



### ***Session 6: Post Racial America***

**Focus:** On November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008 we sat watching as President-elect Barack Obama gave his victory speech. It was a powerful speech on an emotion packed evening. The news commentators were talking about a new era, a post-racial America. A little while after the speech ended, my mother-in-law called me into her room, waited for me to sit, and said, “They are going to kill him, aren't they?”

In his farewell speech, President Obama said, “After my election, there was talk of a post-racial America. Such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. For race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society. I've lived long enough to know that race relations are better than they were ten, or twenty, or thirty years ago - you can see it not just in statistics, but in the attitudes of young Americans across the political spectrum. But we're not where we need to be. All of us have more work to do.”

*Tonight we discuss “Post Racial America”.*

**Gathering Prayer:** Holy One who is known to us by many names and in many ways, we give thanks for the blessings that we have in our lives. You know the thoughts of our hearts; hear our prayers. Be present now as we enter a time of thought and discussion.

**Sentences on the Subject:** *Where the Nixon administration had devoted two-thirds of the federal drug budget to treatment and one-third to law enforcement, Reagan reversed that ratio to what it has remained since: two-thirds law enforcement, one-third treatment. A New Jersey official, describing the massive waiting lists for programs in his state, complained to Rangel’s committee that this reallocation of funding constituted “simple abandonment by the Federal Government of the prevention and treatment field.” By cutting treatment in the midst of a drug crisis, the Reagan administration established the template that would define drug policy in America for decades to come. The consequences have been grave and lasting. Most immediately, cutting funding for treatment denied help to people in pain. After all, behind every statistic presented in the testimony before Rangel’s committee were people, most of them poor, struggling to keep their families and lives together in the face of dependency and addiction.* *Four Hundred Souls* (p. 352)

*The refusal to fund drug treatment programs also helped pave the way for an unprecedented experiment in prison building. With drug markets proliferating, overdose deaths rising, and treatment centers closing, the American impulse toward harsh justice found full expression. Almost nothing was out of bounds. Legislators in Delaware contemplated bringing back the whipping post for drug sellers. Federal officials proposed they receive the death penalty. Though whipping posts never became law, the same vengeful impulse found an outlet in extreme prison sentences.* *Four Hundred Souls* (p. 353).

*Originally written by Senator Joe Biden, who would become vice president during the two terms of Barack Obama, the 356 pages of the bill contained provisions for one hundred thousand new police and over \$12 billion in funding for state prisons, giving precedence to states that had enacted three-strikes laws and truth-in-sentencing. Moreover, the stipulations of the bill, which terminated Pell Grants for prisoners, led to the disestablishment of degree-granting educational programs in prisons. Recreational facilities began to be increasingly removed from prison settings as well.* *Four Hundred Souls* (p. 368).

*Immigrant. The word carries currency. Loaded. Weighed down by a politics of emotionality. Fear reigns and rules. It shrouds policy and reaches into these borders of manufactured fear where the walls are thick with America's rewritten history of immigration, featuring the accents of bigotry and unapologetic open political warfare turning small screens of news shows into horror movies where caged children are vilified and their proponent, America's forty-fifth president, is deified.* *Four Hundred Souls* (p. 371)

*Hurricane Katrina is easily a metaphor for America's attitude toward Black women: rejected, neglected, and never protected. But Black women's persistence and their insistence on survival and restoration are a metaphor for their attitude toward America.....When former first lady Barbara Bush broke her characteristic public silence, she diminished the humanity of survivors. In discussing evacuees in Texas, she told the radio program Marketplace, "And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway," she said, "so this is working very well for them."* *Four Hundred Souls* (p. 376)

*"Every time I vote," Oprah Winfrey said on a 2004 episode of The Oprah Winfrey Show dedicated to voting, "I cast my vote for Otis Moss, Sr., who walked eighteen miles in one day to have the chance to do it. That's why I vote."* *Four Hundred Souls* (p. 378).

*Many thought of the election of Barack Obama, not as the end of racism, but certainly as a turning point. And it was. But for many, President Obama's election was a turning point in a different direction. It spurred a backlash among white supremacists invested in maintaining the status quo. It can be no coincidence that the carnage of the Voting Rights Act so central to the Shelby decision occurred during the presidency of our first-ever Black president. It is no coincidence that in the decade since Obama's election, voter suppression has gained more momentum, velocity, and animosity than it had in the previous three elections combined. Since Shelby County v. Holder, voter suppression has taken on more pervasive and pernicious forms than ever before. Voter purges are on the rise. Between 2006 and 2008, states removed 4 million voters from their rolls, as they are permitted to do under the Constitution in order to maintain the accuracy of their voter rolls. Between 2014 and 2016, that number jumped to 16 million people. Voter ID laws, like the one that stopped Eddie Holloway, Jr., from voting in the 2016 election, have seeped into state constitutions across the country. Felon disenfranchisement laws and voter access laws run rampant. *Four Hundred Souls* (p. 380).*

*The explosion of this Black Renaissance came with a swift, strong backlash. Soon after Black Lives Matter began making a cultural and systemic impact, refrains of "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter" began to counter it. These Americans denied the existence of racism and branded whoever dared to expose it as people who were "playing the race card," ostensibly for sympathy or to deny culpability in their own oppression. These Americans framed Black Lives Matter activists as domestic terrorists who posed a threat to the lives of law enforcement. *Four Hundred Souls* (p. 384).*

Below is some "food for thought", a few probes that might kick start a conversation. Read over them and pick one (or more, or none) to discuss. Remember to hold space for others to share and share only what you feel comfortable sharing.

**Probe 1.** *Critical Race Theory*\* does not define racism in the traditional manner as solely the consequence of discrete irrational bad acts perpetrated by individuals but is usually the unintended (but often foreseeable) consequence of choices (American Bar Association). How does the essay "*The War on Drugs*" illustrate this idea? Can you think of other "unintended consequences" of policy choices?

**Probe 2.** Otis Moss Sr's\*\* story is but one telling of Jim Crow style voter suppression; Eddie Lee Holloway's is a far more recent telling of the same story. A second pillar of Critical Race Theory calls for "embracing the lived experiences of people of color, including those preserved through storytelling." Congresspersons Booker & Lee proposed the *United States Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation*, similar to the South African and Greensboro NC models. How can churches of the PSEC of the UCC, many of which lack diversity, join in telling the story of the contributions of minorities to the community and nation? Should they; or is their mission only the telling of the Gospel? Do you agree with MLK?\*\*\*

**Probe 3.** Black Lives Matter. Critical Race Theory\*. Defund the Police. These ideas become battle cries for the Right and the Left immediately engages. Is the battle real, or simply a way to distract from the underlying issues and solutions? Is there a better way to engage the other side other than clapping back? What is the sound of one hand clapping?

**Probe 4.** Like the 1619 Project and Critical Race Theory, *400 Souls* seeks to re-frame our country's history by shifting a focus onto the role of slavery and Black Americans. Have these stories added to or shifted your thinking on race in America? How? What stories or examples can you share?

**Commission:** *Hold on to what is good. Love deeply. Honor others. Stay excited about life and your faith. Be joyful. Be patient. If you pray, have faith. Share with people who are in need. Welcome others into your homes. Be loving to those who hurt you. Be present; be in the moment. Be gentle, even with those with whom you disagree. Be humble. Be a friend of people who aren't considered important. Do the right thing. If possible, live in peace with everyone. And remember, no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey- you are welcome here.*

*\*Pillars of Critical Race Theory: Race is not biologically real but is socially constructed and socially significant. Racism is a normal feature of society and is embedded within systems and institutions. Racist incidents are not aberrations but are the result of structural and systemic racism; racism is not a few "bad apples" Recognition of the relevance of people's everyday lives and their story to our understanding of history.*

*\*\* Otis Moss III is the pastor of Trinity UCC Chicago and the Grandson of Otis Moss Sr. Last week he Tweeted: I have an internal debate with myself if tweeting on Critical Race Theory to honor the work of Derrick Bell and Kimberly Crenshaw is not feeding into the right wing machine that just wants us talking about it and could care less about the truth." A sermon of his that you should not miss is [The Cross and the Lynching Tree](#)*

*\*\*\* "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority." ~MLK Jr.*