

Matthew 3:13-17
Color Courageous Community: Week 4
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If you know me at all, you know I am a dog lover. I love all dogs, but I especially love black labs. If you need a self-esteem boost, you need a lab. A lab will make you feel like you are the most important person in the world. When I come home, I am greeted by frantic tail wagging and a face that says, "You were gone too long," even if I've been gone 15 minutes. I know it would annoy some people, but our labs have always followed me from room to room, and I love it. They are called Velcro dogs for a reason. All our labs have been Velcro dogs and have shared other traits, but they have been very different from each other as well. I am sure some of those differences are simply because all dogs, like all humans, are different. But I am sure some of their differences are a result of what happened in their lives before they were ours.

J.R., our first lab, was 1 ½ when we adopted him. His first owner was in the National Guard and got deployed. Nobody in his life could take him, so he took him to the shelter. He was adopted once and returned because he was destructive, and they decided he needed too much exercise. When J.R. came home with us, we learned that he had intense separation anxiety. When he went outside, he wanted us to stand at the door while he did his business, and then he would come right back in. Labs are known for chewing on everything. Socks, sunglasses, pillows, trash, and almost everything else are not safe around an untrained lab. From the very beginning, J.R. was only destructive if he was confined in a crate or in a room alone with the door closed.

Shadow, our second lab, lived outside on a chain for the first four years of his life. His brother was chained outside, too, but they were chained so that they couldn't get to each other. They couldn't play with one another or lie down at night together. Shadow had never been inside a house, so toilets, ice machines, washers and dryers, doorbells, and most people terrified him. He would cower behind me when he met new people. He did enjoy meeting people with bacon in their hands, though. When we left him alone, he would find anything with fluff inside it and defluff it. We have new furniture now.

Porter, our third lab and the one we get to love now, was found wandering around the streets of Miami, OK. A vet tech found him and took him to the office, where they tried to find his owner; when they couldn't, they contacted the lab rescue we were fostering for, and they sent me a picture of him and said, "This is your boy." He is practically perfect in every way. However, we think his time on the streets taught him to chase cars. When we first adopted him, our walks were miserable. A car would approach, and he would lunge at it. He's strong, and that was terrifying. The other car-related issue we have is that he barks and snarls at other cars when he rides in our car. It is loud and awful. This week, I accidentally stepped on his foot, and he squealed. I turned

around quickly to comfort him, and he covered like he was afraid I was going to hurt him.

By the time our dogs got to us, they had learned the world was a bit scary and human beings can't always be trusted to do the right thing. They were impacted by their past experiences. These experiences affected their behavior and how they expected people to treat them. J.R. expected us to abandon him. Shadow expected every new experience to hurt him. Porter expects fast-moving cars and people to torment him. This is trauma. And you probably know from first-hand experience, trauma is not only a dog thing; it is a very human thing.

According to the Center for Addiction and Mental Health, "Trauma is the lasting emotional response that often results from living through a distressing event. Experiencing a traumatic event can harm a person's sense of safety, sense of self, and ability to regulate emotions and navigate relationships."¹ During a traumatic event, the brain is primed to respond automatically to ensure survival. But that same line of defense that keeps us safe when we are in danger can keep us reliving the event consciously and subconsciously, causing us to feel unsafe all the time and that impacts how we perceive the world and how we interact with it.

One very troubling thing about trauma is that we seem to be able to pass it along to our children, not just as they watch and learn from us, but genetically. The Center for Childhood Counseling reports, "...research seems to bear out the fact that the toxic stress of ACEs [Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs] might not only be experienced by an individual but could also be transmitted from one generation to the next at a genetic level. In very simplified terms, it may be possible to pass on trauma to our children and grandchildren, making the implications of ACEs more devastating and far-reaching than we ever imagined. Some researchers who have studied historic periods of trauma like the American Civil War or the Holocaust now suspect that abuse, neglect, deprivation, and trauma can impair the functioning at some level of future generations who may not even be living in the same adverse circumstances."²

It isn't hard to understand how someone who experiences racism in person is traumatized. This research on ACEs helps us see that even if we could wave a magic wand and racism would be gone today, the impacts of racism would still be with us. This is called historical trauma. The impacts of historical racism have been studied in Black, Jewish, and Indigenous communities. In his book *My Grandmother's Hands*, psychotherapist and author Resmaa Menekem writes, "Trauma can alter the DNA expression of a child or grandchild's brain, causing a wide range of health and mental

¹ <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/trauma#:~:text=Trauma%20is%20the%20lasting%20emotional,regulate%20emotions%20and%20navigate%20relationships>, accessed 2/2/24.

² <https://www.centerforchildcounseling.org/epigenetics-and-aces/>, accessed 2/2/24.

health issues, including memory loss, chronic anxiety, muscle weakness, and depression. Some of these effects seem particularly prevalent among African Americans, Jews, and American Indians. Three groups who have experienced an enormous amount of historical trauma.”

Last week, with his permission, I shared part of Alex Rivera’s story. He talked about the ways in which unconscious bias has impacted him. One thing he said has really stuck with me, “...one day you believe not only that all these assumptions about you based on your race are true...” In other words, people of color begin to believe the false narrative systemic racism has been telling them. They believe in a story that is a lie, and this story, like so many stories, has been handed down for generations. In the first sermon in this series, I talked about the idea that race was made up by human beings who wanted to convince themselves and others that the color of someone’s skin makes someone better or worse. That is a lie. And that lie is the cause of so much hurt...so much trauma. And the truth is, even the ones upholding racist systems, even the ones benefiting from racist systems, people like most of us in this space, are traumatized by racism. Why? Because human beings were not created for hierarchy. We were not created for division. We were not created to hurt one another. We were created in the image of God, and God is Love. We were created for love, and the fear at the root of racism is the opposite of Love.

So, we are all just walking around as hurt people hurting people, and people of color and other vulnerable communities are being hurt the most. So, what do we do about that? Michelle T. Sanchez, the author of *Color-Courageous Discipleship*, suggests that we need to unlearn the stories about each other that aren’t true and learn a new one. We must learn a new story about who we are and who our neighbors are. She writes, “Healing happens as we courageously ferret out false narratives and fully embrace the true.” True stories are told and written by real people who have had real experiences. True stories are being pulled from public and school library shelves. True stories are not allowed to be taught in some of our classrooms. So, if you are looking for a place to dig your heels in, there’s one. There is a place where we can begin to dismantle racism by making sure true stories are being told and read and taught.

I believe the reason we have ended up believing the false narrative about race and human beings, the reason racist systems abound, is that, for some reason, we don’t really believe the original true story. It is a story about who we are.

This is Matthew 3:13-17.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw

God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved,^[a] with whom I am well pleased."

In the texts leading up to this, John the Baptist had been calling for repentance so that people would be ready to receive the one who was coming after him. "Come, he called. The water is a beginning so that you might have your heart open, your body renewed, your spirit ready, free from all that closes you off to the fullness of experiencing the new thing God is doing through the one to come..." When Jesus arrives on the scene, he doesn't tell John to step aside, and he will take it from there. He tells him to baptize him. Weird, huh? John had been telling people that he was not good enough to untie the shoes of Jesus. And all of a sudden he was being asked to perform this ritual that he understood as a ritual of repentance. From what, we might wonder, did he need to repent? This is sort of tricky ground in a tradition that has taught its people that Jesus was completely without sin. I don't know about you, but I've never believed that. If Jesus was human, he wasn't perfect. Human beings mess things up sometimes.

If nothing else, Jesus, being human, being of the earth, and being part of a community, participated in the reality of collective sin. No matter how many good choices he made, still, he was part of a whole. He was inseparable from the whole. Just as we are. There is no "me" without "you" without "we." This is the reality of life as it's created. This water ritual may have been partially about turning from sin, but it was also about connection. As Jesus was lowered into the water, he was connected with the natural world. And what happens to many of us when we connect with creation? We connect with God in new and meaningful ways. When we sit outside in the morning and hear the song of a new bird or the sound of a wind chime, when we see the sunrise or sunset or gaze up at the stars, we are connected to the One who created it. We are reminded that we are part of something way bigger than we are; whatever it is, it is good. It isn't a stretch, then, for me to imagine that in the moment Jesus felt the water, he experienced that kind of a connection.

The text tells us that at that moment, God reminded him of who he was, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The truth we find in this story is that we are all in this together...there is collective sin and collective abundance and goodness, and we are all beloved. To be clear, telling someone the truth found in this story will not heal trauma. I hate that anyone has to do the work of healing from trauma. It isn't fair. But we can help each other heal by replacing the false stories of worth tied to skin color, gender, sexual orientation ability, or age with the true story. And we do that by listening and by believing. We do that by stepping into people's lives and meeting them where they are. We do that by looking the messiness of humanity in the eye and showing compassion. The world, the creatures and the human beings God created are good. Human beings were created in

God's image and are God's beloved. Everyone you meet is beloved. You are beloved.
Go tell that story. Go live that story. Amen.