

What Happened After the Black Squares

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[0:00] My name is Tonetta. I'm one of the pastors here at the Table Church, and I do want to assure you that there is currently not a tornado warning because I checked.

Thank the Lord. We would not be sitting in this room. Yeah, so I just want to start by saying I am feeling under the weather, so I need for you to pray.

Pray for me as we move through this time. Pray to the God who made Dayquil that I will be all right, okay? All right, let's pray together.

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on us. Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on us.

May we sense this morning the wind of your spirit, God, blowing in this place. May we find ourselves enlivened to do the work that you have called us to.

[1:15] And may we also, God, be able to rest in the sweetness of your presence and the goodness of your love.

Lord, please, in this moment, help us to feel our bodies supported, the air in our lungs, and to know that we can trust something that is bigger than us, that we can trust the God that we cannot control. Lord, thank you for this time, for this encounter. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. Amen. It wasn't too long ago that I felt a vibrant hope that we were right on the cliff's edge of a new world.

It wasn't too long ago when I felt like all around me, a tide was turning towards something unprecedented. In those days, I can remember a sense of both being caught up and of being called to account.

I felt urgent questions surfacing. What was I intentionally enacting with my body? To what ends was I using my resources?

[2:44] Who else did I need to conspire with so that I could triple and double and quadruple our impact? There were social media campaigns and organizations, both new and old, gathering energy.

Even corporations seemed to sense a need to align with the powerful current electrifying the nation. For me, the clearest memory I have of that time sits as a photograph in my phone as much as it sits as a snapshot in my heart.

Me, having stepped to the side of the torrential wave of protesters marching down Pennsylvania Avenue. Me just watching people, so many people, angry and passionate, carrying signs that said everything from black, trans, lives matter to he called all mamas.

That last one bringing tears to my eyes as my own son was just weeks away from his third birthday. It was a tail end of the spring of 2020, a season in which instead of enjoying the radiance of sprouting flowers, we watched the cutting down of black lives one after another.

Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade. Everywhere, anger and movement for those on the margins, especially black lives, seem to be bubbling up.

[4:36] Yeah, instead of that one snapshot of the longest and largest march I have ever witnessed, what I now realize was perhaps the most important thing to capture was the millions of black squares posted on Instagram on Blackout Tuesday.

Only for those accounts to return to their usual routine of posting travel adventures or the latest fashion trend on Wednesday.

I should have kept track of the number of corporations peddling performative slogans or surface level adjustments that could just easily be rolled back.

All in an attempt to keep customers buying and buying and buying. After all, isn't consumerism the solution to everything?

I won true salvation. Six years on with George, with the George Floyd Justice and Policing Act that would ban chokeholds stalled in Congress.

[5:54] Affirmative action and higher education admission struck down. The government sanctioned rollback of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and broad-based attacks on voting rights for the most minoritized.

That cliff's edge overlooking the new world feels to me more like the next threshold in a burning house from which we never seem able to find the exit.

We live in a world that sometimes feels like a carnival with fun houses as far as the eye can see for a few. For a few. While it remains an excruciating experience of smoke and mirrors for the many. Such a world begs the question how can we know what is real? I think today's passage of scripture from Matthew's gospel will help us explore that question this morning.

But I realize that at this point in the series as we start to draw it to a close it still may not be clear why it is helpful to put these two things together.

[7:08] The parables of Jesus and Afrofuturism. Why is it important to put these in conversation? I think it's a fair question and I think it deserves at least the beginning of an answer.

See Jesus was teaching about a new world coming smack dab in the middle of what in some ways must have felt like a dystopia. Our series graphic I don't know if we that's still up.

Yeah our series graphic might strike you as bleak as futuristic something out of a film you need a strong stomach for.

But it's only a stylized sped up version of a world that did exist and still exists for so many.

Historians estimate that roughly nine out of every ten people living in first century Palestine sat around the edge of hunger.

Most of them were tenant farmers farmers or day laborers working land they would never own. At the mercy of landlords who could evict them underpay them or replace them without a second thought.

[8:24] Some of us come from the lineage of yesterday's sharecroppers. We have family ties with migrant workers or day laborers.

those folks in mind you might already recognize this world this world that Jesus came speaking in enfleshed as God.

It was a precarious world. It was dominated by somebody else's whims and the beggars who show up again and again in the gospels that's not accidental.

Those folks gathered at Jerusalem's gates where the desperate went because that's where the money was. Into that world Jesus goes he doesn't hand out a policy reform he tells parables.

These short strange stories that surprise that unsettle that refuse to be pinned down to a single tidy meaning. it's easy to imagine Jesus wandering around saying these spiritual things healing people and then getting killed because the empire and the religious establishment felt threatened by its popularity.

[9:47] But in his book Parables of Subversive Speech Bible scholar William Pardog points out something I think is important. He argues that something else was at play.

The parables themselves were part of the threat. When you in your quiet times or devotionals read the parables I hope that you remember that.

They weren't decoration around the real controversy they were central to the controversy itself. Was Jesus crucified so that we might be rescued and reconciled to God?

Yes. Yes. So that sin might be forgiven and covered over? Yes. So that the dividing wall of hostility between all of us might be broken down?

Absolutely. But he was also killed for these stories because they were doing something dangerous. They were constructing a counter future a way of imagining the world that refused nationalism and ethnocentrism and the hoarding of wealth.

[10:59] And that's not coincidentally what Afrofuturism is doing. The person who coined the term Afrofuturism, Mark Derry, frames it like this.

Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of that history imagined possible futures.

Another scholar, Koduo Yishu, names the tension even more precisely. The tension between counter-memory on the one hand, recovering what has been erased, and counter-future on the other, imagining what has not yet been permitted to exist.

Afrofuturism essentially says you can do both at once. Reach backward and reach forward. And Jesus is qualified to teach us about a counter-future because he is the counter-future. Not just its herald, but its embodiment. And it makes a certain kind of sense that his teaching would come to us as slant. Because most revolutionaries at some point talk in code.

[12:21] Remember that too when you're reading the parables. You don't get off the plantation without some kind of insider speech. Mark Derry says black people have always been masters of the figurative, saying one thing to mean something quite other.

I'll just read the last part of that. he says it's just about the blackest part of black tradition. So when we read the parables and even other parts of scripture too, there are ways in which we must become code talkers in this exact same way.

All right. So let's turn now to the parable at hand. I'm actually going to ask Matt Wilmot to come up to save my voice a little bit to read it. It's Matthew 21, 23, through 32.

Matthew 21, 23, you can grab that one. Do it. Through 32. 32. When he entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him as he was teaching and said, by what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?

Jesus said to them, I will also ask you one question. If you tell me the answer, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?

[14:02] And they argued with one another. If we say from heaven, he will say to us, then why did you not believe him? But if we say of human origin, we are afraid of the crowd for all regard John as a prophet.

So they answered Jesus, we do not know. And he said to them, neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. What do you think?

A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, son, go work in the vineyard today. He answered, I will not. But later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same.

And he answered, I go, sir. But he did not go. Which of the two did the will of the father? And they said, the first. Jesus said to them, truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going to the kingdom of God ahead of you.

For God came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even after you saw it, you changed your minds and believe him.

[15:08] Thank you. All right.

So as we get into this scripture, let's first remember where we are in Matthew's gospel. Jesus has entered Jerusalem on a donkey while people are throwing coats on the road like it was a parade. Better than anything Macy's could ever throw. Then Jesus walks straight into the temple in Matthew's gospel right after that and he flips over tables. And in our passages perhaps one day or maybe two after Jesus has been serving all this fabulous realness and the religious leaders understandably rattled.

They want to know who gave you this authority? Who gave you permission to do these things? And Jesus never one to be read for filth turns it around on them and asks them a counter question about John the Baptist that leaves them basically stuck between two bad answers.

And then he drops the actual parable. It's pretty simple. It's kind of the opposite of the parable we talked about last week. A father asked these two sons to go into the vineyard and one says, I got you.

[16:29] I got you. I'm already on my way, pops. And he doesn't go. And the other one says, nope, not today. I'm reclaiming my time.

Y'all, people abuse that phrase all the time. You know what I'm talking about. I'm reclaiming my time. But then he decides he's going to go anyway. And Jesus asked this simple question, which one did the will of the father?

It's so simple that even his opponents can't help but give the obvious answer. The parable is pretty straightforwardly about the temptation to say the right things but then to do something else with your actions, to post a black square on Instagram on Tuesday and then return to business as usual on Wednesday.

It also reminds us that some folks who do not have the correct words, who don't have a complex theological vocabulary or a pithy saying to post on social media are precisely the people we should be following.

There is a gap between the profession of the religious leaders and the lives that they produced and before we judge those leaders I want us to sit with the gap that exists with all of us, within all of us. [17:54] In a second I'm going to share three things that are worth taking away from this passage. But before I do this I want to give us the chance to move around.

I'm going to drink some more tea as we pass the piece. And I would love for you to answer this question. Because I don't want us to just judge these religious leaders.

What's one thing you believe that your life hasn't caught up to yet? Something that you believe or profess but struggle to embody.

It might even be a gifting or a calling that you sense but you can't find the courage to live out. And I know I'm asking you to be a little bit vulnerable so you can go for the easy answer.

Like I tell my kids to keep the house clean while I leave everything around myself. You can go for the easy answer, okay? I know this is a vulnerable question. But let's take like five minutes, say your name and your pronouns, to answer that question.

[19:00] A little bit vulnerable, not more than you want to share. Okay? Five minutes. Is that clear? Is it good? Okay. Okay. is that clear?

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[21:31] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. All right. All right.

[24:45] Let's start to regather. I hope that these are conversations you can continue after service, maybe over lunch. All right.

So now let's get into... Thank you for that vulnerability. I really appreciate it. Thank you. All right. So let's get into these three things that I think are worth taking home and chewing on throughout this week.

First of all, Jesus in this parable seems to suggest something pretty basic, that your actions prefigure the future.

Not your intentions, not your captions, not the sign you carried one Saturday six years ago. Political theorists have a term for this.

It's prefigurative politics. The conviction that the way of movement organizes itself in the present has to already embody in miniature the world it claims to be building.

[25:51] The son who says, I will go and stays home is not somehow neutral. He's prefiguring a future that looks exactly like his present.

So what is your life prefiguring? That's a key question that this parable asks. What is the long-term commitment that you feel resistance to and yet know underneath that resistance that you have to make?

One of mine is this. A church that is genuinely interracial. That does not quietly organize itself around whiteness as its unspoken center, but where justice and joy mingle for all kinds of different people.

As Isabel Wilkerson named in her much-praised book, caste, endogamy, marrying, gathering, belonging only within your own group, is one of the load-bearing walls of any caste system.

And so I sense that part of my best I will go is to opt in into the slow, sometimes uncomfortable and exhausting work of building churches that defy the color lines drawn by caste.

[27:12] And when the work becomes something I am tempted to simply perform and profess rather than pray into being and prefigure with my life, when it all starts to feel too far-fetched, I remember these lines from Octavia's Brood.

For those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs.

And that is no less true of this church. This church, this community is the science fiction of our ancestors.

And I am humbled to remember that every single church where the dividing wall of race is being broken down is somebody's I will go.

Made flesh, made real. So what is your life prefiguring? In the ordinary architecture of your household, it could be something very different than what I just named and what I sense about my own life, but you know what that is?

[28 : 25] Do you know what that is? Second, in this parable, Jesus seems to ask a simple question. Are you willing to change your mind?

It shows up twice in the passage, the question of whether you'll change course once the truth shows up in front of your face. It's easy to point at the religious leaders and to say, oh, they're so hard-hearted, they're so stubborn.

It is much more difficult to admit that we are just as capable of protecting our own comfort. In our own, I've always understood it this way.

So let me ask you directly. Some of you have one foot planted near agnosticism or maybe atheism, and yet something keeps pulling you back toward this Jesus who some have colonized and weaponized, but who actually still speaks to you.

Can you change your mind? Can you change your mind? Can you change your mind? Some of you feel like you'll never again know how to pray or hear God or read scripture or just feel at home as you used to in a church.

[29 : 45] Can you change your mind? Some of you are settled and steady and if we're honest, getting a little bit tired of watching everybody deconstruct every single thing.

Can you change your mind enough to let your steadiness become a gift instead of a judgment? To use what's solid in you to help somebody else find their footing?

Some of you don't believe this particular church will ever be sustainable for the long haul. You know the stress points. But can you change your mind enough to enjoy the beauty here of becoming?

And then some of you, if you're honest, and I can be in this category too, you just miss the comfort of a larger church.

You all know those churches where the air condition is just right? It's just right. You know, the lighting is just dramatic enough, you know? It's like hinted at a little Broadway, you know?

[30 : 57] You got this three-point sermon. It's not complicated. You just remember it. You remember it when you leave the house, when you leave the church. And then the music is tuned to your taste.

It's exactly all your favorites every Sunday. Can you believe that something messy or something far less predictable might actually be where God is calling you to fully commit?

Not half-heartedly, but Sunday after Sunday. Can you go into the vineyard even when every part of you is resisting the journey?

And then third, and finally, Jesus reminds us that this, reminds us in this parable that there is a particular danger in a world like ours where some people, some elites have access to power like the religious leaders.

And that access, simply by virtue of the people, some elites, simply by virtue of lineage or platform or the accident of who taught them, who mentored them. And that access lets them speak with an authority the rest of us are never given.

[32 : 08] Writer Olufemi Otawo captures this danger in his book, *Elite Capture*, describing the way the elites of our world can co-opt our visions of the future.

It's really easy to be dazzled by people who seem to have all the right words and the clean answers and the tidy theology, especially when we don't have those things for ourselves.

In our world of progressive Christianity, you can watch this happen every day in the wide orbit of white male deconstruction influencers, circling evangelicalism.

Erna Kim Hackett explains it like this. I think of all the work that we as women of color and non-binary folks did to launch out of the gravitational pull of these evangelical spaces.

And she's thinking after 2020. But instead of going on and exploring new worlds, we got re-trapped. The re-trap is that after launching from that world, we remain orbiting it.

[33 : 13] White guy deconstruction bros have looped us into another version of white male-centered theology. These deconstruction experts cannot get us to new places because they

