

**Deuteronomy 24: 10-22**  
**Color Courageous Community: Week 2**  
**Rev. Kelley L. Becker**

In the sermon last week, I talked about the word “woke” and the ways in which it is being used in public discourse right now. I’ve understood “woke” to mean educated, empathetic, open to, and concerned about the experiences of other people. So, I was surprised when I saw a billboard in Tulsa a few months ago proclaiming that “Jesus ain’t woke,” as if being “woke” is a bad thing for Jesus to be. So, I spent some time learning about how others understand the word.

In my research, I read an article by Dana Brownlee, Forbes contributor and workplace antiracism thought leader, who wrote, “Increasingly, influencers (oftentimes but not always white) have latched onto the term “woke” and weaponized it as an easy way to dismiss or discount a racial issue, platform, or grievance offhand as extreme or utterly nonsensical.” Brownlee goes on to say that using the word “woke” in a derogatory way is just one more way white people communicate to people of color, “I don’t want to be inconvenienced by your pain.”<sup>1</sup> This dismissal of thoughts, ideas, and lived experiences makes discussion and change difficult, if not impossible. And I think this is why that billboard got under my skin in a way that surprised me. It’s arrogance and the dismissiveness that I don’t like. “Don’t you tell me who Jesus was.”

Based on the stories of Jesus in the New Testament, being woke, that is, staying awake and engaged in what’s happening around us, is clearly something followers of Jesus should be doing. We must be awakened and remain awake to the experiences of our neighbors, especially our neighbors who are part of marginalized communities. They are the ones who know firsthand that our systems are set up to benefit some (straight, white men) and penalize others, especially people of color. In this series, we are specifically talking about racism, but there is so much intersection between all the isms that it is difficult to isolate them.

The idea of awakening to racism isn’t new. In the nineteenth century, young men living in the northern states campaigned for Abraham Lincoln, calling themselves the “Wide-Awakes.” The club was dedicated to the preservation of the union and to ending slavery. They began as a group of youngsters who were disenchanted with the ways in which partisan politics was impacting the country (gee, that sounds familiar).

The Wide-Awakes gave young people a political identity. Lincoln’s campaign used this well-organized group to reach young voters, sponsoring voting drives and turning out in large numbers for political rallies and parades. By the middle of the 1860 campaign,

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<sup>1</sup> Brownless, Dana, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danabrownlee/2021/04/19/why-white-people-should-stop-using-the-term-wokeimmediately/?sh=b52b22a77794>, accessed, 1/16/24.

there were Wide Awake chapters in every county of every northern (free) state.<sup>2</sup> On the day of Lincoln's election as president, Wide Awakes had grown to 500,000 members.<sup>3</sup> The problem of racism still exists and, like the Wide-Awakes of the 1800s, we must be awake to the truth and to the experiences of people of color in our nation.

Today, we will continue to be awakened as we wrestle with the myth of equality in this nation. This week, John and I watched a Town Hall event that featured presidential candidate Nikki Haley. Haley is a woman of color. Her parents immigrated from India. She was born in the United States and is a United States citizen. And yet, even she has struggled to talk about race. In the Town Hall, the moderator asked her about a comment she made previously, which was, "The United States has never been a racist country." Since making that statement, she has been given multiple opportunities to walk it back or to clarify further. Even after the moderator pointed out that slavery was institutionalized in the Constitution and the White House was built on slave labor, Haley stood her ground, saying she did not believe that the founding fathers established the country on racist principles.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of how you vote, I think we can all agree that we have a problem if a presidential candidate who is a person of color is unable to talk honestly about this country's original sin, racism.

I can imagine most people are able to admit that racism existed when slavery was legal in this nation. We begin to disagree with one another when we talk about the systemic racism that still exists today. The story we like to tell ourselves is that racism was a problem before, but we fixed it. We like to say that everyone has the same chance to succeed and that everyone will succeed if they work hard. This morning, I am going to show you that the story we tell, that everyone in our nation has the same opportunities, is a convenient myth, and perpetuating it keeps us from real change.

But first, since we are trying to follow the ways of Jesus, I thought it would be fun to read some of the Jewish laws Jesus was familiar with about how to treat people who are vulnerable. In these laws, we will see glimpses of the kin-dom of God Jesus talked about. We will see a vision of the upside-down world he promised his followers. Today's text is from the 24th chapter of Deuteronomy, which is a list of laws about how people ought to treat other people. It begins with laws concerning marriage and divorce and then moves on to others. Here are some of the others:

<sup>10</sup> "When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, you shall not go into the house to take the pledge. <sup>11</sup> You shall wait outside while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. <sup>12</sup> If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as the pledge. <sup>13</sup> You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that

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<sup>2</sup> Chadwick, Bruce (2009). *Lincoln for President: An Unlikely Candidate, An Audacious Strategy, and the Victory No One Saw Coming*. Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks. pp. 147–149. ISBN 9781402247569. Retrieved April 1, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> "The Wide Awakes". Hartford Courant Connecticut Historical Society. April 1, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> <https://nypost.com/2024/01/18/news/nikki-haley-defends-claim-that-america-was-never-a-racist-country-at-nh-town-hall-before-primary/>, accessed 1/19/24.

your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you, and it will be to your credit before the Lord your God.

<sup>14</sup> “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. <sup>15</sup> You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

<sup>17</sup> “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. <sup>18</sup> Remember that you were enslaved in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

<sup>19</sup> “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. <sup>20</sup> When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

<sup>21</sup> “When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. <sup>22</sup> Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

A few words about the book of Deuteronomy. In his book, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, scholar Dennis T. Olson writes, “The frequent quotations of Deuteronomy in the New Testament and in the classical rabbinical sources testify to its authority within both the Jewish and Christian traditions.” Contemporary scholars have described Deuteronomy as ‘the theological center (Brueggemann), middle point (vod Rad), and the most theological book (Reventlow)’ of the Hebrew Bible. One scholar remarked that it is the “center of biblical theology (Hermann).”<sup>5</sup> In other words, what is in Deuteronomy is an important part of understanding Jesus’ faith tradition and, therefore, our own.

The laws in this particular section seek to preserve the reputation, dignity, and respect of people within the community, no matter who they are. Olson writes, “The laws guard the reputation and dignity of people...any debtor (24:10-11)...a poor debtor (24:12-13, poor laborers (24:14-15), [and] resident aliens, orphans, and widows (24:17-22)...” And if we were to read into chapter 25, the text continues with protecting the dignity of people who committed crimes and the animals as well. These laws protect people (and creatures) who were not protected or honored by the societies in which they lived.<sup>6</sup> They were intended to make sure everyone had what they needed to flourish. For example, if you were holding someone’s outer garment as collateral for a loan, you were to give it back to them before dark so they didn’t get too cold. You were

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<sup>5</sup> Olson, Dennis T, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading*, (Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis, 1994), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Olson, 108.

to leave some food for people who were hungry because there was the recognition that life isn't fair and "the system" should help and not hinder the ones for whom life is the least equitable.

The problem we have today is that life is still not fair, and instead of our systems working toward equity between people of color and white people, they are set up to make it worse or, at the very least, to maintain the gap. It is important for us, as followers of Jesus, to know the truth about the impact of systemic racism on our neighbors and to acknowledge that the way things are is not in keeping with God's vision for how the world should be, which means also means the way things are does not reflect the vision Jesus cast for what the kin-dom of God is like. Deuteronomy has given us a glimpse into what we ought to be doing, so let's look at what's really happening.

In her book, *Color-Courageous Discipleship*, Michelle Sanchez writes, "Racism has been highly adaptive over time, morphing like a monstrous chameleon as the context has changed. Today, racism works itself out in a subtler way through systemic racism and the racialization of society. If a society's systems persistently result in different outcomes for different races, we call that a racialized society."<sup>7</sup> And now, I want to give you some examples of that. Sanchez calls these examples, "symptoms of systemic racism." I will footnote all of the statistics I cite, so if you wish, you can go to the website tomorrow, access my manuscript, and read more for yourself later.

As I share statistics, let's remember that this date represents real people, real families, and real experiences. First is the wealth gap.

The U.S. Federal Reserve reports that white families in the United States have a median net worth of \$188,000, which is almost eight times higher than Black families at \$24,000 and five times higher than Hispanic families at \$36,000. White earners without a bachelor's degree have a higher net worth on average than Black and Hispanic earners with a bachelor's degree. The concentration of wealth in the U.S. is like this: white families hold 90% of the national wealth, Black families hold 2.6%, and Hispanic families hold 2.3%.<sup>8</sup>

And guess what the single largest predictor of racial wealth disparity is... Homeownership.

In 2019, 73% of white families owned a home compared with 58% of Asian families, 47% of Hispanic families, and 42% of Black families.<sup>9</sup> White families then accumulate

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<sup>7</sup> Sanchez, Michelle T., *Color-Courageous Discipleship: Follow Jesus, Dismantle Racism, and Build Beloved Community*, (Waterbrook Publishing, a division of Penguin House, 2022), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Bruenig, Matt, <https://prospect.org/power/top-10-percent-white-families-almost-everything/>, accessed 1/19/24.

<sup>9</sup> "The Racial Disparity in Homeownership Rates Persists," <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/son-2020-homeownership-gap>, accessed 1/19/24.

more home equity, which increases the wealth gap.<sup>10</sup> Between 1934 and 1968, 98% of home loans went to white families, and even now, Black people are less likely to be approved for mortgages.<sup>11</sup>

Closely related to both the wealth gap and the disparity in homeownership are the statistics about employment.

Research by the Pew Research Institute indicates Black workers are twice as likely to be unemployed when compared to white workers. And this has been true for at least 60 years, whether the economy has been good or bad.<sup>12</sup> So, it makes sense that this impacts the massive income gap that exists between Black and white families.

In my opinion, though, the biggie is education.

In a 2019 New York Times article, journalist Sarah Mervosh reported on a study done by the non-profit group EdBuild. The study revealed that minority school districts received 2.3 billion dollars less in funding than white-majority districts.<sup>13</sup>

I saw this for myself in our hometown. Our children went to a grade school that was in a fairly affluent, mostly white neighborhood. The school was well-maintained, and class sizes were in the low 20s. Teachers who taught at this school, stayed at this school. In this neighborhood, there were a lot of stay-at-home parents, so the school never wanted for volunteers. I remember when my youngest son, Andrew, was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, there were 12 room parents in his class. Class parties were chaos because there were so many parents in the room. Andrew's teacher asked for volunteers to come in one afternoon a week and read with students individually. There were so many volunteers that she didn't need all of us. So, his teacher suggested some of us volunteer at a school across town. I did. And I am so grateful I did. The day I walked into that school was the beginning of me waking up to the systemic racism that exists in our schools.

The class I volunteered in was so large...low 30's, I think. English was the second language for at least half of the students. The teacher didn't have an assistant, and I was the only parent there. The desks were old, the classrooms still had chalkboards while my son's school was moving to smartboards. The hallways were dark. The school had a completely different vibe than the one across town.

I've talked to teachers, and I know this is true to some degree in this community, though I have not seen the disparity for myself. Generally, the students in affluent districts have better facilities and more resources. This is because schools rely on

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<sup>10</sup> Marksjarvis, Gail, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-black-homeownership-plunges-0723-biz-20170720-story.html>, accessed 1/19/24.

<sup>11</sup> "The Future of Fair Housing," [https://nationalfairhousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Future\\_of\\_Fair\\_Housing.pdf](https://nationalfairhousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Future_of_Fair_Housing.pdf), accessed 1/19/24.

<sup>12</sup> Desilver, Drew, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2013/08/21/through-good-times-and-bad-black-unemployment-is-consistently-double-that-of-whites/>, accessed 1/19/24.

<sup>13</sup> Mervosh, Sarah, <https://edbuild.org/content/23-billion#CA>, accessed 1/19/24

property taxes for funding. In Oklahoma, 28% of school funding is from property taxes.<sup>14</sup> The schools in this state are less dependent on property taxes than in other states, but they are more dependent on state funding, which also hasn't worked out great. You can see how the wealth and housing disparities intersect with our education system.

And sadly, all of that intersects with our criminal justice system because of the school-to-prison pipeline that exists. The data is stark. According to the ACLU, Black students are 3 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students. Students who are suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation are 3 times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile criminal justice system the following year.<sup>15</sup>

Part of the myth of equality and fairness we tell is that in our criminal justice system, everyone is treated the same, regardless of skin color. That is a lie. Black people comprise 40% of the prison population but only makeup 13% of the U.S. population.<sup>16</sup> Black people are more likely to be arrested when they commit a crime than white people.<sup>17</sup> In her book *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice that Shapes What We See, Think and Do*, Jennifer Eberhardt writes that Black people are convicted more often, receive a harsher sentence, and the darker a Black person's skin looks, the more likely they will be given the death penalty.<sup>18</sup> The Innocence Project has reported for a long time the truth that people of color are more likely to be wrongfully convicted. According to a 2021 report, "Black people account for 40% of the approximately 2.3 million incarcerated people in the U.S. and nearly 50% of all exonerees — despite making up just 13% of the US population. This is, in large part, because they are policed more heavily, often presumed guilty, and frequently denied a fair shot at justice."<sup>19</sup>

This morning, I've talked about just five symptoms of systemic racism. I haven't treated each one completely, and there are certainly other symptoms I could talk about. My hope is that the bits I've shared will inspire you to do your own investigation. The point is that we must know the truth. And I recognize that statistics can be manipulated to say anything we want them to say. The statistics I've presented this morning are from a variety of sources; some I learned about through Sanchez's book and others I stumbled on myself. They tell a story. Systemic racism, in all its insidiousness, is alive in our nation. The United States is a racialized nation. Some people have more

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<sup>14</sup><https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pWsLDe01SBir7KYhiDwDjYHMbrl8CZDCDJY13edZJmM/mobilebasic#:~:text=Public%20schools%20are%20supported%20through,operations%20than%20many%20other%20states.,> accessed 1/19/23.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/infographics/090116-sttp-graphic.jpg>, accessed, 1/20/24.

<sup>16</sup> Farbota, Kim, <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-crime-rates-your-st b 8078586>, accessed 1/19/24.

<sup>17</sup> Farbota, accessed 1/19/24.

<sup>18</sup> Eberhardt, Jennifer L., *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice that Shapes What We See, Think and Do*, (New York: Penguin, 2019), 129-31.

<sup>19</sup> <https://innocenceproject.org/how-racial-bias-contributes-to-wrongful-conviction/>

opportunities than others, and “some people” always seem to be white people. That is racism.

So, this sermon has felt more like a class presentation than a sermon. I know. Friday, I presented at the Oklahoma Region Ministerial Practices Seminar where candidates for ordination are taught and have the opportunity to practice the things ministers do, like communion and baptism. I taught the worship portion. I told the ordination candidates that a sermon should answer the question, “What are we to do or think about?” A sermon that leaves people thinking, “So what?” isn’t meaningful. So, there are two things I would like us to do following this sermon. One is low risk, and the other is higher risk.

First, as I said earlier, this data represents real people. The Black people who have been denied mortgages are real. The people wrongly imprisoned are real, and they are being robbed of their lives, and their families are suffering, too. There are real children sitting in classrooms that you would be horrified to see.

So, that’s the first thing, the low-risk thing. Recognize that the data equals people...our neighbors near and far. To them, this conversation isn’t simply an intellectual exercise or an opportunity to prove we are “woke.” Our neighbors who are people of color are wide awake to the impact of systemic racism. In fact, they wake up to it every single day of their lives. As you dive into your own research, put some faces with those numbers. Read the statistics, but listen to the stories too.

Second, and this is riskier. Tell the true story. Our nation is racialized. Our systems benefit some and hinder others, and the others are almost always people of color. Hiding our history and telling a false story of today are never going to bring change. We are doing ourselves, our neighbors, and future generations a huge disservice by perpetuating the “nothing to see here” narrative.

In his Netflix special, “Where Am I,” comedian Trevor Noah, who is a Black man from South Africa, talks about his visit to Berlin, Germany. He says, “It was nice to be in a place where people don’t bury their history.” While there, he noticed that there is no way to travel around Germany and miss the country’s history. There are monuments and museums. They talk about the past. They know it’s painful, but they don’t try to hide from it. They teach their children about Hitler and the Holocaust, but the goal is not guilt. They tell them, “You weren’t alive then. This was not your fault. But because you are the future of this country, it is your responsibility not to let it happen again.”

He compares this to the struggle we have in this country talking about our history, and this impacts our ability to talk about the present. And it will impact our ability to create a different, more just, more loving future.

Let us be truth-tellers. It will be risky. I mean...that’s why Nikki Haley isn’t telling the truth. It’s risky. Lots of people don’t want to hear the truth. They don’t want to hear the

truth about the past because they don't want to feel guilty or bad or think something less than fabulous about this beloved country. And they don't want to talk about the present truth because, simply, they benefit from the way things are. And they lie to themselves and think that what impacts people of color doesn't impact them. We know that isn't true. We know that we are all connected. What hurts our neighbors hurts us and even if it didn't, we ought to care about other people's pain. That's being woke. *That* is following the ways of Jesus. Let us tell the truth about our past and tell the truth about the present. This is not about guilt. This is about using the truth to write a different story for the future. Let's start today. Amen.