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LEAVING BEHIND THE WHITENED JESUS

On Sunday mornings when I was little, I would run down the steps into the kitchen while wearing my Sunday best. According to my mom, I'd be wearing my "church clothes," including my sharp clip-on tie. When I made my appearance, gripping my Bible in my hand, I would loudly proclaim to everyone (which was the small audience of my family) a bold message. I would say, in my best minister's voice, "The preachings of the gospel! The preachings of the gospel!"

My grandfather was the preacher I came up under in church back in those days. I admired his bold and confident preaching. I too wanted to preach the gospel. At that point, however, I was only beginning to understand what the gospel really is.

Only through a long journey would I discover that the gospel is much more comprehensive, subversive, dangerous, and even undermining of everything that I knew and took for granted in life. It is a divine intervention in history and a life-altering reality. God descended and was revealed in the birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and it is in this same one that all things are sustained and through whom all things are being reconciled. The gospel is about Jesus.

God is not a taken-for-granted idea or proposition that we can comprehend just by being socialized in a supposedly "Christian" nation. God does not fit into our box. Our finite assumptions about God are mere projections of our own wanting. For this reason, God has been commonly thought of as an old white man in the American imagination. And Jesus also was remade through white supremacist imagination into the likeness of a white man with distinctively Anglo-Saxon features and Western culture. In 1967, Vincent Harding articulated the effect of a white American Christ on not only white churches but black churches as well:

From the outset, almost everywhere we blacks have met him in this land, this Christ was painted white and pink, blond and blue-eyed—and not only in white churches but in black churches as well. Millions of black children had the picture of this pseudo-Nazarene burned into their memory. The books, the windows, and paintings, the filmstrips all affirmed the same message—a message of shame. This Christ shamed us by his pigmentation, so obviously not our own. He condemned us for our blackness, for our flat noses, for our kinky hair, for our power, our strange power of expressing emotion in singing and shouting and dancing. He was sedate, so genteel, so white. And as soon as we were able, many of us tried to be like him.¹

Jesus was revealed in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; was testified about by Sojourner Truth and Henry McNeal Turner; and is uniquely present among the least, the last, and the lost of our society. And the gospel of Jesus is manifested visibly by kingdom citizens who have disciplined their bodies and have been formed by the Spirit after the image and likeness of Christ. Our descriptions of Jesus ought to be consistent with his revelation in Scripture. And what we find both in Scripture and by watching those who have sought to truly live as Jesus lived (1 John 2:6) is that Jesus' way is very subversive.

1. Vincent Harding, "Black Power and the American Christ," The King Center Digital Archive, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/black-power-and-american-christ#>.

As Christians, we have developed all kinds of fancy theological tricks and justifications that allow us to circumvent Jesus as recorded in Scripture. We don't think it's necessary to immerse ourselves in the gospel narratives so long as we call on Jesus' name. We are not concerned that the Jesus we follow sometimes bears more similarity and likeness to Uncle Sam or ourselves, in thought and reasoning, than to the crucified Messiah in Christian Scripture. Of course, we all are shaped by our culture, and all see dimly, but at times there seems to be no resemblance between "our Jesus" and the apostolic and scriptural witness we have. Jesus may be our answer, but our projections of Jesus may also be our problem.

When considering the racial problems in the United States, we must begin taking the New Testament Jesus more seriously, in all of his subversive and troubling implications for our social order. Howard Thurman recognized these problems decades ago, in the mid-twentieth century. Thurman reminded his readers that Jesus was Jewish rather than a white man, poor rather than some wealthy elite, and part of an oppressed minority living under occupation rather than one domineering over others in the socio-political realm. Jesus was among "the disinherited," an obvious feature of the Jesus story for those open to seeing and hearing.² After we discard the white, elite, Western Jesus, a human construct used for sociopolitical domination, we open ourselves up to the divine revelation of the poor, oppressed, Jewish, and ultimately crucified Messiah. And in a life of discipleship, we will find the way that can dismantle and dis-align the racial hierarchy and order upon which our lives are built.

Racial hierarchy didn't exist in Jesus' day, but he navigated a society built upon other forms of hierarchical power, particularly as it related to ethnicity, gender, class, and other realities that intersected with Roman imperial occupation and the religious political establishment in Jerusalem. Jesus was always concerned with how society left vulnerable people as stigmatized social outcasts. Jesus subverted these hierarchical forces and categories that dehumanized people as though they were lower on a human ladder of value

2. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949).

and worth. Rediscovering the subversive Jesus, and his life amid social hierarchy, will reveal to us God's divine presence and activity in the world today.

UNDERSIDE OF THE UNDERSIDE

Born in Bethlehem, Jesus had a humble beginning. His company was not Caesar, nor Pilate, and certainly not Herod. The audience to the great moment of his birth, beyond his parents, was shepherds. These were the undesirable and despised underclass of society.

Shepherds lived life on the margins. These weren't the cute Christmas card or Sunday school program shepherds. During this time, Rome was the ruling empire over the Jews, and consequently all of Israel understood what it meant to be oppressed—what it meant to live life with someone's foot against your neck. The Jews despised their Roman occupiers and desperately wanted to see them kicked out of their land. The Jews were oppressed, exploited, and humiliated. And yet, when we understand the social class of shepherds, we remember that they themselves, among their own people, were further stigmatized and unwanted, seen as misfits and left living on the margins of society. They lived on the underside of the underside. What God would make an arrival with people at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as if they were the preferred crowd?

Simultaneously, Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, made a decree that had the whole empire registering for taxes. Pure and simple, this was economic exploitation of an occupied people. Augustus had consolidated the Roman Empire, taking hold of centralized power over the boundaries of his reign. He also claimed that his adopted father, Julius Caesar, was divine after he passed away. Audaciously, Augustus also began to refer to himself as "a son of god," believing his own press that he somehow brought peace and justice to the world through his might. The emperor was believed to be at the very top of the Roman imperial hierarchy.

Ironically, with all of his centralized power, political domination, and exploitation of others, the emperor was still clueless about what was actually taking place on the ground in the little

town of Bethlehem. God was in the midst of enacting a history-altering moment. Jesus was soon to become an unstoppable force that not even the most powerful empire in the world could contain. The incarnational (God taking on flesh) entrance of Christ was off the grid. He was able to "steal away" into the metaphorical "hush harbor" of Galilee.³

Caesar's imperial life at the top of the social ladder actually *distanced* him from what God had done on the margins in the person of Jesus. Despite imposing a registration and census of all the people in his empire, he still didn't have a clue about Jesus' birth. He would never see Jesus face-to-face. Caesar's kingdom was hierarchical and run from the top down, but Jesus' kingdom centralized the outcasts on the margins from the bottom up. In essence, the one who attempted to occupy the center had actually placed himself on the margins of God's restorative and liberating activity in the world. And the one born on the margins was actually at the center of God's shalom erupting into our groaning creation. Jesus' birth gestures toward a God nothing like Caesar.

This good news went first to the marginalized shepherds. It was a life-changing announcement that was going to alter everything. This was a message that brings hope to the poor, uplifts the brokenhearted, revitalizes the tired, liberates the oppressed, and declares that God's kingdom has arrived.

What was the good news that was shared? It was that on that day a Savior, a deliverer, a liberator was born in the city of David. He was the Messiah, the awaited king of Israel who was prophesied about in the Scriptures. This Messiah, or Christ, was the true Lord. Counterfeit lords who demanded ultimate allegiance would soon be unveiled as frauds and fakes.

Also, notice the sign given to identify Jesus as the Messiah. The angels told the shepherds that they would find Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, lying in a feeding trough for animals. He wouldn't be identified as Messiah because of some royal procession; he wouldn't be identified as Christ for being born in a

3. "Hush harbors" or "brush arbors" refer to the secret gathering places of enslaved Africans, as they would come together to worship God in spirit and truth outside of the watchful eye of white supremacist surveillance.

palace; he wouldn't be identified as God's Son because of a royal announcement given from Rome. No. Instead, he would be recognized for being born in some little town out in the country, lying in a humble feeding trough. None of this divine activity was accidental. The very location and circumstance of Christ's birth was a symbol and sign of God's solidarity with the socially oppressed and outcast. It bears witness to Paul's claim that "God chose what is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, to set aside what is regarded as something" (1 Corinthians 1:28). This is the precise way God chose to reveal God's self to the world, demonstrating a deep identification with the majority of the world who struggle with dehumanizing poverty and oppression under dominating forces. Jesus' birth in the manger was a visible protest against the powers of this world that denigrate the dispossessed.

According to Matthew, things didn't settle down for Jesus as a young boy, either. In fact, life was increasingly unsettling. His family had to flee because Herod was carrying out a genocidal campaign against his young peers. Jesus' family became refugees on the run. They were displaced immigrants hiding out in Africa for safety. He would eventually move back and be raised in Nazareth, in the middle of Galilee, when it became safe again. But nonetheless he was born on the wrong side of the tracks. People asked, "What good can come out of Nazareth?"

Jesus' life is particularly significant given his subversive invitation to his followers to be formed after him. In his life and ministry, Jesus found solidarity with the poor, with the oppressed, with vulnerable women, with the socially rejected and marginalized, with ethnic Samaritan outcasts, with the demon-possessed, and with the blind or physically sick. A Jew himself, his daily life was primarily among the masses suffering under the occupation of Rome. He regularly confronted and frustrated the local religious leaders, claiming to have ultimate authority even over the Mosaic Law itself, which sounded fairly blasphemous, because only God could have that authority. He protected those charged with sexual sin from the punishment of the religious leaders, shared life intimately with tax collectors and violent insurrectionists, and invited each of them to follow him into new life.

The kind of life that Jesus lived was grassroots and subversive, traveling from town to town with his improper and scandalous crew. Jesus' kingdom ministry was disruptive to the social order and therefore a direct threat to the social, political, religious, and economic establishment. His life and ministry undermined the powers, yet without ever swinging a sword.

THE SUBVERSIVE WAY OF JESUS

In Luke 13, Jesus had been traveling through various towns and villages, teaching about the kingdom of God and calling people to repent and to follow him. He was busy healing the sick and restoring the outcast so they could fully participate in society, affirming their dignity as humans loved by God. Suddenly, according to Scripture, some Pharisees came to Jesus. Unlike the stereotype of Pharisees as hypocrites, which commonly circulates in the church, we see that in reality Jesus and the Pharisees shared the same social world. Much of their conflict came from differences exposed by proximity.

Therefore, these Pharisees quickly approached Jesus, warning him, "Get away from here, because Herod wants to kill you" (Luke 13:31). Herod was basically a thug king who had been put in place as a puppet of the empire to keep the Jews in that region in their place. The Jews were so difficult to control because their submission to God conflicted with Roman allegiance. Nonetheless, Herod's hierarchical reign over others was threatened by Jesus' presence. Herod was intimidated, as he should have been, by this bottom-up kingdom of God, which was radically reordering all social relationships. And it was gaining traction right under his nose.

Herod's death threat helps put some perspective on how subversive Jesus actually was. In the gospel narratives, Jesus' crucifixion is not a random, one-time characteristic of his life. Jesus' entire way of life reveals him consistently clashing with the status quo establishment in such a provocative way that various powerful and well-connected people were always wanting to kill him. Jesus' subversive life placed him in constant danger by those who ran society.

As I already mentioned, Jesus' presence was so threatening that we are told in Matthew that Herod not only tried to kill him but also committed genocide of countless young boys in the process, forcing Jesus' family to flee for their lives. Furthermore, Jesus' first sermon, recorded in Luke 4, wouldn't be described exactly as a home run by the standards of most American Christians. Actually, he started off well. He began by talking about how justice and liberation were about to be experienced because the day of Jubilee had come through him. This is the liberating moment when slaves are emancipated, debts are forgiven, and land is restored. All these things level the playing field and flatten the social hierarchy.

That message wasn't a problem. Jesus' oppressed Jewish audience was with him there, and they understood Scripture's implications for justice. But then, instead of collecting the offering and saying the benediction while he still had the crowd in the palm of his hand, Jesus continued on to explain that the boundaries of God's activity and favor extended beyond Israel to Gentiles as well. The Jews were a covenant people so they could be a blessing to the nations, not so they could be an exclusively favored people before God. God has always been present and active among Gentiles, especially scandalized and marginalized ones.

The crowd did not like Jesus challenging their script of how they understood themselves before God, so they tried to throw him off a cliff. According to John 10:22-39, things got really bad for Jesus. The religious leaders wanted to seize and stone him. They asked Jesus to be up front about whether he was the Messiah. Jesus, however, said that his very deeds testified to who he was and that they nonetheless still did not believe. Of course, after Jesus claimed that he and the Father are one, these leaders became furious with such seemingly blasphemous words, and they picked up stones and once again wanted to kill him. But he escaped their clutches.

Of course, this is not a comprehensive list of the ways Jesus threatened the establishment of his day. There are other times when people wanted or threatened to kill Jesus according to the Scriptures. My point is that Christ's actual crucifixion was not

the only time that Jesus' life was in danger. What is clear from these few examples is that the life of Jesus was so subversive and radical that he repeatedly undermined and clashed with the status quo establishment. These clashes inevitably and repeatedly resulted in people wanting Jesus dead. Jesus did not affirm the existing social order. And there is no doubt that today Jesus also identifies with black men and women experiencing the daily threat of police brutality—especially those who, like Jesus, have courageously resisted the establishment upholding the racialized status quo.

Luke 13 tells us next that the Pharisees told Jesus to “get away from here” (Luke 13:31). Their intuitive reasoning was probably that Jesus ought not to risk continuing with such subversive ministry in that region, where the backlash for his radical way of life might catch up to him. Instead, Jesus boldly headed right for Jerusalem—a place, as Jesus explained, known for executing people sent by God. Jesus understood his revolutionary ministry to be on the border where God's disruptive kingdom and the old social order of domination collide. And he did not avoid that calling in an effort to live a comfortable and secure life. Subversively, he remained steadfast.

In response, Jesus sent these Pharisees back to Herod with a personally worded message, beginning with this precise phrase: “Go and tell that fox” (Luke 13:32). Yes, you heard that right. Jesus engaged in some radical, revolutionary, and very defiant speech. He clearly didn't respect Herod, a Roman puppet ruling over the Jews. And just so there is no confusion with our English usage of this word and its meaning for that time: Jesus was not playing nice. When Jesus called Herod a fox, he wasn't complimenting him for being sly and sharp. Nor did he find Herod cute or sexy. No, Jesus defiantly dared to tell the truth to Herod about his role in a blasphemous empire that claimed to be a savior to the world to justify its conquests and military expansion. In Jewish literature, there were three ways that the term *fox* was commonly used, other than in reference to the actual animal. First was to call someone a predator, because foxes hunt for their food. Second, somewhat like calling someone sly, Jewish literature also used the

term to describe someone as a deceptive person. Third, foxes are small animals, so calling someone a fox could be a way of saying that person was small or insignificant.

It seems like any or all three of these options could fit this scenario. In any case, Jesus took up the radical prophetic task of speaking God's truth to a powerful person who was lording over his community. He symbolically named and unveiled this violent and unjust man. In naming him "that fox," Jesus unveiled Herod's true character and role in things. He was a puppet for the violent, oppressive, and blasphemous Roman Empire, which had aligned its way with evil forces contrary to God's reign on earth.

Jesus was defiant and determined to continue manifesting his subversive kingdom right within and under the jurisdiction of the powers until he clashed with the establishment in Jerusalem. His resolve was that "nevertheless I must go on my way" (Luke 13:33). He would not be turned around. A similar sentiment was expressed in the 1960s when the people sang that they wouldn't let anyone "turn us around." Jesus was on a mission. As his disciples living in a racialized society, we must reenvision what types of prophetic words need to be spoken in our day to unveil the hidden evil forces of oppression and hierarchy, which have been permissible in our society for too long.

TWO WAYS OF LIFE

This Luke passage presents two ways of life, each clashing with the other in how it organized community and wielded power. Where the old order structured life by wielding its coercive power to take life, intimidating the masses into subjugation, Jesus' kingdom reconfigured life around the authority of God, taking down thrones, casting out demons, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, liberating the oppressed, and proclaiming good news to the poor. Where the old order dominated and violently lorded over others, the kingdom of God arose from the bottom, margins, and cracks of society, freely inviting people to share in the peace and justice of God made available in the presence of Jesus. The old order called people to be puppets for the status quo, while God's kingdom liberated people to discover who they truly were. And while

participating in God's kingdom, people found that they were created in the image of the Maker of heaven and earth.

The kingdom of God has become visible right under the surveillance of those who claim supremacy over others through control and domination. These contrasting ways of life offer different promises, different ways of life, and different end goals. The old order is passing away, and the kingdom of God is the future that God has for us that has been ushered into the present. The kingdom of God is already being experienced, in part, right now, for those who are willing to follow and cling to the delivering presence of the living Jesus.

In this story Jesus also expresses that on the "third day" he will "complete" his work (Luke 13:32). Of course, the third-day reference, for us as the church, becomes a not-so-subtle reminder of Jesus' resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is a game changer. Without victory over sin, death, and the forces of this world, and without the promise of experiencing the world to come with Jesus, following after him and participating in his rejection and suffering seem illogical. Yet with the resurrection, death has lost its sting. That is why Paul talks about Jesus in this way: "Disarming the rulers and authorities, he has made a public disgrace of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15). We are reminded that Jesus is victorious over the cross itself, triumphing over all the social, political, and spiritual forces that aligned together in hopes of destroying him. And we don't have to fear when we join Jesus' revolutionary movement. We will also participate in Jesus' resurrection.

And yet there can be no honest understanding of resurrection outside of a world of crucifixion and death. Jesus, consequently, insists that "it is impossible that a prophet should be killed outside Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33). Jesus is heading straight toward Jerusalem. He has been stirring up a different kind of revolution, one not predicated on hierarchical violence. Jesus has started a *kingdom* rebellion in which his citizens love their enemies, redistribute their resources justly, forgive one another, treat the poor with dignity, live in solidarity with the vulnerable, and liberate the oppressed, all because they worship and praise the God of Jubilee who has

been revealed. Jesus is prepared for a big confrontation, even as he already knows what the result will be. The death-wielding, evil forces of the Jerusalem establishment will put their full weight against him, in hopes of destroying him and his movement.

In response to the cycle of violence from Jerusalem, Jesus laments. He cries out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem" (Luke 13:34). He is emotionally tugged by the life and trajectory of Jerusalem, in relation to both its leaders and its inhabitants, who suffer under Roman occupation. Both are caught up in destructive cycles of violence, having bought into the logic that violence rather than peacemaking would ultimately bring shalom and God's kingdom into existence. It is important to remember that the word *Jerusalem* actually means "city of peace" or "city of shalom." It was intended to be a place that made visible God's reign. But instead of being an alternative social order manifesting God's shalom, it was acting just like the rest of the world, seeking violence as the answer, including against God's prophets. Both Herod and Jerusalem represent the ways that a religious people can become accommodating of, complicit in, and implicated by the sinful and violent ways of the empire. Knowing all of this, Jesus is still undeterred. He is determined to carry out his covenant mission as the suffering servant to the nations, accepting the consequences in his own body for providing deliverance to the nations.

Just when Jesus seems to not be able to get any more revolutionary, he returns to the usage of animal-centered stories to make some serious social analogies about his society and its failed ethics. People often seem to resort to symbols, and particularly animal figures, when they desire to say otherwise extremely hard-to-hear things. For example, enslaved Africans in America used the Brer Rabbit stories to powerfully critique slave society, and yet they did so without it resulting in their immediate death. Death certainly would have occurred had they made those same critiques without such creativity and prophetic imagination. The book of Revelation also does this significantly, although I know there is a lot of debate around the meaning and purpose of such symbols. This kind of storytelling lends itself to being a tool for the underdog of

society. It creates space for subversive speech that reveals realities that have been hidden and covered up.

Jesus begins to talk about his desire for Israel as his children, and how he longs to gather them like a hen gathers and protects its chicks under its wings. This forces us to confront two different animals in this passage, each representing very different ways of being in the world. They are two contrasting ways of life. The first, as we already discussed, is the fox. The fox is a predator; it is deceptive, but it is ultimately just a small figure. The fox is a puppet for greater, bigger actors. The fox's way of life is violence. It wields death, and its end is death.

The hen, in contrast, is motivated by a deep and courageous love for its children, its chicks. Out of such motherly love, it is willing to endure the brunt of the attacks of the fox in attempt to provide cover and safety for its chicks. It longs to create a life-giving space of flourishing and shalom under its wings and within its realm. But if the chicks go running in every direction except toward the hen, then they have chosen to experience the full brunt of the vicious cycle of violence and destruction outside of the hen's wings.

According to Jesus in Luke, Jerusalem was unwilling to look to the Prince of Peace and would thus be forsaken and unprotected. Thereby Jerusalem would be left vulnerable under the whims and brutalities of the Roman oppressors. As historians of first-century Palestine can tell you, this is more than just a parable. In the Gospels, Jesus predicted multiple times what was going to happen to Jerusalem if people refused to take up the way of Jesus by following his subversive life of transformation and peacemaking while caring for the most vulnerable in society. In Luke 19:42, Jesus is less cryptic, and once again laments over Jerusalem because residents didn't know "the things that make for peace"; he suggests that such a path meant that their enemies were going to surround them and crush them. And by AD 70, Jerusalem was literally destroyed by the Roman Empire. Over six thousand people were crucified. Thousands and thousands more killed. The entire city was leveled to the ground. When Jesus said, "Your house is forsaken" (Luke 13:35), he was referring to the absence of shalom

that would be experienced. This had direct physical, social, and political implications. This illustration of the hen and its chicks wasn't a warm, fuzzy message. It was a prophetic warning about God's people living counter to what God was doing on earth as manifested in Jesus Christ. It was a warning about being complicit in, as well as crushed under, imperial power and violence.

Jesus follows that by saying, "You will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Luke 13:35). Most of his listeners would have been anticipating a visitation from God as Jeremiah prophesied, and many would have also expected a messiah who would come and deliver them from their unrighteous oppressors. This would happen in Jerusalem. Yet when the time came, they did not recognize God in the flesh.

Isn't that something? They could not recognize that it was God manifested in Jesus. They attended synagogue and observed the torah their whole lives. Yet when God took on human flesh, somehow Jesus looked nothing like many people's projections of the divine one. We now know that if you want to know what God looks like, then look no further than Jesus Christ. He is the revelation of the triune God in bodily form. Jesus is the clearest image we have of God.

CHRIST CRUCIFIED

God becoming one of the crucified ones of the world is baffling. It goes against the way we conceive of God in the world. If most American Christians were told to think of a pyramid of power and to place Caesar and God on it, they would almost certainly elevate Caesar above most people. Caesar had a lot of power. We think of him as shaping history and running things. Most Christians would also insist that God is at the top of the pyramid of power—in fact, so far at the top that it would make Caesar's power look insignificant and ridiculous.

Yet have we really grasped the meaning of God's power if we simply think that divine power is just a supersized, Caesar-like power? Isn't that merely the taken-for-granted logic of a society that refuses to meaningfully understand the revelation of the crucified Christ?

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul sets aside the sensible, informed, and enlightened perspectives of God that existed during his time. He is not impressed with human wisdom. He asks, "Where is the wise man?" (1 Corinthians 1:20). For Paul, human wisdom cannot compare to God's wisdom. In comparison, human wisdom is nothing but foolishness. God's wisdom is expressed most vividly in the crucified Christ. This is a stumbling block for some and just plain foolishness to others. God's Messiah, who suffered and was crucified by an oppressive power, is the key that unlocks a new way of exploring society in a truer way.

Not only is the *wisdom* of God unlocked in view of Christ's crucifixion but so also is the *power* of God. Let's come back to my discussion on the idea of a pyramid of power. The problem with thinking about God's power as imperial power on steroids is that it doesn't consider God's power expressed in the crucified Christ (1 Corinthians 1:24-25). Paul forces us to ask, "What kind of power is this?" The truth is that God's power is not like Caesar's power! It is a different kind of power. God's way of doing things looks nothing like Caesar's. Divine power isn't beating earthly rulers and authorities at their own tyrannical game; rather, God undermines and subverts their power in a way that to us looks very much like earthly weakness.

What kind of God is this? That God has been revealed as a crucified liberator from Galilee should dismantle our earthly conceptions of divine wisdom and power. The American god of dominant culture seems foolish and weak once we realize that God has chosen to especially restore, liberate, reconcile, and transform our world from below. This God dwells among the socially vulnerable and marginalized, who have always been discounted by the dominating and controlling group in society.

IMMERSED IN THE SUBVERSIVE LIFE OF JESUS

Americans in great numbers have passionately cried out "Lord, Lord" every Sunday. Likewise, there is no question that America has a long, horrific, four-hundred-year history of white-dominated, racialized practices including slavery, white terrorism, lynching, Jim Crow segregation, humiliation, police brutality, mass incarceration,

inequitable educational and economic opportunities, and much more. That Christian piety and oppression could so easily coexist should be horrifying. It can happen, though, because the Jesus being referred to in America rarely had any resemblance to the subversive life embodied in the gospel narratives of Scripture. Rather than creating a new order, the American god has too often been the sustainer of this old order, white supremacy and all. The god passed down from generation to generation in dominant culture legitimized our racialized hierarchy. People have assumed that white American “old-time religion” was synonymous with the kind of religion that God accepts (James 1:27). Taking for granted that God is with them, most people grow up always presuming what God is like. Many intuitively believe that God blesses America and thinks of it as a divine vehicle in the world. God’s America is (or was) mostly an innocent Christian nation. We can throw out clichés like “God is sovereign,” “God is all-knowing,” “God is [fill in the blank]” because we have God in our doctrinal box. Unfortunately, dominant cultural reflections on God rarely adhere with the revelation of Jesus as specifically attested to in Scripture.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while in prison before being executed for following Jesus into resistance of the white supremacist regime in Germany, addressed the same concern.

Everything we may with some good reason expect or beg of God is to be found in Jesus Christ. What we imagine a God could and should do—the God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with all that. We must immerse ourselves again and again, for a long time and quite calmly, in Jesus’s life, his sayings, actions, suffering, and dying in order to recognize what God promises and fulfills. What is certain is that we may always live aware that God is near and present with us and that this life is an utterly new life for us; that there is nothing that is impossible for us anymore because there is nothing that is impossible for God; that no earthly power can touch us without God’s will, and that danger and urgent need can only drive us closer to God.⁴

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 514–15.

For too long, the church has gone about its business as though nothing were wrong. Meanwhile, it has been a racialized organism, not only fractured relationally but actually practicing, perpetuating, or remaining silent to the racial oppression of others. And yet Jesus, in his birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection, has been the answer available to us all along. According to our sacred Scripture, Jesus lived a life that nonviolently subverted the powers and confronted the establishment. The wisdom and power of God, of a different sort from earthly wisdom and power, is something we are invited to participate in as God’s church. We are the called-out ones—not from the world, but from being patterned by the wisdom and power of this world through our sinful practices and mind-sets.

Jesus can help us transform how we understand and resist racism in our society. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus can help us participate in God’s presence in the world rather than perpetuate racism unknowingly. We must consider how American Christianity’s common sense has failed to understand the world from the perspective of crucified Christ. In the next chapter we will consider the limitations of white dominant cultural ways of knowing, and will seek a more Jesus-shaped posture from which to view race and racism in our society.