

# HEALING THE HEALERS

SPECIAL EDITION: COVID-19

A **LIVE** TOWNHALL

## Preaching during Crisis: Igniting Pastoral Imagination in the Face of Fatigue, Injustice and Collective Trauma

EXPERT REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

A PROJECT FROM

**ODYSSEYIMPACT!**

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# Introduction

At Odyssey Impact, we believe in the power of personal story to change perspectives, change attitudes, and even to change the world. As the COVID-19 pandemic intensified in the U.S., Odyssey Impact responded to the needs of faith leaders, spiritual care providers, and faith communities by convening live town halls on requested topics. Experts, leaders, scholars, and on-the-ground providers shared their candid insights and questions arising in this unprecedented time.

Our hope is the following guide will help current Faith Leaders in their work to lead a thriving congregation or community and faculty as they prepare future faith leaders to navigate trauma.

May our networks of care be strengthened, our imaginations expanded, and our hope ignited.



For the creation of this written resource, we are grateful to the Rev. Dr. Carolyn Helsel, Associate Professor of Homiletics at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

<https://healingthehealers.org/project/>

# Panelists



**REV. MATT FITZGERALD**

**Senior Pastor**  
Saint Pauls UCC  
Chicago, IL



**REV. DR. JAMES ALEXANDER FORBES JR.**

**Senior Pastor Emeritus**  
Riverside Church - New York, NY  
**Founder**  
Healing of the Nations Foundation - North Carolina



**REV. DR. JACQUELINE J. LEWIS**

**Senior Minister**  
Public Theology & Transformation Middle Collegiate Church  
New York, NY



**REV. MANDY SLOAN MCDOW**

**Senior Minister**  
Los Angeles First United Methodist Church  
Los Angeles, CA



**REV. DR. GINA M. STEWART**

**Senior Pastor**  
Christ Missionary Baptist Church  
Memphis, TN

## Moderators



**REV. DR. KATIE  
GIVENS KIME**  
**Director of Religion and  
Civic Engagement**  
Odyssey Impact



**REV. PETER  
M. WALLACE**  
**President &  
Executive Producer**  
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# Expert Reflection and Discussion Guide

Rev. Dr. Carolyn Helsel

In further exploring a conversation between congregational faith leaders from June 17, 2020, about what wisdom and insights can be drawn in our context of the COVID-19 pandemic from experiences of other kinds of communal tragedy and anxiety, you are invited to consider the following four themes in light of your and your community's situation:

**Video Clip #1: Preaching to Communities of Color, Preaching to Whites**

**Video Clip #2: Preaching Biblically that Black Lives Matter**

**Video Clip #3: Asking Questions, Rather than Being the Answer Person**

**Video Clip #4: Naming Racism without "WhiteSplaining," and Hope for the People of God**

We invite you to reflect personally, with your staff or colleagues, or in small group discussions among those with whom you provide spiritual care. After viewing each of the following sections, please take time to reflect first on what the speakers share. Then, consider the prompts below for ways you may continue to respond and practice care amid the unfolding and aftermath of pandemic in your midst.



## Rev. Dr. Carolyn Helsel

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn B. Helsel is the author of two books published in 2018: *Anxious to Talk About It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully About Race*, and *Preaching about Racism: A Guide for Faith Leaders*. Together, both books earned the 2019 Book(s) of the Year Award from the Association of Parish Clergy. Since 2015, Dr. Helsel has been a faculty advisor to the Truth and Reconciliation Oral History Project. Through this oral history project, Dr. Helsel joins faculty from HBCU's (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) across Texas to record and study the oral histories of persons who have experienced racial discrimination. Dr. Helsel is ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).



# Preaching to Communities of Color, Preaching to Whites

## Video Clip #1

(if using the link to the hour long town hall please refer to time code - 5:44-10:44)

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*“I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man [sic] who stands with his back against the wall. It is urgent that my meaning be crystal clear. The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them?”*

- HOWARD THURMAN, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976). p.3

In this clip, the Rev. Dr. Gina Stewart starts by mentioning the work of Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. In Rev. Dr. Stewart’s congregation, she is preaching to communities of color who constantly are experiencing life with their “backs against the wall.” Her call to preach during this time requires her to preach to their particular needs, not in the abstract, but in real concrete ways, offering them hope in the midst of their despair.

On the other hand, we hear from Rev. Matt Fitzgerald, who is preaching to a diverse congregation that is still predominantly white. He acknowledges that there are different needs present within his congregation, but particularly for those who are white, “to not let our people off the hook.” He later adds “It’s a time for judgement for white America.”

How do preachers in different racial contexts preach to their congregations? Because our churches remain largely segregated, it is likely that you are preaching to either a predominantly white church or a church comprised of a majority of people of color. Also, your own racial identity as a preacher impacts how you preach. How comfortable are you preaching that Black Lives Matter from the pulpit?



Understanding our own racial identity takes time and conscious reflection. The work of Beverly Daniel Tatum outlines the early formation processes at work for people of color, who are unable to avoid seeing themselves as part of a “race” by a racist society. Yet there are still important steps of processing one’s racial identity as a person of color in order to challenge the internalized racial oppression that is constantly in the air. For white people, the privilege of avoiding understanding one’s racial identity is what makes whites so behind developmentally in having conversations about racism. The stages of white racial identity can help whites see the emotional reactions that tend to be part of learning about racism as necessary parts of a longer process. Dismissing these reactions simply as “white fragility” may not be helpful to those whites who want to withdraw from the conversation altogether. This is an opportunity for white preachers to journey with their congregants to help them build the necessary stamina of how to have these conversations.

While it may be tempting to speak only in terms of judgment for white congregations, since it feels good to pass the blame on “other white people,” it is important that preachers root their ministry in the gospel that invites all of us by the grace of God into the work of reconciliation. Yes, preachers need to pass judgment on racism. But the goal is not to be seen as saying the right things, but rather equipping disciples for the long-term effort of anti-racism. It requires more than judgment: it also requires a committed invitation to engagement.

### ★ **Additional Resource**

For additional reading:

*Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*, 3rd Edition. Basic Books, 2017. **Beverly Daniel Tatum**

*Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, (Oxford University Press, 2001). **Michael Emerson and Christian Smith**

*Anxious to Talk about It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully about Racism*. **Carolyn Helsel**

*Preaching about Racism: A Guide for Faith Leaders*. **Carolyn Helsel**

# Preaching Biblically that Black Lives Matter

## Video Clip #2

(if using the link to the hour long town hall please refer to time code - 11:35-17:52)

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*“The biblical evidence is clear: the Gospel of Jesus Christ has a dimension of meaning that is indisputably political, which means that the worldview of Jesus himself also had a crucial political dimension. ...In numerous Gospel passages, Jesus employs various tactics to address the social, economic, and political conditions of his day and their terrible effects upon the lives of his people.”*

- OBERY HENDRICKS, *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted*. (New York: Doubleday, 2006), pp.9-10.

In this clip, we hear the Rev. Dr. Lewis speak about preaching the gospel as seeing “Jesus in the face of the Black men beneath our knee,” referring to the murder of George Floyd, and emphasizing that Black Lives Matter because the inequalities present in our society paint the picture that Black lives don’t matter. Rev. Dr. Stewart uplifts the variety of biblical themes that call for justice: themes of God’s love and compassion. Rev. Dr. Stewart urges preachers to see how God has always been on the side of justice, on the side of the oppressed, and that because all people are made in God’s image, it is important to preach that all lives matter, particularly when Black people have been told their lives do not matter. In a follow-up, Rev. Dr. Lewis recalls a time when someone in her very diverse congregation felt challenged by her preaching on Black Lives Matter, but who eventually realized that being pro-Black did not mean being against this congregant: rather, we all have to be pro-Black in order to be pro-everyone, to support the needs and concerns of all oppressed peoples.

Have you had the experience of persons questioning your preaching about racial justice as somehow outside of the Bible’s purview? Do you have congregants who object to you preaching about race because it is political? How do the words of the Rev. Dr. Lewis and Rev. Dr. Stewart help you to reframe those critiques? In what ways have you continued “preaching the gospel” as the Rev. Dr. Lewis exhorts us?

# Asking Questions, Rather than Being the Answer Person

## Video Clip #3

(if using the link to the hour long town hall please refer to time code - 18:00-20:09 and 26:05-28:57)

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The Rev. Dr. Forbes offers preachers a great gift. In this clip, Dr. Forbes is encouraging preachers to not have all the answers. When preachers are tempted to be the go-to answer person, when we have congregants looking to us for answers, it can be a powerful opportunity to turn to the “interrogative” rather than the “imperative.” Dr. Forbes uses the example of the scene of God in the garden of Eden, knowing exactly the whereabouts of Adam and Eve, yet nevertheless issuing forth a question: “Where are you?” Dr. Forbes encourages preachers to use these times to ask of our congregants: where are you with all of this? Where do you find yourself?

A question we can also pose during this time is our crying out to God: How long? As the Rev. Dr. Forbes asked of God: “how can you stand the injustices that we are going through?” Our honest appeals to God demonstrate our expectation that God listens, and that God hears us. And in response to those questions, we may be reminded that God still is at work.

Dr. Forbes gives preachers a second gift in this clip: reminding us of the sacredness of sabbath. Similar to the pressure to have all the answers, preachers also may feel during this time that they must attend every protest, join every meeting for racial reconciliation, be part of every Zoom call of their local anti-racism movements, and post several times a day to educate about racism. But sometimes our bodies give out, or pandemic conditions mean we are quarantined at home and must miss out on attending protests in our city. These moments may be forced sabbaths. But the Rev. Dr. Forbes reminds us that “God may get a lot done for me and even through me when I dare to remember that REST is a partial way of showing confidence that God is coming through and that God is still at work.”



What questions can you pose to your congregation, rather than rushing forth to provide them with answers to the questions they are posing to you? What questions can best help with the need of our congregations to jump to answers, rather than waiting in the discomfort of our questions and lack of knowing? Where have you seen the power of sabbath in these urgent times? How have you balanced sabbath and protest, or sabbath and active resistance to the forces of injustice? What does sabbath look like during COVID-19 and during this time of widespread outrage over continued racial injustice? How can sabbath prepare us for action?

# Naming Racism without “WhiteSplaining,” and Hope for the People of God

## Video Clip #4

(if using the link to the hour long town hall please refer to time code - 33:44-39:22 and 41:44-44:30)

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In this clip, the Rev. Dr. Katie Givens Kime shares a question posed by an attendee about how to help white people “shut up and listen.” The Rev. Dr. Forbes responds by saying he does not want white people to shut up—he wants them to speak up and speak out. Ways that white people can speak up and speak out include naming the sin of racism, claiming in our prayers of confession that we have been part of a racist legacy, and that we need God to have mercy on us. The Rev. Dr. Forbes looks to the cries of King David for our example: “Have mercy on me, oh Lord.” The Rev. Dr. Forbes says that preaching the gospel can help white people move beyond guilt and shame to this position of contrition, “not because you’ve judged them so harshly, but even maybe because the loving grace of God has been portrayed so beautifully that they say, in contrast, woe is me.” After that, Dr. Forbes says, “the business of having them shut up is a good idea, if they are thinking that they can always explain everything.”

White preachers and white congregants need to be hesitant to try and explain racism, even if it is in service of educating other white people about racism. If talking about racism makes white people feel as if it is something they can tackle, then they have not fully understood the depth and the breadth of the depravity that is racism. White people joining the movement for racial justice can do well by educating themselves, but when that education turns to quick answers and explanations, they become part of the problem. For whites preaching about racism, humility is key: no matter how far you feel your congregation has to go, remember that you have traveled far and still have not arrived!

In this clip, the Rev. Dr. Gina Stewart also helps us understand racism by calling it a “sin against creation.” Racism is not simply an intellectual failure or ignorant bigotry. Racism is a sin against creation itself, viewing whites as above all else, closer to God than any other human being or species. Racism asserts itself against creation through the destruction of land, the theft of indigenous lands and the destruction of natural resources. Around the world, people of color are those most harmed by pollution and climate change. Whites continue to bear the least burden for their catastrophic degradations of the natural world. While wealthy white people have often been at the front of environmental protection movements, they have also ignored the centuries of efforts organized by people of color fighting for the well-being of the earth. To speak about racism, we need to name racism as a sin against creation.

Also in this clip, we hear the encouraging words of the Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, who says that she is no longer anxious about offending people; the more she tells the truth to her congregation, the more excited they get. This is good news! Breaking free from these cycles of sin is something to celebrate. We cannot be liberated if we keep silent on what is binding us to sin. Dr. Lewis names racism as whiteness, naming the ways whiteness gets inside all of us and is insidious, and yet also: “it’s time for us to show the people of God that you’ve got everything good inside of you to make the world good.” We need to both name racism and declare that God is empowering us to do good work in the world.

Do you or members of your congregation struggle with “whitesplaining?” If you are a white person, where can you take your lead from people of color? If you are a person of color, what has been the hardest part about explaining racism to your congregants? What images and concepts have you used to convey racism to listeners? And finally, what is the good you see in your congregation that God wants to use against the powers of injustice today? In what ways have you and your congregation been encouraged during this time to use your gifts? How have you together remembered that you are, as Dr. Lewis proclaims, the “people of God called by that...to the shaping of the world, to making heaven on earth”?