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# PREACHING BLACK LIVES (MATTER)

EDITED BY GAYLE FISHER-STEWART

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## PREACHING / SOCIAL ISSUES

Prophetic imagination would have us see a future in which all Christians would be free of the soul-warping belief and practice of racism. This collection of reflections is an incisive look into that future today.

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[www.churchpublishing.org/preachingblacklivesmatter](http://www.churchpublishing.org/preachingblacklivesmatter)  
Available as an ebook

ISBN 978-1-64065-256-9



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## Books and Their Covers

*Jamie Samilio*

In contemplating this essay, I realized that to give an opinion on how I would preach to a Black congregation, you should first know part of my story. Otherwise, I fear my words would be added to the words of other privileged White folks, wanting to say the right thing. We are all at some point outsiders and the more we share our stories, the closer we will get to respecting the dignity of all people.

We often assign the moniker of bravery to soldiers, but the bravest person I have ever known was a seven-year old Black girl—my friend, Belinda. I met Belinda in 1967 at the Villa Maria Academy, Elementary Division for Girls, in Erie, Pennsylvania. I see Belinda in my head as clearly as if I were in the school auditorium. Standing in rows are one hundred and thirty-nine young girls wearing heather blue uniforms, white blouses with peter pan collars, and navy-blue knee socks. One hundred and thirty-eight White faces and one Black—my friend Belinda. She knew she stood out in this body of White students, but she displayed confidence and was as proud as any of us to be a “Villa girl.”

It was the turbulent 1960s and America was in the throes of the civil rights movement; Belinda was the first Black child to attend our fine Catholic school. Not that Blacks were kept out of the school: they just never imagined they would be welcomed—at least not until Mrs. Watson enrolled her daughter. Jane Watson was a nurse, a medical professional, skilled at what she did. Jane went to school in Pittsburgh, even though there were nursing schools in Erie. She would have been the only Black nursing student in Erie, and allowing Jane to have a private dorm room, or compelling a White student to share a room with Jane was not acceptable in the 1950s. But the times they were a changin’ and Jane had enrolled her daughter in the finest school in the city.

This was a time when the headlines and the issues were as simple as black and white. I was privileged to attend a private school for girls, and Belinda, the only Black student, was viewed as privileged as well. My mother had made a point of meeting Belinda’s mother. I remember them stopping to chat at a

school open house. I had seen Black people before, and it did not strike me as odd that Belinda was Black. To me she was just another girl in my class, a girl whose home I would visit, a girl who would come to my house to play. But Belinda turned out to be more than that. Belinda became my first best friend. Our mothers arranged play dates for us. She would come to my house and we would play dolls, swing, and run through the yard. I would go to her house, where her mother and grandmother would cook while we played and listened to records. We would go to the basketball court across the street and hang with the other neighborhood kids. It seemed totally normal to me. I was a kid like any other kid and I watched cartoons like *Fat Albert and the Gang*—“Na, na, na, gonna have a good time.” I loved visiting Belinda in the city where there was a basketball court and kids playing, just like in the cartoon.

Most of all, Belinda and I talked, laughed, and wondered what would become of us, imagining how our lives would unfold. About the only disagreement I ever had with Belinda was over Michael Jackson. All our friends were over the moon for Donny Osmond. His face was plastered on posters, book covers, and teen magazines. One day I told her I liked Michael Jackson better than Donny Osmond—that, in fact, I did not like Donny much at all. Well, *she* told me! Because I was White, I had to like Donny and I could *not* have Michael. I was mad. I did not want to be stuck with Donny Osmond. Who would? Even his sister Marie left him after a while. As it turns out, Jermaine Jackson was her real heartthrob, and Belinda cried the day his marriage announcement hit the newsstands.

It took many years for me to realize how brave Jane Watson was to put her daughter in an exclusive private school with all White children. It took me longer to realize how brave my mother was to greet Jane Watson, to arrange play dates for Belinda and me, and to let me spend time in Belinda's neighborhood playing with her friends.

I did not understand that my mother, who ran the ladies' golf league, belonged to the country club, and, with my dad, sent her children to private school, had decided to be color-blind and deaf to the White establishment. My mother and Mrs. Watson both took a step toward equality, a step they seemed to execute with ease. Sometimes, we do not recognize when we are being strong or brave, especially when we are just living in the moment and trying to do the right thing.

Years later, after many moves, college, and kids, when Belinda and I were reunited, we talked about how brave both our mothers had been to risk reaching out to each other. We realized that their small steps, combined with the

steps of others, are what had helped to change the culture. I like to think that seeing my White face playing with all the kids in the Black neighborhood and seeing Belinda's Black face sitting in the Boston Store cafeteria where all the White shoppers gathered helped people accept the cultural shift of the civil rights movement. The world did not end when I played in the 'hood and no one died when Belinda had a milkshake in the department store. I do not know who saw us, but if they did and it moved them to accept, communicate, and include in their lives someone of a different race, then let us give thanks to God for the bravery of our two mothers in 1967.

My mother formed some of her opinions about prejudice from an experience in 1945, on Labor Day weekend, when she and my Aunt Irene went by train to Washington, DC, and then boarded a bus to Raleigh, North Carolina. They passed many half-filled seats and made their way to the back where they could sit together. The bus did not move. They sat for more than fifteen minutes with everyone looking at them. Finally, two Marines who were seated toward the front came to the back and said, "Do not say a word, just come and sit with us." The Marines explained that the bus driver would have sat there all night; the whole back could be empty, but Whites could not sit there. My mother would have none of it—and neither would her children.

My father, on the other hand, grew up in a household where they were skeptical about people of color. My dad was a first-generation American and was considered an outsider. I guess being near the bottom of the social ladder, feeling like they were at least one step above someone, is what drove my grandparents to hold prejudiced views. How we are raised and what we are taught to believe impacts our view of the world. My dad, however, liked to form his own opinions of people and, although it took him a while to shake the language of his childhood, he shut the door to ignorance and intolerance that his parents had opened for him. We are all one race, the human race. Humanity is divided by racism not by race; we are all colors created as individuals, not as clones.

My social education was grounded in the school community I experienced with the Sisters of Saint Joseph. I was an obedient child and I believed that what I was taught in school was true and should be followed. I was taught to treat others as I want to be treated, to have humility, to love everyone as brothers and sisters, to forgive, and to turn the other cheek when offended. The lesson that influenced me the most was that we are all equal in the eyes of God. I came to understand that each of us has different gifts and talents, that it takes all of us to create the rich, diverse, and interesting world we live in, and that all

life has value. God is love, and love is what we must do, and loving others means respecting the dignity of all people.

I can never truly understand what it is like to be Black, to have my skin color be an outward and visible sign that my ancestors did not come here of their own free will. What I have experienced, however, is people assuming that, as a White person, I shared their point of view on race. As a gay woman, my personal experience includes people assuming that I share their views on sexual orientation. Numerous people, assuming I was straight, have confided in me their belief that homosexuals are sinners who choose to live a queer and disgusting lifestyle. Telling me—because I am a Christian—that all of “those people” (LGBTQ+) are going to hell. And furthermore, all “those” people should be locked up or eliminated. Those conversations had interesting outcomes when I told them that I was one of “those” people.

Being part of a subculture, I have learned a few things about what it means to be family. Some people do not have parents or siblings. Some have families, but have cut ties with them for one painful reason or another. Family are the people who come into relationship with each other and form a bond of love that can never break. In any family, there are fights and disagreements, but in the end, their love and support for each other stands firm. My wife, Sylvia, and I have been together since our freshman year in college. Thirty-five years later, we were married in Washington, DC, by a priest in an Episcopal church, surrounded by our families. When Belinda and I rekindled our friendship, she was excited to meet Sylvia, and even brought her daughter and grandchild over to dinner at our home. Belinda and I were family, and happy to have our other family members meet each other. A couple years after our reunification, I received a call from Belinda's daughter, who told me her mother had lost her battle with cancer and asked me if I would give the eulogy at her funeral. Sylvia and I found ourselves, along with one other White person, in a room filled with a couple hundred Black people. As I stood in front of the group and looked out at the crowd of family and friends gathered, I realized what Belinda must have felt like that day in 1967 when she walked into school and stood with us. I am forever grateful for my sister, Belinda.

Culturally, my wife, Sylvia, and I are members of the gay family, and we share a bond with other gay people. Interestingly, we have more friends who support us who are straight, and we are comforted that, as much as we belong to a subculture, we also belong to a large, diverse family of people who love, appreciate, and accept each other just as we are. Many of these friends have held up our marriage and relationship as something they strive for in their own lives—we are blessed.

I feel that my gay siblings who wore pink triangles in the German concentration camps are my ancestors, and my little siblings who have been thrown out of their homes because of their homosexuality are directly related to me.

It took me a long time to become a priest, but not because I was busy doing something else. I was denied a seminary education because I refused to lie about who I was as a person. The dean said, "We regret that we will be unable to allow you to attend Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) because your psychological profile states that you are a practicing homosexual." I asked if he thought there were other homosexuals enrolled in the institution, and he said he was positive there were several, but their paperwork was *clean*. I then asked if he was fine with the institution's engraving the words of Jesus on its walls, "I am the truth, the life, and the way," yet admitting students who either lied directly or by omission about their sexuality. Would Jesus, the "Truth," approve of admitting only homosexuals who lied? Would he approve of a religious institution that felt it was right to accept people who told lies of omission? There was a long silence. It took another decade until VTS changed its policies and I was finally able to attend seminary as an openly gay woman.

I know what it means for society to view me differently, to be hated by some and condemned by others, but I can hide my homosexuality. I can even deny it. Being gay does not carry with it any outward or visible signs. I can hide in plain sight and enjoy the privilege of blending in. People make assumptions and judgments based on the way people look—rightly or wrongly. That is the way it works, until people take the time to get to know each other. What I cannot imagine is living in a world where my skin color is the determining factor in being stopped by a cop, given a loan, watched while shopping, or assumed to be uneducated or a troublemaker. Knowing what it means to be viewed differently makes me keenly aware that as a White person I am compelled to reach out, welcome, and connect with people who do not look like me because on the inside, I am them. I am their sister, a fellow human just trying to make my way through life.

I said that the bravest person I have ever known was a seven-year-old Black girl. I see Belinda in my head as clearly as if I were in the auditorium yesterday, 138 White faces, and one Black one—my friend Belinda. To me, this memory represents all of us when we find ourselves the "other" in a group.

When the Episcopal Church finally figured out there was a place for me, I was ordained a priest. I serve a predominantly White congregation. When I look out from the chancel into the faces of my parish family, I note the faces of people who are different from me. Some are Black, some are Asian, Indian,

Middle Eastern, gay, and more. I long to see more faces of people who are not like me. I want to welcome especially those who are church shopping and have come to see if we are a welcoming parish. When I see a new person of color, I look around and I am disappointed if I don't see our members who are people of color at that service. I want to say to all the brave people of color who attend predominantly White parishes that they are missed when they are not in church. Their presence in a "White" church is a huge gift of welcoming and evangelism to any non-White, non-heterosexual person who walks in the door, because those "other people" are looking for them. They are the outward and visible signs of a congregation that accepts, welcomes, and makes everyone feel safe as part of God's family in that place. There is a difference between saying we welcome everyone and people seeing for themselves how others like them are established in a church and welcomed. I have also experienced people of color making assumptions about our predominantly "White" congregation when they find themselves alone among our White faces. It is not like I can stand at the entrance greeting them as they leave saying, "Welcome, please stay and join us for coffee hour. I promise there are multiple people of other races and cultures who are members of our congregation; they were just all busy today. May we add you to our e-mail list?"

I realize what I do is not nearly as important as who I am, but who I am has so much to do with what I do. I am who I am, a loving and welcoming child of God with siblings of every race, creed, nation, and pronoun. I can use all the friends, family, and allies I can get, and I have found that sometimes help comes from the most unexpected places and unexpected people—the shape, size, color, ability, or any other description matters not.

I am calling on all White people to reach out to those who do not look like them. I am calling on all heterosexual people to realize how they act and what they say to members of the LGBTQ+ family matters. It is the duty of every person who identifies as a Christian to respect the dignity of all people; it is the Baptismal Covenant. And, if we are Christians, then we are known by our love and respect for everyone, including those who believe in a God of their understanding, and love even those who are not Christians. Period. Ultimately, love is the answer to the meaning of life because brilliance requires creativity, wisdom requires patience, love requires nothing, and gives everything in return.

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl said there are only two races: the race of decent people and the race of indecent people.<sup>1</sup> "Stay woke"

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1. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, gift edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 70.



to the “others” in the world, those who stand out in a crowd, and those who are hiding in plain sight. Perhaps I should say this in a way everyone can understand. Be kind to everyone, love God, love your neighbors, and respect and uphold the dignity of all people—all the time —no exceptions!

Building relationships is at the foundation of building a life or a congregation, and breaking down barriers and making people feel welcome is a top priority. In my work on a diocesan staff, I often encountered vision and mission statements naming “diversity” as a goal to be achieved. Each time I encountered this language I had to carefully walk the group through the process of understanding that diversity in itself is not a goal to be set, but a byproduct of being a truly open and welcoming community. In my current congregation we make a statement before every Eucharist and at many gatherings. It is on our website and as much as possible on the minds and hearts of the people in the pews. “Whoever you are and wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here to receive God’s love, freely given.” My words from the pulpit support this statement when I tell people that what we do in the world matters and has an impact on other people. We need to stand with and for each other. I cannot stress enough how important this statement is to me and for the welcoming of people into our congregation.

As a Christian, I am aware that Jesus was a storyteller, reconciler, redeemer, healer, teacher, brother, son, savior, and more. Jesus stood up for those who could not adequately defend themselves, and Jesus told us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, and stand up to oppressive forces. As Christians, this is what we are called to do for everyone, no exceptions. So put out a rainbow flag, post a Black Lives Matter sign, post words that let our neighbors know that we respect them just as they are. Speak using words that show love for those not like you, and walk in support of those who need support. We need to do all of these things if we are to create a welcoming community that will naturally become a melting pot of people, different from each other, but united by love.

One thing I think every preacher might consider is that people who have been discriminated against, had family members enslaved, live or have lived in poverty, hear the messages of scripture with very different ears than those of us who have been privileged and do not directly experience discrimination, poverty, and rejection in our daily lives. While I try to relate the scripture to my own story and experience, I think I do my best work when I can reach beyond myself and empathize with those who are unlike myself. I think it makes the message broader, and I think it helps to keep me humble.

Martin Niemöller is perhaps most famous for his words on standing up with and for each other:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.<sup>2</sup>

“They” also came for the Communists and the gays (the connection between homosexuals and pink triangles comes from the German concentration camp designations). The thing Martin said that I think every congregation can benefit from came in an interview when he was asked why he had initially supported Hitler. Martin listened to Hitler and believed him when he said that the Church would be supported and protected and that no real harm would come to the Jews. In the end, Martin deeply regretted his initial support of Hitler. He said he had paid for his mistake, but so had thousands of others; he was not alone in his sorrow or regret. What Martin had to do was look past the words being spoken to him and search his heart and his Christian identity to see if what was being said and what was happening were true and following Jesus’s command to love one another as he loved us.

How are we following Jesus’s command to love each other? It is easier to ignore and hate than to show respect and love. I think most of us naturally gravitate toward the easy way out. When we are anywhere in a group of other people, we naturally look for and speak to people who are most like us. If we are going to lead open and welcoming congregations, then we need to retrain our brains and learn to love each other. We need to practice. The next time you are at an event or even a grocery store where you do not know other people, seek out the other. Strike up a conversation with someone who does not look like you. Greet a stranger, be the first to smile. This may seem like a tall order, and emotionally costly, but the price of not reaching out in love to those not like us, comes at a greater expense—perhaps as high as the price of our souls. American journalist Dorothy Day said it well, “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”<sup>3</sup>

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2. US Holocaust Museum, “Martin Niemöller: ‘First They Came for the Socialists . . .,’” Washington, DC, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>.

3. Dorothy Day, in Allison Beatty, “The Person I Love the Least,” February 27, 2018, <http://www.aggiecatholicblog.org/2018/02/the-person-i-love-the-least/>.