

Civil rights protestors sang these words in defiance of a segregated social system preventing different races from sitting together at lunch counters in the United States. Lunch counters were desegregated in the 1960s through valiant struggle and historic legislation. Yet, many Communion tables remain segregated. Some African American churches passionately protest against racial discrimination, while remaining eerily silent about oppression based on economic class and other types of social stigma. We must break the silence to enable Communion tables to become authentic welcome tables for black lives from all walks of life.

At The Open Church of Maryland, where I serve as the founding senior pastor, Holy Communion became once a radical object lesson about classism and inclusive welcome tables. As an entrepreneurial church start, The Open Church benefited economically from attracting middle-class persons who were early adopters of the ministry. These persons made generous financial contributions that enabled the congregation to establish a firm footing.

Amid this financial generosity, signs began to emerge that some in the congregation were becoming preoccupied with material concerns. The congregation was renting space in a beautiful Lutheran church in Baltimore. Yet, the passion for "buying our own space" appeared to be more important for some persons than our establishing partnerships with communities experiencing social and economic marginalization.



Additionally, a spirit of entitlement began creeping into the congregation. Some congregants seemed to feel that their financial contributions gave them a "right" to religious "good and services" (i.e., worship services and sermons) being delivered according to their "preferences." It felt as if the relationship between some congregants and me had morphed from partnership to patronage. These congregants seemingly presumed that they were the "patrons," and I, as the "client," was expected to implement their wishes.

To employ a different metaphor, the congregation had contracted a case of "affluenza," which Dale Andrews defined as "a cultural disease of excess—an excess that seldom satiates the desire for more." When affluenza is present, "our daily appetite increases as we normalize privilege. Yesterday's privilege becomes today's expectation."[30] As the congregation's resident doctor of the soul, I diagnosed the situation and prescribed an antidote.

On the first Sunday of Advent in 2013, we were scheduled to serve Holy Communion after my sermon. I preached a sermon titled "The Toughest Examination" that was based on 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. I reminded the congregation that the Communion table brings us to Calvary, the Christian shrine of revelation. The divine light emanating from Calvary's darkness illumines our probing self-examination, which is the toughest examination. Whenever we approach the Communion table, we should plead in the words of the gospel song: "Search me, Lord. ... Shine the light from heaven on my soul."

As I concluded the sermon that appeared well received by the congregation, and as the congregation was eagerly preparing to share Holy Communion, I administered the antidote for classism and affluenza. Like any "flu shot," it was initially painful, but the potential long-term benefits outweighed, in my estimation, any short-term discomfort.

I issued my sermonic conclusion and supposed invitation to the Communion table with these words:

> As we come to the table today, I do not have time to be concerned about your individual moral transgressions. What I am concerned about are the attitudes and actions that perpetuate the sin of social inequity.
>
> Because of your social status, do you secretly feel superior to the homeless sex worker who might come to our church from a "rough neighborhood" looking for assistance for her sick child? Examine yourself.
>
> Do you have time to luxuriate in the latest gossip at The Open Church? Instead of gossiping about who said a curse word in a church meeting recently, what about the obscenity of a middle-class church nestled comfortably in a luxurious, half-empty house, eating a symbolic meal of bread and wine with thousands of poor people within miles of this comfortable house? We have yet to invite these economically vulnerable friends to our feast. Examine yourself. Discern the body. It is the toughest examination.
>
> The examination is not about us bathing our conscience so that we can eat the meal. Rather the examination may involve a *refusal* to eat the meal until more of our economically vulnerable sisters and brothers have a seat at the table with us.

The dinner bell is ringing, calling us to the Communion table. Or is that the school bell ringing, calling us to take an examination? Amen.

I then came from the pulpit and addressed the congregation:

> As your pastor, I love you too much to allow us to take Holy Communion today. There is not enough class diversity in this congregation. We have not worked hard enough to invite economically marginalized people to the feast. If we eat this meal today, it is simply a middle-class snack, and according to Scripture, we would eat and drink judgment upon ourselves. Thus, Holy Communion will *not* be served today!

I pronounced the benediction. The service was over, but the "scandal" had only begun. Many congregants sat with their mouths ajar as if to say, "Did he just do what I think he did?" Other congregants smiled as they realized that my spoken sermon had been a "set-up" for the real sermon, the dramatic demonstration of *not* serving Holy Communion. Still other congregants were offended because my action had tampered with their "right" to take Holy Communion.

Whether my audacious action was right or wrong, it inaugurated an ongoing dialogue in a middle-class congregation concerning how class-based privileges and "rights" oppress and exclude others, which is always wrong. In the quest to affirm that black lives matter, Keri Day challenges African American religious communities to consider how their practices impact economically vulnerable black people, and especially black women:

> Religious institutions can provide leadership in developing a moral consensus on the blight and plight of our poor. Specifically, black churches can begin to rethink anti-poverty strategies, prosperity theologies, and policy activism in order to participate in a project of hope and thriving with and for poor black women and other poor persons within an American underclass.[31]

Taking Holy Communion "in remembrance of Jesus" should involve remembering, including, and partnering with persons who are economically oppressed. Long before his last supper with disciples, Jesus provided etiquette for inviting people to a meal: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:13-14). When we invite as Jesus taught us, Communion tables become welcome tables. At welcome tables, irrespective of creed or class, black lives matter.

## The benediction: a communal rallying cry

Baptism and Holy Communion are liturgical acts that can heighten the social and political consciousness of African American Christians. Most liturgies conclude with a



benediction. I wrote this benediction to send us forth, as we radicalize our practices of baptism and Holy Communion:

> **Leader:** A first-century freedom fighter named Jesus, living in colonized Israel, once declared, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."
> **People:** A twentieth-century freedom fighter named Assata Shakur, living in colonized America, once declared, "It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win."
> **Leader:** Sacred Spirit, through baptism and Holy Communion, teach us and trouble us until we not only *know* the truth but also *do* the truth. In *doing* the truth, we, too, are set free. Righteous action is radical abolition.
> **People:** "We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."
> **Leader:** "It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."[32]
> **All:** Since black people were brought to America in chains, it will be heaven—or heaven on earth—when *all black bodies* are unshackled, and we are free, indeed! Amen.

## Notes

1 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 205–6.
2 See Laurence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982).
3 See Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ's Feast with the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993) and Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, and Resurrection* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007).
4 Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, "Holy Communion and Epiphany Commentary," *The African American Lectionary*, http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=3 (accessed May 1, 2018).
5 These are the opening lyrics of the hymn "Down at the Cross" written by Elisha A. Hoffman.
6 William R. Newell wrote these hymn lyrics.
7 Lawrence S. Cunningham, John Kelsay, R. Maurice Barineau, and Heather Jo McVoy, *The Sacred Quest: An Invitation to the Study of Religion*, 2nd edn. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 79–80.
8 https://blacklivesmatter.com/ (accessed May 1, 2018).
9 Daniel Funke and Tina Susman, "From Ferguson to Baton Rouge: Deaths of Black Men and Women at the Hands of Police," *Los Angeles Times* (July 12, 2016), http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-police-deaths-20160707-snap-htmlstory.html (accessed May 1, 2018).
10 Christopher J. LeBron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), x.
11 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Nonviolence as Compliance," *The Atlantic* (April 27, 2015), https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/nonviolence-as-compliance/391640/ (accessed May 1, 2018).

12 Luke Broadwater and Ian Duncan, "Once again, Baltimore's Mayor Has Fired a Police Commissioner. Will It Make a Difference?" *The Baltimore Sun* (January 20, 2018), http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/investigations/bs-md-ci-davis-fired-weekender-20180119-story.html (accessed May 1, 2018).

13 Neil Elliott, "The Anti-Imperial Message of the Cross," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 168–9.

14 Gail R. O'Day, *The Gospel of John, New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville, IN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 834.

15 Concerning Jesus's African identity, see Rodney S. Sadler, "The Place and Role of Africa and African Imagery in the Bible," in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 23–30.

16 N.T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 182.

17 Ibid.

18 William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, "Introduction," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 2.

19 Kin-dom is a term coined by feminist theologians to disrupt the unjust assumption that God is "male."

20 Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 33.

21 For an interpretation of Jesus's identity and politics from a radical African American perspective, see Brad R. Braxton, "'Every Time I Feel the Spirit': African American Christology for a Pluralistic World," in *Radical Christian Voices and Practice: Essays in Honour of Christopher Rowland*, ed. Zoë Bennett and David B. Gowler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 181–99.

22 John accentuates the radical nature of his baptismal preaching with a radical (i.e., getting to the root) metaphor in Matthew 3:10: "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." The ethical commitments of our baptismal identity compel us to expose, and perhaps expunge, the roots of unjust and unproductive social systems.

23 James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975), 62.

24 This is an allusion to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech at the 1963 March on Washington. James M. Washington, ed., *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 219.

25 NPR Staff, "The Victims: 9 Were Slain at Charleston's Mother Emanuel AME Church," *NPR* (June 18, 2015), https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/18/415539516/the-victims-9-were-slain-at-charlestons-emanuel-ame-church (accessed May 1, 2018.)

26 These lyrics are from the second stanza of James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing" which is referred to as the Negro National Anthem.

27 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 232.

28 Mark W. Stamm, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest: A Theology of the Open Table* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 48.

29 Donna Langston, "Tired of Playing Monopoly?," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998), 132.



30 Dale P. Andrews, "Preaching a Just Word in Privileged Pulpits," in *Just Preaching: Prophetic Voices for Economic Justice*, ed. André Resner, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 169, 171.

31 Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 149–50.

32 These words from Assata Shakur have become a rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter movement.

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