

## “Forgiveness and the African American Church Experience”

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**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** Today I’ll be speaking as you know on Forgiveness and the African American Church Experience.

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” (Matthew Chapter 6, Verse 12). “You have heard that it was said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.” (Matthew Chapter 5, Verses 43-44) “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke Chapter 23 Verse 34).

The murder of nine black parishioners attending an evening Bible study class at the historic Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina has focused national attention upon racism already roiled by a succession of killings of unarmed black men and women and a child captured in some cases on cell phone videos and body cams. [Nine parishioners] were shot to death by a 21 year old white supremacist Dylan Roof, who hoped to incite a race war. He had chosen the church after historical research informed him of its significant history. Some of its members were accused of plotting a slave rebellion led by a free black carpenter named Denmark Vesey who was a class leader in the black Methodist community in Charleston.

At the bond hearing for Dylan Roof family members of some of the victims amazed many by expressing their forgiveness to the killer a gesture in imitation of the words of their crucified Savior.

The thoughts that follow are my attempt to locate their astonishing act of forgiveness in the history of the black church. I will describe precedents over an extended period of African-American religious life stretching back to slavery. In doing so I attempt to

demonstrate that African-American Christians adapted from the Bible an alternative religious narrative, or script if you will, contradicting the dominant national myth of America as God's New Israel or alternately as the Redeemer Nation. In other words they developed a radical criticism of the cultic piety of American exceptionalism. In their narrative Christianity and slavery were incompatible. The earliest printed example of such a critique dates from January 13, 1777, in the form of a Slave Petition for Freedom to the Massachusetts Legislature.

This conflict between two versions of Christianity, one that accommodated slavery and the other which did not affected more than legal status. It bifurcated the meaning of the Christian gospel. The division went deep; it extended to the fundamental interpretation of the Bible.

Moreover, the moral obligations of Christian life in the midst of a thoroughly immoral system created opportunities for slaves to assert their own virtue and personal dignity despite the reigning doctrine of black inferiority and white privilege and superiority.

In 1855, former slave William Grimes remembered that when his master punished him for something he had not done: "It grieved me very much to be blamed when I was innocent. I knew I had been faithful to him, perfectly so. At this time I was quite serious, and used constantly to pray to my God. I forgave my master in my own heart for all this, and prayed to God to forgive him and turn his heart. "If this thing is done in a green tree [to the innocent] what must be done in a dry [to the guilty]?" That quote aligns him to the sacrifice of Christ and identifies him with the archetypal "suffering Servant." This allusion reveals that it was from his morally superior vantage point that Grimes was able to forgive his master, who lived under threat as he saw it of devastating punishment. Simply put Grime's view of himself, what it meant for him to forgive his master creates a moral leverage or an act of moral jujitsu if you will, which elevates him over his master. In short, if Jesus came as the suffering servant, who resembled him more, the master or the slave?

Mary Younger, a fugitive slave who escaped to Canada claimed in an interview "if those slaveholders were to come here, I would treat them well, just to shame them by showing that I had humanity." The assertion of this humanity despite slavery's denial is the meaning behind these "difficult sayings" by slaves. The black minister, ecumenist, mystic, and university chaplain, Howard Thurman, captured the oppositional character of the

slave's Christianity when he claimed in his profound meditation on the spirituals, *Deep River*, published in 1945. "By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master has profaned in his midst." The moral and spiritual dimensions of the slave experience gave rise to a tradition that stood in profound and prophetic challenge to American Christianity. While generations of white American preachers and politicians spoke of America (by which they meant the United States not the Americas) as a New Israel, the Promised Land. African-Americans maintained that on the contrary this nation was the Old Egypt, "Go Down Moses and Tell Old Pharaoh to Let My People Go" and would remain so until all of God's children were free.

On Sunday 4, 1899, Francis J. Grimke wanted to calm aroused emotions of dejection and despair at the racial situation in this country. His topic was lynching. Accounts of the death of one victim occasioned Grimke's sermon series. Two months earlier Sam Hose, a black man accused of assault and murder, had been burned alive by a white mob in Newnan, just outside Atlanta, Georgia. According to the newspaper accounts local whites celebrated the atrocity as a festive occasion. Close to 2,000 citizens eager to get to the lynching on time purchased tickets for the short train ride from Atlanta to Newnan. Along the route women on porch steps waived handkerchiefs at the passing cars in celebration of the occasion. This was to be what's come to be called "a spectacle lynching." Hundreds arrived too late to watch Hose die, but pressed on to see the charred corpse and to collect some souvenir of the day's outing. It was April 28, 1899, a Sunday.

Grimke was shocked less by the fact of the lynching than he was by the spectator's enjoyment of it. How could people who claimed to be Christian go out and do such things? Grimke, like generations of black pastors before him, sought to find some meaning, some message of hope in all this misfortune, lest his people despair. "I place my hope not on government, not on political parties, but on faith in the power of the religion of Jesus Christ to conquer all prejudices, to break down all walls of separation, and to weld together men of all races in one great brotherhood."

The facts of Grimke's own life did not support an easy or simplistic belief in Christian progress. He learned at an early age the perversity and intransigence of white supremacy. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, where his mother was a slave, his father was his master. After his father's death, Grimke's white half-brother attempted to

enslave him despite the provisions of their father's will that he be set free. At the age of ten Francis Grimke was a runaway slave. Captured several years later, he almost died in the Charleston workhouse where his brother had him jailed as a fugitive. After release, his brother sold him to a Confederate army officer. So no, Grimke did not find it easy to regard whites as his brothers. Even in his own denomination, he had experienced the spirit of caste in overt acts of discrimination. If Christianity were to triumph it would be in spite of the American church, which he castigated in print as "an apostate church, utterly unworthy of the name which it bears."

Yet Grimke did not despair. He kept faith in the power of Christianity to change the world because other events in his life validated this belief. From Charleston jail to Princeton Seminary, from betrayed brother to beloved nephew, from slave to prominent cleric, the trajectory of Grimke's own life countered despair. He was hopeful that the racial situation would, in time, improve but his hope strained in tension with the reality of racism in nation and church. "Jesus Christ is yet to reign in this land. I will not see it, you will not see it, but it is coming all the same. In the growth of Christianity, true, real, genuine Christianity in this land, I see the promise of better things for us as a race." In reaffirming this belief, Grimke and his congregation were reaffirming the meaning and value of their lives.

Flash forward sixty-four years later on another Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, the congregation of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama was busy preparing for Youth Day. In Birmingham, protest leaders and city officials had finally signed a desegregation agreement one week earlier. After Sunday school, five adolescent girls stood checking their appearances in front of a mirror in the ladies room in the church basement. At 10:22 a.m., a tremendous blast shook the entire church. The bomb was so powerful that the outside brick and stone wall collapsed into the basement. Out of the rubble staggered 12-year-old Sarah Collins. She was the only one in the room to survive. Four others died. As news of the bombing spread across the nation and around the world, people of all races and nationalities were moved to outrage by the tragedy. Martin Luther King, Jr. later remembered his response: "I think of how a woman cried out crunching through broken glass, "My God, we're not even safe in church!" Prophetic. I think of how that explosion blew the face of Jesus Christ from the stained glass window. What a stunning symbol of the consequence of the bomber's act. "I can remember thinking, Where was God in the middle of these bombs? Some of us could not

understand why God permitted death and destruction to come to those who had done no man harm." One week later, King attempted to articulate the meaning of the deaths of the four girls as he delivered he funeral oration to the mourning congregation of blacks and whites and to a national television audience as well.

"These children," he said, "unoffending, innocent and beautiful, are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. So they have something to say to us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of the stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. They have something to say to every Negro who passively accepts the evil system of segregation and stands on the sidelines in the midst of a mighty struggle for justice. They have something to say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, and the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly to make the American dream a reality. So they did not die in vain. God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city. So in spite of the darkness of this hour we must not despair. We must not become bitter, nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. We must not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and worth of all human personality."

King's nonviolent philosophy insisted upon an unstinting love that did not permit outward violence or the inner violence of anger, hatred or even resentment and was not conditioned on the goodness of the other. As it so happened, the Sunday school lesson at Sixteenth Street Baptist on that Sunday, the day of the bombing, was "The Love that Forgives."

Three months earlier in June 1963, Fannie Lou Hamer and seven other Mississippi civil rights organizers attended a five-day workshop on citizenship schools. Hamer, one of twenty children of a dirt poor share cropping family had already established a reputation for leading attempts to register black voters in Sunflower County, Mississippi, home of

Senator John Stennis, and had lost her job, her house and almost her life as a result. She had already attended a similar training session.

Returning home by bus on June 9th, they were stopped and six of their group including Hamer were arrested for trying to be served in the bus depot restaurant in violation of the Public Accommodations Act which the sheriff claimed had not reached Mississippi yet. Hamer and these six others were arrested and jailed in Winona, Mississippi which happened to be the headquarters of the White Citizens Council for the State of Mississippi.

Hamer repeated the story of what happened next in interviews in public appearances around the country and significantly on nationwide television during the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She testified before the credentials committee in a failed attempt to unseat the all-white regular democratic delegation from Mississippi. Lyndon Johnson was so angered by this that he called an impromptu news conference to get the cameras off of Fannie Lou Hamer. And when the press gathered to see what the conference was about, he said it was the seventh month anniversary of the shooting of John Connally in Texas. The journalists as you might imagine looked at one another in bewilderment about what was going on. But Johnson was so angry at this "ignorant woman" as he called her, who was threatening his convention, that he wanted to get her off the media. Of course it backfired because all of the national networks showed her testimony in full that evening on the evening news.

This is what she said: "I was placed in a cell, and I began to hear some of the saddest and some of the loudest screams and sounds I'd ever heard in my life. And then I began to hear somebody else. I understood Miss Annelle Ponder, Southern Christian Leadership Conference worker...I will never forget something that Ms. Ponder said during the time that they were beating her. She asked God to have mercy on those people because they didn't know what they were doing...I was led out of that cell into another where they had two black prisoners. The state highway patrolman ordered me to lay down on the bunk bed on my face, and he ordered the first prisoner to beat me. The black prisoner said 'Do you want me to beat this woman with this?' It was a long leather blackjack with some kind of metal in it, and he, the patrolman, said, "if you don't beat her you don't know what we will do to you.' The first prisoner began to beat me, and he beat me until he was exhausted...And the second prisoner began to beat and I couldn't control the sobs then

because I was screaming and couldn't stop. And during the time the second was beating my dress worked up real high behind my body. And I had never been exposed to five men in one room in my life because one thing my parents taught me when I was a child was dignity and respect...And then one of the men walked over and began to beat me in the head. I remember wrapping my face down in the pillow where I could muffle out the sounds. I don't know how long this lasted, but I remember the same cop was standing there cussing, telling me to get up...They carried me back to my cell and just to bend my knees forward, you could hear me screaming I don't know how far."

Hamer concluded her testimony to the Democratic Party credentials committee asking a question. "How can these things happen in America? Is this America, the home of the brave and the land of the free?" Flooded with phone calls and telegrams, the committee seriously considered the request to unseat the regular Mississippi Democratic Delegation. Hearing word of this Johnson sent Hubert Humphrey to try to negotiate a compromise. When Humphrey appeared before Hamer and some of the other leaders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party delegation, he mentioned that his job as the potential nominee for the party depended on the success of negotiating a settlement. Fannie Lou Hammer looked him in the face and said, "Mr. Humphrey I lost my job for just attempting to vote." She said, "I'll be praying for you. I'll be praying that you do the right thing." Not only did Humphrey attempt to convince them to compromise, Martin Luther King, Jr. attempted to get them to compromise. And so other black leaders attempted to get them to compromise, patronizing them by saying 'look you don't know how the system works.' And their response was "we didn't come this far to get two non-voting credentials, we didn't come this far to not be able to vote on the convention floor."

Hamer and the other badly injured prisoners were charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest and held in jail without medical attention from Sunday to Wednesday. She suffered permanent damage to her kidneys and a blood clot on a nerve in her left eye. During their imprisonment the group tried to sustain their spirits by singing spirituals and freedom songs based by Hamer's powerful singing voice. On Tuesday, the prisoners were hauled before court for a show trial without representation and with some of the very men who beat them acting as jurors they were found guilty of disturbing the peace and resisting arrest. On Wednesday, James Bevel, Andrew Young and Dorothy Cotton, finally got them released on bond. Their joy at being free, however, was quickly dashed

by the news that Medgar Evers, the field secretary for the NAACP had just been shot in the back and killed outside his home in Jackson, Mississippi.

Hamer was taken first to a hospital close by in Greenwood and then to Atlanta for more extensive medical care paid for by the SCLC. Then she traveled to Washington, D.C. and New York City, staying away from home for a month. Refusing visits from her family, except for one sister, to shield them from seeing her condition and to recover emotionally from the physical and sexual violence she had endured. By the fall she was back in Mississippi, addressing a Freedom Vote Rally in Greenwood, grounding her rhetoric in the Bible, and Spirituals, and in the preaching style of her and their Black Church background: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me" she began, "because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty to them who are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." Luke Chapter 4, Verse 28 in which Jesus is citing Isaiah Chapter 61, Verse 1. Note that she has appropriated the role of Jesus the prophet appropriating the role of Isaiah, the prophet. The narrative lines of the scriptures both Old Testament and New live on.

I believe that Fannie Lou Hamer, Annelle Ponder, Martin Luther King, Jr., Francis Grimke, Mary Younger, Solomon Bayley and William Grimes would understand and appreciate the acts of forgiveness offered by the families in Charleston.

I'd like to close on a brief autobiographical note, if I may. I was born in 1943 in Bay St Louis, Mississippi, during the period of entrenched segregation and white supremacy. I was born three months after my father was shot and killed by another man, a white man, in Mississippi, in 1943. I grew up without knowing the full story of my father's death, except that the man who shot him was never prosecuted. My mother and my stepfather decided not to tell me until I was 17 years old and about to begin college, because, as they explained: "We did not want you to grow up hating white people." At the age of 50, going through a mid-life crisis, I felt that I needed to go back south and to research as a historian the death of my father. The story briefly was that there had been a fight between the manager of an ice house and a black woman from the town who wanted to get two blocks of ice, this was when ice was being rationed during the Second World War, and he wouldn't give her a second one and they began to fight. And an elderly friend of my family stumbled on the scene and tried to stop the fight and was knocked down. My

father heard about this and went to the home of the ice house owner to confront him about the behavior of his employee. He wasn't home but his wife was there and my father told her that when your husband gets home, I want to talk to him. She told her husband that. And the next day, her husband went to the store where my father was a clerk and took a gun out and shot him to death and left the store telling them "I just killed your nigger."

I went to the police department and I found an arrest record of the man who killed my father. And one of the policemen said I think the son of the man who killed your father lives in Biloxi, not far from Bay St. Louis. So I called him up on the phone, and I said "this is out of the blue, but I wanted to ask you something." I said, "your father shot and killed my father and I wonder what story you might have about it?" And he paused and he said "yes, I was nine years old when that happened. I remember it." And he said "your father, I remember him. He was a big burly man and he and my father fought and he was beating my father up and my father pulled a gun in self-defense and killed him."

I have a picture of my father standing between my two sisters. One of them was 13 years old, the other one was 11. My father was maybe two inches taller than my 13 year old sister. And I asked my relatives, what did my father look like? They said he looked like you. Your father was slender man. He was not burly. So his story had changed from my family's story. I said "what happened to your father?" He said, "my father came down with terminal cancer and shot himself to death."

I thought about it but didn't ask him, did he use the same gun as he used to kill my father? The end of that trip, I went to my father's grave and I had been there many times in the past on visits down south to my relatives. But for the first time I began to cry and then as if in my mind's eye I saw my father, I saw him up on the ladder in the stockroom and I saw him being shot and I saw him falling. And it was as if he fell into my life. And for the first time a father and a son met and I cried for him, I cried for myself, I cried for my mother and my sisters. And I instinctively knelt down and picked up some grave dust from his grave and rubbed it on my forehead. And then I left.

That is the end of my remarks.

**WILL SALETAN, *Slate*:** I want to know about what role forgiveness plays in change. On the political right in this country, we hear a lot of "get over it." Sometimes on the left,

particularly in the academy, we hear about “structural obstacles” to change and how difficult if not impossible it is for an individual to transform society given conditions, some of them physical or economic, social, some of them psychological, the mind set of being oppressed.

But you spoke of the transforming power of “moral jujitsu.” The key thing is that the oppressed is the initiator. It is almost a radical spiritual act to transport oneself from the position of the oppressed to the person who is capable of forgiveness, who is above. What role does forgiveness play in that process of change? To what extent can it overcome these structural obstacles? To what extent are those people who say “get over it” right, but perhaps not in the way that they understand it?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** Part of what I am referring to here is two scripts, two national myths if you want, two ways of viewing what America means. And what the slaves and their descendants down to the present day have been urging is there is something wrong with the script here. And we have a different script which comes from the same Bible. And we think you ought to pay attention to this other script when you talk about national identity and national purpose. And there have been times, most recently the civil right era, when people were moved to compassion to hear that script, that alternate script, that oppositional script. They were moved by seeing the suffering of black people, whether it was in Selma or Birmingham or Mississippi. And largely that other script became visible because of the press, because of people writing about what they saw of a New York paper that described the screams of people being beaten on the Pettus bridge or even before Selma itself, leading up to it, describe the sounds of black people being beaten in the black belt area around Selma for demonstrating and the demonstration in which Jimmy Lee Jackson was shot to death trying to protect his grandfather. The footage of what happened on the Edmund Pettis Bridge went national. So the press has played a major role in broadcasting, making known to Americans generally the suffering of black Americans.

I am just about to publish a book called *Sharing the Divine Pathos: Prophetic Voices in 20th Century United States*. My argument in the book is that the eight people that I’m dealing with all shared the divine pathos and the premise of the prophetic voice is that people will listen. Indeed prophets tend to shout so loud and to be so in your face that it is hard not to listen.

And so this is the mechanism for change. How does somebody answer Hamer's question? Can this happen? Is this America? So when people saw that on TV and when they flooded the credentials committee with phone calls, with telegrams, they took that question to heart. How could this happen in America? Once you've got people asking how could this happen in America. What can I do about it? Is change possible?

That is the mechanism that you've somehow got to get people in touch with what is going on, in terms of oppressing minorities, in terms of the inequality of wealth, in terms of the lousy schools on the Sea Islands outside of Charleston and the ongoing experience of black people with police forces. All of that has to come out with the hopes that Americans will be moved by seeing these things to ask questions. Is this consistent with American's values, with our values, with my values? Is this consistent with what it means to be a free society? Is this consistent with both the civil gospel and the religious gospel in which we claim to believe?

So that is the way that it works. Now the empowerment is that it is not mandated that it is going to work. The prophets often were persecuted. I mean, I think it was Ezekiel who had to flee for his life from Jezebel. Prophets tend to be folks who get beaten and severely mistreated. But it's that voice, that alternate script; there is another way of living than the way that we are living now. It doesn't have to be this way. That is the hope that is kept alive by these examples that I've tried to demonstrate to you.

The temptation to despair is always there. But the loss of life feeds, as it were, the decision to go on that you know in their honor we need to go on, we need to persist, we need to keep the struggle going.

**ERICA GRIEDER, *Texas Monthly*:** In the antebellum era were there any theological defenses of slavery in the system? And then secondly when you were telling the story about Grimes and his reaction to being unjustly punished, his reasoning seemed very straight forward and intuitive to me, so I was wondering how the African-American church has shaped the white church? I mean does it seem so intuitive to me today being raised in a white church because of this tradition?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** On the first question of theological defense, there is huge literature on the pro-slavery versus anti-slavery defenses.

Slaves were clear about which sections of the Bible they thought were valid in terms of their experience. One mistress was talking to her slave one day and she said, Polly how do you keep up your spirits, you know, your life is so hard? Polly said when I heard about Exodus and God's freeing his people I know it mean we poor Africans because if God will not be good to us someday, why were we born? So this accommodation of the Exodus narrative as being talking about us.

They actually reenacted the Exodus experience in their religious worship in a way of religious dance called the Shout. And they would sing snatches of spirituals and hymns over and over again and would lead into kind of a trance in which time and distance disappeared and in which they literally became the Israelites. So this wasn't just an academic debate, it was an experiential thing. They knew in their bodies that these biblical verses talked about them.

Slaves talk about well we listen to the masters preachers and they say the same thing all the time you know don't take your master's hog, don't take your master's turkey, be obedient to your masters. When we would want some real preaching, we'd go off into the hush harbors where we would preach over an overturned pot and we would talk about what God really wanted of us.

So there is this constant struggle in which the slaves aren't just passive, they are resisting in very active ways, sometimes at the risk of great punishment. In the hush harbor, it was illegal for them to go off the plantation to another or to hold a meeting on the plantation. There are cases of slaves being beaten and while they are being beaten praying for freedom.

So there are all of these forces that can be leveraged which slaves used.

**EMMA GREEN, TheAtlantic.com:** A number of evangelical Protestant denominations have gone through a process, trying to confront racial tensions that still exist within their church communities. In those very powerful centers of church life in the United States, is there a way to harness the kind of tradition that you are talking about from within the black church and actually bring that to what is effectively still the white church and

denominations that have historical roots in slavery? Then I think moreover, as we are in a time where there is significant racial divide...is the white church basically effectively still hobbled by the fact that it is still pretty much divided and hasn't in a lot of ways reconciled itself with a history that is very much rooted in slavery and racial division?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** We still live in a segregated society. Our schools are actually more segregated now than they were even during the civil rights movement. Residential segregation guarantees that. It would be an interesting question to ask you, you don't have to answer it now, but how many of you have dinner regularly with people of another race? Is there commonality?

The issue of how do we desegregate on a micro level, is I think as important an issue and maybe even more important than the larger statements and apologies by denominations. That is fine. But it doesn't necessarily affect the ongoing racial divide unless people are meeting in schools, in homes, in work places face-to-face and having contact in which their stories can be shared. What we are as a nation is a collection of disparate stories, an ever exfoliating set of separate stories and what we need to bind us together is to be able to hear the stories of others in face-to-face encounter. And that can be sponsored by churches; churches would be a natural place to sponsor that kind of face-to face contact. But it's amazing when I ask the question of how many of you really meet regularly and experience the life stories of people who come from a different ethnicity than their own. And it is rarer than one might think.

**ROBERT DRAPER, *New York Times Magazine*:** I'd like to get your thoughts on the very moved reaction in the white community to the forgiveness that was offered by the families of the Charleston shooting victims, particularly when juxtaposed against the reaction in the same community to the Blacks Lives Matter movement going on at the very same time. There has been the observation made that while forgiveness is divine it is not only a poor substitute, arguably no substitute, for justice but that it actually undercuts the emotional locomotion for justice. And so I wonder what your thoughts were about whether that sort of forgiving spiritual reflex of the families came at the expense of the less forgiving more insistent demand for justice from Black Lives movement?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** I don't know how you would measure it but it would seem to me that the two don't necessarily need to conflict at all. The good will or the amazement of whites and others to their act of forgiveness might lead to an appreciation of that we need to do something about some of these other issues that are roiling the surface, including the Black Lives Matter Movement. Indeed the whole televising of the funeral and Obama's presence there and Obama's beginning to address in a very direct way, to actually give a black talk, a black sermon on the racial situation in this country, shows that the two don't need to be antithetical or one defeats the other. I mean he raised issues of poverty and lack of divergence of education and other major issues in his sermon for Pickney. I don't see it really as a distraction.

**ADELLE BANKS, Religion News Service:** I actually was going to ask a question that relates to the role of the sermon and whether it deals with forgiveness or next steps after these very tragic incidents. And I wondered about your comparison maybe of King speaking after the Sixteenth Street bombing and then Obama after the Emanuel AME bombing, shooting.

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** Going back to Grimke's sermon after the lynching of Sam Hose. These are all attempts to link the feeling. You know, in Grimke's case it is the feeling of despair, let's not despair, we can't despair. Even though this is the period that historians call the nadir, the pits, the absolute bottom of race relations in this country. So the sermon is a major way of communicating, of taking these moments of tragedy and communicating them in ways that both arouse pathos and therefore tends to tap into people in terms of activism.

**KAREN TUMULTY, Washington Post:** I'd like to go back to a point you made early on, which is that the black theological experience in America was a repudiation of the idea of American exceptionalism which has always had a theological element that God granted this country a special place in human history. But now we see American exceptionalism invoked in our politics constantly. Barak Obama had to spend what two years getting himself out of having suggested that maybe American isn't that exceptional after all. Is there anyway ultimately of reconciling the black experience with American exceptionalism? Is that ultimately where you go? Or is it that these are two ideas that can never meet?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** The force of the oppositional narrative is to point out the flaws in the cultic, dominant, hegemonic, imperial narrative and to say this isn't the way to go either in terms of civic piety or religious piety. The way to go is all those texts that we've been quoting. It is to care for the suffering. It is to help the poor. If you want to make America exceptional, you make it exceptional by how it cares for the least of these.

Number two is you guys are picking this battle with Great Britain over your freedoms. How can that be consistent with our being enslaved? Samuel Johnson says the worse cries for freedom are from people who are slaveholders. And so look at this inconsistency. You can't have it both ways.

**DAVID RENNIE, *The Economist*:** The question I wanted to ask is about how moral jujitsu and hegemonic, shaming of majority culture, how that works now? Are there potential risks to a narrative about how the good response is forgiveness now because in the past, when you had either slavery or legal segregation, it was goodness as a response to a kind of system which denied that it was bad. Now the dominant narrative from those who do not wish to hear about Black Lives Matter or black suffering "is that this country was bad." "Sure, we accept that but now we're color blind. We want to move on. We don't want to hear about this anymore."

Does that moral jujitsu work in exactly the same way now in this new context where there's a risk that people just co-opt it? You've forgiven us because you accept that this was an isolated instant with no larger political significance, that Dylan Roof was insane and their forgiveness has allowed us to park it. Is there a sense that the moral jujitsu works differently now that the struggle is to deny that the things are normal?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** If there could be an opening made by horrendous incidents, like the one in Charleston, for which —there is an irrationality to evil.

There is a sense in which there's something inexplicable about something like that happening and forgiveness is not an adequate answer. My hope for change lies in communication, and we're talking about a micro level. Nothing against macro level either, but I think we need to not be strangers to each other and to each other's experiences and the more that we can become less estranged, the more there's a possibility of change.

It's hard to hate somebody who you eat with regularly and it's important to discover beyond the binary of racism. I mean, for us, what racism means is black and white. Well, racism can mean a lot of other things, too, as we know, as our variety of immigration continues. So there's always continuing exfoliation of stories from different people from different backgrounds and if we can, on the smaller levels, begin to share those stories and see the suffering and triumph, the sadness, the joy of other people, we can begin to see them. I use some purposely religious language here. We begin to see them not as others but we can begin to see them as icons of God's presence, as made in the likeness and image of God.

**NAPP NAZWORTH, *Christian Post*:** You talked about the history and that the split within Christianity, you said, was deep and fundamental and you had two versions of Christianity, some who supported slavery, some who did not support slavery.

Then in response to Emma's question about what this means for religious institutions, you said what we need to bind us together is to hear the stories of others and face-to-face contact and we've seen a tremendous growth of multiracial/multiethnic churches in the United States and so I wonder what you think about what it means for the future of the Church if we are going to repair that split.

Does the Church need to become more multiracial/multiethnic and, if so, what does this mean for those historically black churches that grew out of the slave churches?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** Howard Thurman was a chaplain at Howard and was the co-pastor of the first interracial church in the country. He was a black Baptist in background. And the question for Thurman became, doesn't your position mean the disappearance of the black church and basically he says, yes, theoretically, but we have a long way to go in terms of something like that happening. It doesn't necessarily mean the disappearance of the church but the changing of how we think of churches; that is, is there something sacrosanct about denominational lines?

Right now, as far as all of this, as far as I can see as a functional possibility, is for churches to become places where these kinds of discussions, interfaith discussions and interracial and interethnic discussions, can go on, trying to stress basically what the Church believes, which is, at least if it's Christian, is a universality Christianity.

**LAUREN GREEN, Fox News:** You quoted Scripture, the Lord’s Prayer, but then you went on and really explained the reality of forgiveness that is on a visceral level. That’s not intellectual at all. How do you bring these two concepts of forgiveness together?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** Yes. The rub of it is the question of how does one take, in this particular case, the Gospel sayings of Jesus. He says, this is how you pray and that results in the Our Father. The crucial part of the Our Father is that particular “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against others.” That is a prescription of how to live. It’s not just an intellectual formation. It’s a teaching about how you pray but your prayer should be your life. So this is an instruction manual that’s being presented here for living.

**JULIA IOFFE, *New York Times Magazine*:** Christianity was imposed on black people when they were brought over as slaves and used as a tool of enslavement and the backlash to Christianity, to this narrative of forgiveness that arose within the black community in the ’60s and ’70s, with Stokely Carmichael and the Nation of Islam, and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit how you see that debate.

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** That debate caused me to go to graduate school at Yale and to write a dissertation on slaves in the book. It’s called *Slave Religion*. I argue that rebellion and docility were not the only two alternatives, that there’s another alternative, which involves symbolic resistance to know that you are morally superior, to know that you are not a nigger or a slave but a human being, not just a human being but a child of God, especially when linked to the Evangelical requirement of a conversion experience. These are people who have experienced God’s total acceptance of them as His children, viscerally have had that experience, and that changes the whole way in which you see life.

Slave named Morte is out in the fields and he has a seizure. He has a conversion experience and he gets back to the barn where the owner’s waiting for him and says, “Where were you?” and he tells him his conversion experience. The master begins to cry and he says, “Morte, I see you’re a preacher. I want you to preach before my house on Sunday.” Morte stands up before the big house on a makeshift kind of platform and he preaches to the master and he says I reduced the master and the master’s family to tears and the rest of the people who were around. Now presumably the slaves are watching

this. What does it mean to see a fellow slave reducing the master and his family and others to tears by preaching on their enslavement to sin?

**CARL CANNON, RealClearPolitics.com:** Professor, I wanted to talk about when you said how often do people have meals with people of a different race on a regular basis and that got me back to thinking about Emmanuel Church in Charleston.

The Sunday after the shootings, the congregants at another church, Citadel Square Baptist Church, came to church there. Those churches are right next to each other. This is a white church and this is a black church. And even before the shooting, the pastors had been talking about doing things. They had never quite gotten around to it.

The people went over from one church, from the white church to the other church and brought flowers. It was a very touching scene. The networks were there. But I’m wondering, hearing you talk, if it’s enough. What could these churches do more to actually have real integration and would that help?

**MAYA RHODAN, TIME:** I wasn’t there immediately after but when I went down in August, we started by going to Bible Study on a Wednesday and there had become this new Emmanuel. It’s completely different than what it was like prior to the shooting, because it’s a very diverse group of people, people from the Charleston community who had never worshiped in Emmanuel, people from all over who wanted to just simply pray with the parishioners there because when people saw this moment of forgiveness, they begun to see people of that church, people of Charleston not as strangers but as children of God. It helped people see that though they’d been neighbors all along, they didn’t really know each other and they wanted to better understand and maybe had that happened before, maybe the shooting wouldn’t have happened. It’s a different way of understanding how to foster communication and understanding within communities.

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** In terms of worshiping together, the first thing I would suggest for them is to have mixed congregation Bible Study.

**ELIZABETH DIAS, TIME:** You mentioned the two national myths of what America means for the black community and the white community, specifically in churches. I’m curious as a third national myth has really been rising in past decades with the growth of the

Latino community demographically and the different Christian faith tradition that that brings. As a historian, how do you define or describe the Latino history about forgiveness and where do you see that intersect this conversation historically and what's been fruitful about that, what's been challenging?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** The impact of Latinos is to extend the notion of enculturation. The particularity of Latino spirituality, Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Christmas Pageants, the celebration of the Day of the Dead, a lot of other practices, have to be embraced by the larger Catholic structures as appropriate and necessary. So universality as a reality in terms of there's no culture which can't be enculturated into the body of Christ, equally as valid.

**TED DAVIS, Messiah College:** Martin Luther King said, "The metaphysical." Apparently this was a reference to Edgar Brightman, [who] wrote that "all religion is of, by, and for persons. Religion ascribes a unique value to persons and has a unique interest in their welfare and their salvation." I wanted your take on that and see if that has anything to do with the degree to which the civil rights movement in America may have been rooted in specific kinds of Christian theology.

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** The movement made King, King didn't make the movement. So King is certainly one of the most eloquent spokesmen for the civil rights movement but his philosophy and his ideas were not necessarily constitutive of what it meant to be involved in that movement. So it's good to know King's intellectual background, but a lot of that is irrelevant to the people in the movement. The values are relevant but the background is not necessarily.

**EUGENE SCOTT, CNN:** You spoke earlier about the hope of historically black and predominantly white churches coming together to address race issues here in the States and hopefully having an impact on it beyond the Church. I was wondering what do you make of all of the data saying that fewer people are actually even going to church, especially among millennials, the increasing number of unaffiliated people. "The nones" would suggest that the impact of the Church on this issue can't be as significant as it has historically been.

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** Activism might be one of the ways of bringing “nones” back to the Church. There’s lots to criticize in our society today and if churches were involved in some of that criticism in meaningful ways, it might help to bring some people back to the Church who might be idealistic and looking for a meaningful contribution to life that they’re not finding within the Church.

**DANIEL LIPPMAN, *Politico*:** I was wondering, where are the places in our society where you can encourage people to not be strangers and to actually get dinner with people of other races and ethnicities, like colleges used to be more places where there’d be more moral instruction and that’s not the case in many places. Should the government be involved at all, or where do you tell this message to millions of people that would help change their hearts and make them not be strangers?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:**

It has to begin at the local level and I spoke to a group of high school students about a year ago. I asked them how many of you go to school with other races, you know, and it was true — there’s just not opportunity for them to get together. So I suggested that this organization be such a place and it was appropriate because the group was quite well racially-integrated. So you start with small groups in which you try to get people basically where they are and say this is an important thing that we need to develop for citizenship. It’s an important thing we need to do to change the society that’s still damaged by segregation and you start small and build and see where it goes.

I don’t think it’s that difficult. I mean, we have all kinds of Rotary Clubs. We’ve got Chambers of Commerce. We’ve got various organizations. It shouldn’t be that hard for a few people to organize, whether they’re from the seminary or from a college or your local people who are civically minded to create an organization. If we can create all the Martin Luther King Day celebrations that we have, why can’t you form out of those some groups that are willing to have other mediums on other days than his birthday?

**DANIEL LIPPMAN:** What comes to mind is a lot of people, they don’t even realize what they’re missing. They don’t even think. They’re well-meaning people. They’re not racist but they’re leading such busy lives that they don’t think about this issue. They don’t think, oh, I should really get to know people other than who look like me. You have to point that out to them.

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** One of the ways of doing that, is it's the job of the press; that is, by saying, look, although this has been happening in Charleston, *Time Magazine* talks about this. Let's read this article in *Time* and then talk about it. It takes several meetings to talk about it or book groups. Book groups are great places to raise such issues. Have them read the *Color of Water* by James McBride or *Woman Warrior* about the Little Rock, Arkansas seven, and reading those books really explode people's consciousness about such matters.

**JULIA IOFFE:** The Jewish community and the black community were often in lockstep during the Civil Rights movement and since then, it seems that on both sides, that relationship has frayed, and there seems to be a lot of animosity on both sides. The two communities have such a natural historical affinity for each other and like empathy in a way that I think not every community can have for each other. Where can the two communities go from here in bridging what has become a pretty nasty divide?

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** The origins of it go back to that Jews were the subject of quotas in terms of admission to colleges, and so the whole issue of affirmative action for Jews took on a different content and implication than it did for African Americans and then that played itself out also in various school districts, particularly in the boroughs of New York about local control in schools, and it did become very ugly.

You're right about the fact that there's so much in common.

I hate to belabor what I've said before but I think the best way for there to be communication beyond the occasional sharing of Seder with black Americans or other Americans is small group discussions and discussions that are not just, you know, let's just sit here and make nice but let's talk about problems and let's see if there's something concretely that we can do about some of these problems. We have such a flat and poor understanding of what the political body needs. We think about politics, we think often about governing and election. We don't think about civic discourse and about how we should be training our children from the early age to be aware of civic responsibility and of civil civic discourse in which differences are not ignored as potentially conflictual but differences are celebrated as what is the case in our polity, and if you start them out as children, then maybe the nature of political discourse will change into something that's

much more humane than it presently is, which is a battle of tit for tat between the Left and the Right.

**TOM GJELTEN:** My question has to do with clarifying your thoughts on the role of the Government versus the role of faith-based organizations in working for justice because you've told different stories. One is the empowerment that comes from faith and how important that has been but, on the other hand, you told the story of Fanny Lou Hamer, who seems to have come from a more secular experience and focused on more secular approaches and this is obviously a huge issue right now, whether the work for justice is the mission of government or whether it's the mission of faith-based organizations.

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** Fannie Lou Hamer was converted by attending a meeting in her black Baptist church led by some of the Civil Rights activists. Her whole understanding is biblically studded. If you read any of her speeches, the Bible comes up often more and more and the hymns that she uses come up more and more. So I would say that there's some way for [faith-based and governmental action] to be combined in ways that don't violate church and state, the separation, but that can be practically usable for alleviating some of the problems that we have in society.

**ADELLE BANKS:** I noticed that you had the word "docility" in the end of your book title. I wonder if you could explain that forgiveness may or may not be a sign of being docile and how it might relate to the whole historic stigma and tension of the relationship between slave and slave master.

**ALBERT RABOTEAU:** That was purposely chosen as part of the binary that occupied the discussion particularly during the Black Power period. I was teaching at Xavier University in New Orleans and the issue became very alive as to whether Christianity was a detriment to the struggles of the black liberation or whether it was a spur to black liberation. That became the topic of my dissertation.

When I first mentioned it to several faculty members [at Yale University], they said, "Weren't they all Baptists and Methodists?" I said, "Well, the majority of them were but this was more complicated than that." It's not only a black/white question or even an American question. This is a question posed to the Marxist critique of religion. Certainly there were times when the notion of depending upon Jesus and upon salvation and

## ABRIDGED TRANSCRIPT

“Forgiveness and the African American Church Experience”

Dr. Albert J. Raboteau ♦ March 2016

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another world was important but that didn’t necessarily mean that at another time in a slave’s life or when an incident arose, that he might engage in revised actions, such as attending a praise meeting that was forbidden by the master. That’s a revolutionary act because you’re going to get 50 lashes if you’re caught doing that.

So you’re praising Jesus, who the master thinks counsels slavery, but you’re doing it in a way that relativizes the master’s will. God’s will takes precedent over the master’s will. It’s not a plot to revolt but it is a revolutionary action in terms of what’s most — who’s the most important source of value in my life? God, not the master.

♦ END ♦

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