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Restoring the Power Of Our Community

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First Episcopal District Bible Study

The Year of RESTORATION

Key Verse:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 1:8

Study Passage:

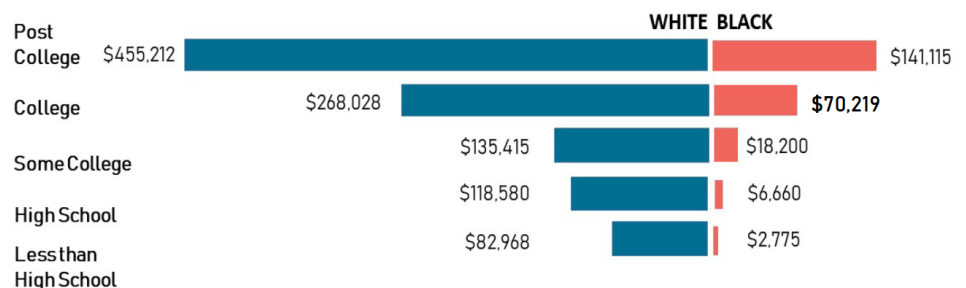
Acts 3:2-16

THE RECKONING

Since European colonizers began to traffic enslaved Africans across the Atlantic, the black experience in the Americas and Caribbean has been one of relentless and systematic disempowerment. The AME Church was born, in large part, as a bulwark in the struggle to reclaim black freedom and communal power. Yet, despite the heroic resilience of our foremothers and forefathers in that struggle, the white supremacist racial caste structure established through slavery still persists today through economic, political, and social systems that constrain the capacity of black communities to flourish.

Dr. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Duke University professor and President of the American Sociological Association, has spent a career tracking and exposing the ways in which this “new racism” exerts its power in Post-Civil Rights America.¹ Black economic power is stifled by an array of oppressive conditions. Racial discrimination manifests in the labor market as blacks are

Figure 1: Median Household Net Worth by Race and Education



Source: Authors' calculations, Survey on Income and Program Participation (SIPP) 2014.

Note: Many of these figures were updated from a prior report entitled *Umbrellas Don't Make it Rain: Why Studying Hard and Working Hard Isn't Enough for Black Americans* (Hamilton et al. 2015).



THE RECKONING *(continued)*

steered into jobs with lower wages and less upward mobility than whites. Blacks receive lower wages than whites in the same jobs at every income level, earning an average of 56 cents for every dollar white families earn. The wealth gap is even more debilitating with black families holding a net worth of 7 cents for every dollar of net worth of white families.² Economic inequality leaves the majority of black families in the vulnerable position of living paycheck to paycheck, with little economic power to survive a crisis or invest in our future wellbeing.

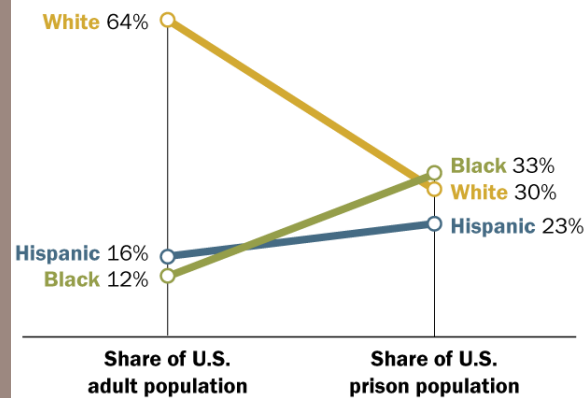
The “new racism” reinforces its economic power by adapting the social and political control of slavery and Jim Crow into more subtle, contemporary forms. Whips and chains have been replaced by a criminal justice system that over-polices, over-arrests, and over-prosecutes black communities, resulting in an incarceration rate for blacks that is six times higher than that for whites. Access to quality housing, education, food, and health care remain separate and disturbingly unequal. Meanwhile, despite the election of President

Barack Obama, black communities remain woefully underrepresented as blacks account for less than 2% of all elected officials, while in 2013 the Supreme Court struck down major

provisions of the Voting Rights Act. In these and many other respects, the social and political gains of the Civil Rights Movement have virtually disappeared. The evil genius of this new form of racism is that it maintains all of this racial inequality while perpetuating the language of “color-blindness.” Thus, a “racism without racists”³ attempts to deny black people not only economic, social, and political power, but even the power to tell the truth about our experience and call racism by its name.

Blacks, Hispanics make up larger shares of prisoners than of U.S. population

U.S. adult population and U.S. prison population by race and Hispanic origin, 2017



¹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).

² Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity, Report: “What We Get Wrong About Closing the Racial Wealth Gap” (Duke University, April 2018).

³ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003)



RECLAMATION

The power of God’s Spirit at work in the world is greater than the powers that work against our communities. Restoration happens when we bear witness to this truth and share its power with our communities.

RECOVERY

Written between 80 and 100 AD, the book of Acts completes the two-volume narrative that begins with the Gospel of Luke. 2nd century bishops acclaimed the author as “Luke the physician,” a travelling companion and helper of the Apostle Paul. What we know from the text itself is that the author never encountered Jesus personally and was most likely a Gentile convert who grew up outside of the Palestine region that was home to Jesus’ early followers. Thus, the book of Acts aims to assure those who (like the author himself) came to the faith after Jesus’ departure that they, too, had access to the presence and power of Jesus. The key verse for this study highlights the moment Jesus promises to empower the Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the study passage, we see the first example of the way the Spirit works through the Church to empower those who are deemed powerless.

Acts 3:2-16 (NIV)

² Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. ⁴ Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” ⁵ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

⁶ Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” ⁷ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

⁹ When all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

¹¹ While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon’s Colonnade. ¹² When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?

¹³ The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go.

¹⁴ You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. ¹⁶ By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

RECONSTRUCTION

1. How does the lame man’s infirmity function as a “power” working against him? Can you identify the economic, social, and political implications of his disempowerment in that cultural context?
2. In v. 4, the text focuses on the fact that Peter “looked straight at” the infirmed man. What do you suppose is the significance of including this detail? How might Peter’s response have differed from the treatment the man would typically receive? Peter then says to the man, “Look at us!” What does this exchange teach about the manner in which the Church ought to encounter those who are powerless?
3. In v. 6, Peter says, “what I do have I give you.” What exactly did Peter have? (Hint: read through the entire passage). Having identified what Peter had to give, how does Peter offer it? What are the specific words spoken and actions taken through which Peter makes this offer?
4. After “the man’s feet and ankles became strong,” what changed in his life? What did he then have the capacity (i.e. the power) to do that he did not have before? How does this newfound power alter his relationship to the wider community?
5. In v.11 we see that even after his healing, the man continued to “hold on” to Peter and John. What might this detail suggest about how the power of the Spirit works?

RENEWAL

The 2019 “State of Black America” report from the National Urban League documents the disturbing resurgence in myriad systematic attempts to deny black people the basic right of citizenship—the right to vote.⁴ Yet, while the report is honest about the threats to black political power, it is not overrun with pronouncements of doom and gloom. To the contrary, the report is a hope-filled call to arms that announces the truth of the black community’s promise and potential. One such

offering is made by Rashad Robinson, President of Color of Change, in an article titled, “Black Joy, Black Power, Black Votes.”⁵ In this article, Robinson notes that despite vigorous efforts to suppress the black vote, the overall rate of black voter participation has actually surpassed that of white voters. Robinson’s only lament is that this success story has not been celebrated loudly enough, allowing the lie of black political apathy to persist as the dominant narrative. As a result, the true electoral power of black voters has not been adequately harnessed and strategically directed because not enough people realize that this power exists!

In response to this state of affairs, Color of Change set out to change the narrative by organizing “Black Joy Brunches” and Black women’s events across the country in 2018, meeting with over 10,000 people in more than 12 cities. Robinson explained the rationale for the strategy this way: “In our long history in America, the antidote to our disillusionment with politics and grave disappointment in society has always been our abiding faith in one another. Our belief in the power, joy, and ascendance of Blackness has motivated us to care for ourselves when no one else will and realize our potential when others deny it.” Rather than focus on policy first, the brunches brought people together to talk about community and rebuilding our own networks of care through our churches and other religious and cultural institutions. These conversations built on the strength of our care for one another and framed civic participation as a part of this larger commitment to black freedom and black thriving. Through these Black Joy Brunches, Color of Change was able to activate greater black political power by telling the true story of the community’s inherent value and strength, and equipping the community with the knowledge and skills necessary to direct that strength toward action.

⁴ National Urban League, *2019 State of Black America, Getting 2 Equal: United Not Divided* (soba.iamempowered.com).

⁵ Rashad Robinson, “Black Joy, Black Power, Black Votes” in *2019 State of Black America Report* (soba.iamempowered.com).



REVIVAL

Color of Change’s “Black Joy Brunch” movement illustrates the same principles exhibited by Peter and John at the Temple gate called Beautiful: they saw their audience through the eyes of love and not through the lens of the station society had relegated them to; they reached out and engaged in meaningful relationship; they spoke a message of hope that informed their audience of the truth of their power and capacity; they validated that message by offering material support and partnership; and they accompanied their ministry of empowerment with a ministry of rejoicing. Consider how this pattern of community empowerment might help shape the ways in which the Spirit can work through your Church:

1. Who are the powerless in your community and how do you see them? Do you agree with society’s story about them, or do you see something more? What steps can you take to make sure they know that the Church truly “sees” them?
2. What specific strategies can your Church employ to establish meaningful relationship with them? How do you get them to “look at us”?
3. What would it look like to communicate and demonstrate your belief in your community’s God-created worth, capacity, and power? What kinds of gatherings or encounters would you need to join or create?
4. What material support can you offer? Peter and John did not have money, but they offered their hands and shoulders to lean on. What personal investment are you prepared to make?
5. How can we help our communities celebrate? How can we be ministers of power while also being ministers of joy?