

“Talks at the Desk” Season 3 Discussion Guide

African Descent Ministries is offering another season of “Talks at the Desk,” concentrating on the 2023 Reclaim Gathering. This past September over 60 African-descent Lutherans congregated at Central Lutheran Church and Redeemer Lutheran Church in Minneapolis to have our cups filled. The reality is, being a non-European American person in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a constant act of courage and a true testament to our faith in Lutheran theology. We have an extensive history of being mistreated, experiencing verbal, physical and financial abuse. All this leads to the deterioration of our mental and physical health, grief, rage and even death.

The need for a safe space for people of African descent and our other global-majority siblings is essential for our survival. The truth is that we can never be our full selves in spaces where white supremacy dwells, and if we are to say white supremacy does not exist in the ELCA then we deceive ourselves. Naming white supremacy is not always about people, and it is not exclusively about interpersonal conflicts. White supremacy is an ideology, a systemic practice and a tool to isolate power. Most of the time, individuals that may perpetuate white supremacy do not even realize they are doing it, because these are learned values in institutions we have inherited and we have been taught to align ourselves with white supremacy for our survival. During Black History Month we will not center white supremacy as the focal point of our narrative; however, to even pretend to understand Black joy, one must be familiar with Black pain. White supremacy causes pain to everyone, but this month ... is about us.

For this study guide you are invited to use these questions and prompts before and after watching each episode of “Talks at the Desk.” Use this during Lent. Apply this over the summer during ordinary time. Preach the same Scripture. Your African-descent colleagues and leaders have chosen to be vulnerable and authentic in revealing their experiences in the ELCA. Let us be church together and honor these stories by listening deeply and celebrating the gift of community.

Week 1: Reclaim

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” —Galatians 5:1 (NIV)

1. What does the Galatians text mean to you? The Rev. Andrea Walker continues the text through verse 6 for her sermon:

²Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Dr. Walker connects the concept of circumcision to forced assimilation in our faith community. In what ways do you or your faith community practice forced assimilation? How might that impact someone's relationship to a community or institution?

2. What does it mean to be Lutheran, to you? When you describe it, do you associate particular ethnic/racial attributes with it? How might your definition of a Lutheran differ from that of someone in the episode?
3. The Rev. Carl Taylor speaks to his formation as a Black man in South Carolina and being told he may never get a call in his own state. Have you ever had leadership in your place of worship or work that did not reflect your racial or ethnic identity? How did you and your peers react to that?
4. The Surinamese Lutheran practice of giving everyone their flowers was a shocking yet meaningful practice brought to Reclaim. How might acknowledging everyone regardless of relevancy and merit challenge white supremacy?
5. Did you notice the baby at the event? In the antebellum South, enslaved African women would perform their daily tasks, whether these were farm labor or domestic work, with their infants tied to them. In 2024, with the rising cost of living, miscellaneous debt and lack of infrastructure to support families, women, especially women of color, are still tasked with juggling childcare and their careers. Intergenerational spaces are essential to all generations of people, but what is the church's role in supporting young families?

Week 2: Embolden

¹Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ²He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴“For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”

⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”
(Luke 18:1-8)

1. Why is it significant for Mary Ann Harrison to choose to speak of her culture and her disability in harmony with each other?
2. What might be the impact of being a 60-year-old congregation in Compton, Calif., and never having had a Black pastor until now?
3. There is a common trend early in the episode of preparing to be the new mentors and aunties to the next generation of African-descent Lutherans. Is the practice of preparing to be good elders a common practice in your culture?
4. Deacon Adrainne Gray says, “Black people don’t play about their spirituality,” echoing the prophetic words of the Rev. Jazmine Brooks from the sermon. Many of the superstitions named by Rev. Brooks are HooDoo practices. This reminds us that Black spirituality is more expansive than a denomination or a polity. We come from cultures that saw God in many ways.
5. Why does it matter that the Rev. Carl Taylor places himself in positions where he has a seat at the table, where he can contribute to informed decisions?

Week 3: Embody

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:4-10)

1. Alice Walker wrote, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” Professor Rector speaks about being a “womanist theologian.” Why might womanist theology be an asset to the Lutheran tradition? What perspective could womanism bring that feminism lacks?
2. At the Reclaim Gathering there was a two-day Intergenerational Dialogue to repair relationships across the span of generations in our churches. The Rev. Nic states, “We [millennials] will not uphold institutions that don’t serve us.” Why do you think younger generations are rejecting these institutions, both religious and secular? Why might they be rejecting the ELCA?
3. The Rev. Solomon Missouri says, “The same God that loves me wanna see me loved well.” This sermon pushes through the purity culture often found in Christian contexts, forcing us to confront our own relationship with romance and faith. How has purity culture impaired your faith formation?
4. While celebrating the Men in Ministry cohort, some say they have never before seen 17 African-descent Lutheran pastors in one room together. The Reclaim event had over 30 African-descent rostered leaders present. By choosing to omit “men” as the descriptor for pastors, we choose to erase the pastoral presence of women within our own communities. Where else do we sacrifice the labor and authority of women in our own lives?
5. Though the United States is an inherently patriarchal society, culture and religion are often passed down through matriarchal practices. Somehow, even with women being the majority of church members and Black women being the largest growing demographic of church members, women in ministry are still widely disenfranchised. Who taught you about your love of ministry?

Week 4: Liberate

²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²²Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. ²⁹His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ ³⁰But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³²Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵This is how [God] will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Matthew 18:21-35)

6. There are a lot of things we have yet to learn about the antebellum period of the United States, but the infliction of Christianity upon Black and Indigenous people is widely known. How do one group of people read Scripture and find validity in oppression and genocide while another group of people find hope and liberation? What does your faith community teach about both sides of this spectrum?
7. Some of the most well-intentioned people are the most harmful. When was a time your impact did not match your intention, and how did you work to resolve it? Why is it important for us to reconcile after perpetration?
8. Several commentators note that Black people don’t play about who they are. The understanding of self is an important concept for a people whose heritage and rootedness were stripped away from them. Who do you say you are when people ask?
9. When the Rev. Christina Montgomery speaks about liberation, she informs us of her multiple marginalized identities. From her experience she understands that there are only two viable options for existing, liberty or death. Many of us cannot quite understand the limitations and hatred that our neighbors with these identities carry that stretch us to either pursue liberty or subside to death. How does marginalization kill us? Why is it that the more afflicted understand God in more expansive ways than the comfortable class?
10. Professor Rector introduces the *epistemology of ignorance* and gives as an example the fact that people of European descent are “not supposed to” have a race. She says, “We are not supposed to talk about whiteness, because it shouldn’t exist.” It doesn’t get talked about because no one *needs* to know. Have you ever heard of the epistemology of ignorance? After hearing a bit about it, how does this challenge your understanding of self?