Theology Cafe: Black Theology

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[0:00] A lot is communicated when we consider what is supposedly the default, the normal, the expected. So a couple examples, like crash test dummies, when they were designed, they were designed using the average male body.

So when car makers and federal regulators were figuring out what was a safe car or not, they were using male bodies, and that excluded half the population from the sample size of what is considered a safe car or not, because a male body was considered the default.

The same thing happened with like medicine, pharmaceutical testing for years and years, where they would only use white male test subjects, not taking into consideration gender or race.

Think about what is the default size of clothes versus what's considered a specialty size, or of an airplane seat, or what's the default for building construction?

Do you use stairs, or do you use ramps? Do you take into consideration the different abilities of people, or do you have a default that doesn't take those into consideration?

[1:18] What's the default romantic show or movie plot? Who are the leads? Are they straight? What are the defaults when you're looking at things labeled, you know, for men or for women?

When you walk into a well-stocked theological bookstore, you'll see like shelves and shelves of books, and you'll see these little placards on them. One of my favorite bookstore placard is a teen paranormal romance.

You don't see that in a theological bookstore, but you know, you'll see things like biblical studies, or systematic theology, or biblical theology, Christian living, things like that.

And then you have to go like a little bit deeper into the store, and then you'll find these specialty studies, like black theology, or feminist theology, or queer theology.

So then it makes you think like, okay, so if there's like black or Asian theology, or feminist theology, and then there's just theology. What defines the default?

[2:21] Who got to decide this is the default normal option, and everything else is on the specialty bookshelf? So what is meant when we say biblical studies?

Biblical studies by and for whom? So this year, we're going to introduce something called Theology Cafe. Sorry, there's no coffee.

But Theology Cafe, where we are going to sort of take a sampling over the year, and we probably will continue this past just this year.

We'll take a sampling of all the different forms of theology or biblical studies that are out there that question the supposed default option.

By looking at that wide, wide variety of other ways of constructing our theology, or way of talking about God. Whenever I see, as a pastor, whenever I see like panic about like those dang progressive Christians, or those supposed liberals, or whatever, what it usually is communicating to me is, oh, your experience of what Christianity is, and was, and can be, is this narrow, even though there's a wide other ocean of not default options that's been happening for decades and centuries.

[3:42] And so part of what Tanetta and I want to do is just sort of introduce us all to that. Some of us know it, some of us don't, and there's a wide mix in between. So we're going to look at this wide variety, because everyone does theology.

Even the statement, I don't do theology, is a form of theology, okay? You can't opt out. So our plan for 2023 is to every few months, take a look at a different lens and experience of theology.

Feminist, Asian American, queer, Latinx, indigenous. And this month, in light of Black History Month, we're going to be taking a look at black theology. So every theology cafe, we're going to invite a practitioner or scholar of this Sunday's theme to share with us.

And so today we have a pre-recorded video, and that is by the Dr. Adam Clark of Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. Not our Adam Clark. Sorry, Adam.

He currently serves as the co-chair of black theology at the American Academy of Religion, and actively publishes in the area of black theology and black religion.

[4:47] He is committed to the idea that theological education in the 21st century must function as counter-story, a way of pushing it back against the default. One that equips us to read against the grain of the dominant culture, and inspires us to live into the saying of St. Ignatius of going forth to set the world on fire.

So we're going to watch this presentation by Dr. Clark, who prepared this just for us, and then we'll have some discussion time and move forward from there. So roll the tape.

Good morning. Good evening. Good afternoon, depending on what part of the world you're from. Good morning.

Good morning. Good morning, everyone. Good morning. Good morning.

Let's go to the Director. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. to Black History Month. And there we have Black History Month, a month to recognize the achievements of Black Americans.

[6:35] This morning, I want to talk to you a bit about Black theology. And before I do that, I just want to talk a bit about the history or the mission of the Christian church, the mission of the Christian church.

The mission of the church is to be a vehicle for God's love. The Gospel of John reminds us, Christians love God because God loved us first.

But the question becomes, what is the love work of the church? Where should the flow of love be directed? When one examines the history of this country in regard to race, Christian love has been paralyzed in relationship to the color bar.

Christian love has not pushed back sufficiently against slavery. It hasn't pushed back sufficiently against segregation, against colonialism, against mass incarceration.

And Black theology emerges as a critique and a corrective to hold Christian love accountable to the pain, to the suffering, and to the hurt of Black and oppressed people.

[7:56] Black theology gets its Christian identity from the life and teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. King modeled a prophetic conception of Christian faith.

A model that transformed Christianity from a religion primarily concerned with the afterlife, i.e. Billy Graham, to a religion of this worldliness.

Christianity is not exclusively about the soul's relationship to God, but it's about the well-being of the entire person. Christianity is not exclusively about the soul's relationship to God, but it's about the same reason.

It's about the same reason. Black theology gets its liberation identity from two stories in the Bible. First, the Exodus story, where Jesus announces his mission to the world as he unscrolls the text of Isaiah.

In the Exodus story, what we have is an enslaved Hebrew people who are fighting and rebelling against a slave-holding Pharaoh.

[9:07] And the mighty acts of God work through Moses to deliver God's people. In the Gospel of Luke, you see Jesus connect his anointing to good news to the poor, setting the captives free, delivering sight to the blind.

The Blackness of Black theology is derived through the life and teachings of Malcolm X. Malcolm X taught us that Blackness is a sight of divine activity, and God is active in a liberating and goal-orientated way in Black history and culture.

In the Bible, James Cone, the father of Black theology, defined Black theology as an interpretation of Jesus Christ through the standpoint of the Black struggle for justice.

In later years, he would reference the Genesis story of Cain and Abel. Cain killed his brother Abel, but Abel's blood spoke.

And the Lord said, Where is your brother Abel? And Cain said, I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper? And the Lord said, What have you done?

[10:35] Listen, your brother's blood is crying out from the ground. Cain is a metaphor, according to Cain, for white people, and Abel Black.

And God is asking white people, Where are your Black brothers and sisters? And whites respond, I don't know. Am I their keepers?

And the Lord says, What have you been doing to them for four centuries? And the blood of Black people, it's still crying out from the ground.

The blood of George Floyd. The blood of Breonna Taylor. The blood of Sam DuBose. The blood of Sandra Bland.

The blood of Emmett Till and the countless others, the thousands of others, unnamed people who were lynched. The tens of thousands lost in the middle passage, whose bodies are lying at the bottom of the ocean floor.

[11:42] All of these folks sit on the same continuum, Black blood crying out. And what redemptive word does the church have to say about that?

The discipline of Christian theology is an ongoing and continuous conversation that is centuries old. To be an effective student of this tradition, one must learn its conversation partners, its sources, its norms, as well as its exclusions, its silences, its limitations.

Theology is not identical to Christian faith. It's the critical side of Christian faith. Black theology is an invitation to participate in this centuries-old conversation through the lens of the Black experience in America.

Now, up until the 1960s, this theological conversation wasn't meaningfully impacted by Black people. And James Cone challenged the theological establishment by asking, why has the question of Black suffering been ignored by American theologians?

After the Holocaust in Germany, you couldn't be a credible Christian theologian without wrestling with the atrocity of the Holocaust.

[13:17] During the 1960s, a young James Cone watched all these uprisings that occurred after the assassination of Martin Luther King. And he asked the question, what does Christian theology have to do with this?

How can it speak powerfully to this moment? And why are so many white Christians more concerned about law and order than they are about justice?

Something must be profoundly wrong. And Cone started to raise questions about the relationship between Christianity and Black and poor people.

And as a living tradition, the character of Christianity is shaped by the very questions it asks. In this earliest formation, Christians ask questions such as, do you have to be circumcised in order to be a Christian?

Do Gentiles have to learn the laws of Moses in order to be a faithful follower of Jesus? Later on, Christians started to really think critically about what does it mean to proclaim a human being is both fully human and fully divine?

[14:36] How do you work that out? And do infants have to be baptized? If they're not baptized, can they still be saved? And what are the roles of the sacraments in the Eucharist?

If those are your questions, your theology is going to look a certain way, right? Those questions keep theology accountable to the Christian, to the institutional church, right?

The believing community. But what if you believe that theology's primary responsibility is to be accountable to the needs of the poor and not necessarily the institutional church?

What if you believe the affirmation that God so loved the world, not so much God loved the institutional church, but God's love was broader.

God so loved the world. If you took that seriously, then your theological paradigm might change. So instead of working out your faith in relationship to reason, where the credibility of your theology is based on how much intellectual coherence it has and how much organization it has internally, right?

[15:57] Faith and reason. And it shifts to faith versus the non-person where you work out the credibility or faith of how much justice it can bring forth.

The history of Christian theology has made assumptions that those who theologize their bodies are fed well. Their bodies are rested.

They have fed bodies, rested bodies. They have bodies that can enjoy leisure. But what if your body's on fire because you're dodging bullets?

What if your body is in chronic fear for its safety? If that's the case, your theological questions look different.

You may not be concerned so much about sacraments or about baptism. Your primary concern is about justice and safety and things of that order.

[16:59] So the Christian affirmation that God is love, if you're coming from the underside, the question becomes, how can we make that claim credible in light of mass squalor, in light of mass suffering, in light of social misery?

If you have water and electricity and plenty of food, and I don't, how can I claim that God loves us equally? Since color has been a primary source of dehumanization in the Western context, the people who have been negatively impacted by color, raced people, raise a different set of questions to theology.

They raise questions that disrupt the traditional theological enterprise and bring a set of new experiences to the conversation.

And one way to understand this is by understanding our assumptions about American history. To put it simply, there could be two readings of American experience, a sunny side and a night side.

All of us have been socialized with the sunny side reading of American experience. This sunny side reading of American experiences understands America to be the land of promise.

[18:28] Promise is a biblical concept about the covenant, covenantal promise. Well, this idea of the European immigrants who first came here understood America through a biblical lens of promise, right?

So America's wealth and power has been understood as her promise. From this standpoint, American history has been seen as her chronology of great white men, right?

Starting with Washington, going to Lincoln, maybe Kennedy, maybe Ronald Reagan, right? So you see this chronology of great white men who are the motive force for this form of history.

And American promise has been image in biblical metaphors. America has been understood by European immigrants as a city on the hill, right?

In the old countries, you have Jerusalem. America is the new Jerusalem, the new Israel, right? Because everything's new based on God's promise.

[19:33] You have England and you have New England. You have Mexico and you have New Mexico, right? You have Athens, Greece and you have Athens, Georgia.

You have Birmingham and England. You have Birmingham, Alabama, right? And so on and so forth. Everything's named based after the old map, the map of the old world in the Europeans' mind.

So that immigrants who come to this country, especially European immigrants, want to share in the promise, right? And that means upward mobility.

If you work hard and play by the rules, you should do better than your parents and your children should do better than you. And that's the idea of American promise, right?

That's the first theological idea. The second idea is about American innocence or the inherent goodness of America. If you ask most Americans what America has done wrong, they probably won't mention slavery because they understand slavery to happen so long ago that its impact is negligible.

[20:46] Now they may mention Vietnam or Iraq, but even with those, they'll say that at least we had good intentions. It was a mistake, but it wasn't from evil motives or bad motives.

It was good intentions that went wrong. And in Vietnam, they wanted to fight against a godless communism. In Iraq, it was a tyrannical dictator, right?

They're trying to protect people. So America is innocence. That is, she never functions from bad or evil motives. She may have made mistakes, but it was with the best of intentions.

So from the sunny side view of history, America is a democracy, right? Demos, of the people,ocracy, rule of, right?

So it's a democracy or a more perfect union, a union that is a constant pursuit of perfecting itself. That's the sunny side.

[21:47] To understand Black theology, you have to understand it from the night side. And the night side has a whole different starting point. Africans first got to America in 1619, right?

That's the narrative origin. Now, we understand that historically, Africans were here earlier than that, but that's the narrative origin in Jamestown, Virginia of 1619.

That is 157 years before 1776. So the first point is that Africans or Black folk were in America before America was formed.

Now, slavery wasn't officially abolished to 1865. And the catalyst was a civil war. It wasn't moral enlightenment or moral reason.

It was a civil war that was a catalyst for the Emancipation Proclamation. That is 246 years of legalized slavery in this country, right?

[22:54] And it wasn't from slavery to freedom. It was from slavery to segregation. Segregation did not officially end until 1965, the passage of two civil rights ads.

So that's 346 years. And now we're in the year of 2023. That's less than 60 years. So from the night side, America has only been a relative democracy for less than 60 years.

I want to say that for less than 60 years. That means that Black people have been enslaved to this country longer than they've been free. I want to say that again.

Black people have been enslaved in the United States longer than they've been free. So imagine if you enter in subjectively the experience of a community that have been enslaved longer than they've been free.

How would you reread their civic history of democracy? How would you read the dominant religion of Christianity? Right?

[24:09] It's going to look different from that perspective. Right? So one way to account for this is to go back to the Bible.

This is what Black theologians did. They looked at the relationship between the Roman Empire and the American Empire. And here's the analogy that you can make. The cross is the underside of Roman Empire just like the Black experience is the underside of American Empire.

Right? So if you reread the Black experience similar to the cross or rejection and persecution, suffering, just like the Black experience has been loaded with rejection, persecuted, suffering, then your Christianity looks differently.

So if you take this framework seriously, then the love work of the American church is a prophetic task. It is to redirect the aspirations of middle-class Christians from excessive materialism, individualism, and personal prestige and to become rebaptized in the justice struggles of Black and poor people.

Amen. All right. Let's take a few moments. We're going to do some discussion with your neighbors. If you put those questions on the screen, please. So a few questions.

[25:41] Number one, what has been your default theology? Was it ever named as particular to your intersection of race, culture, country, class, gender, etc.? Or was it just assumed to be the default?

So in your group's name, what your default was. If you grew up in the church or if you came to the church later in life, what has been that case for the past few years? Number two, can you identify any particular characteristics or quirks of your theology or the theology that was handed to you?

Individualism, triumphalism, escapism, liberationist. So in other words, can you name like this seems to be specific to my church or my theology and I know it was different from maybe my neighbors down the street or the church down the road?

Number three, what draws you in about black theology, what you just heard? What makes you say, yes, that's it? And number four, what challenges you about black theology? What makes you think, oh gosh, that stings a little?

All right, so find three, four, five of the most people near you. Move the chairs around. We'll give you about five, six minutes to talk and then we'll wrap up with communion. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians chapter nine, he says, to the Jews, I became like a Jew to win the Jews.

[26:58] By win, he means bring them to knowledge of Jesus. To those under the law, I became like one under the law. So as to win those under the law, to those not having the law, I became like one not having the law.

As to win those not having the law, to the weak, I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the good news that I may share in its blessings.

There is no one way to talk about God. And if we believe the lie that there is, then we lop off our ability to know God in all of their glory and splendor and goodness and pain and suffering.

So we need a wide spectrum of voices and light to be shed to shine on what reality is, what truth is, what the experience is of ourselves and those around us.

That is what theology does. And so this is an invitation. There's nothing resolved about tonight. We didn't solve anything. But we did invite ourselves and were invited into a broader conversation that's been happening.

[28:18] But how do we speak about God? How do we speak about the experience of people in the midst of pain? And how do we measure our credibility not by intellectual completeness, that is Dr. Clark said, but by our ability to bring forth justice?

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.