

“Til We’ve Seen This Journey Through”  
a sermon by Sakina Dixon and Kyndall Rothaus  
Lake Shore Baptist Church  
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Sakina: The late theologian Dr. James Cone stated “The church is the community that lives on the basis of the radical demands of the gospel by making the gospel message a social, economic, and political reality. It has the courage to take the risk, knowing that, at this early stage, it lives in a society that refuses to believe the gospel message.” Here at Lake Shore, we have the capacity to take this call seriously and live out the radical demands of the gospel. This sermon barely scratches the surface of this topic. But we have to start somewhere.

*Kyndall: Sakina first approached me about this idea to do a joint sermon months ago when she expressed to me her disappointment that too many sermons about race set a low bar for allyship. Sakina, you expressed to me that it often feels like we’re not really going anywhere. Can you say more about that?*

Yes. I believe my disappointment comes from the lack of concrete action taken by Christians towards racial healing and equity. I believe most Christians are antiracist. I believe most Christians truly believe in loving their neighbor. But there seems to be a disconnect between values and practice for many of us.

I have been at Lake Shore for just over a year and a half. I have heard people applaud at the end of a sermon twice. One was Paula’s sermon. Let’s break down what she said. She talked about being raised on land and growing up in a communal neighborhood, where everyone helped each other out. This sounds great, it is reminiscent of the type of community we have lost today. Then she talked about setting the dinner table for the help. I was instantly confused. She just said she was part of a great community where everyone helped each other out. Where did the help come in? Why was it needed? She proceeded to talk about how once she set the table for everyone (her family and the Black people who worked for them), they always ate together from that point forward. She also talked about her church integrating. This congregation was moved to applause. I was almost in tears. Her dinner story did not mention if her family’s workers were paid a fair wage. Or if they lived in similar type housing. Or if their kids received the same quality of education she did. Seeing everyone around me so aroused at narratives that happened decades ago with no tangible connection to race as it is experienced or what the church can do to engage in antiracist work was hard. Nothing changed for me.

*That sounds like a pretty discouraging experience for you--like here we are applauding supposed “progress” that occurred 50, 60 years ago, decades before you were even born, which in no way speaks to your actual experience as a black woman in 2019, nor does it really speak to the work we as the church need to do right here and right now.*

Exactly. We have all heard that thoughts and prayers do not stop gun violence. This notion is similar for people who are not racist. You not being racist, is good, but it doesn’t stop racism from occurring. There is actual work we need to do. Hard work.

We know that ministry is messy, but that should not stop us from engaging in it when it is hard. And unpopular. Antiracist work is deeply unpopular.

Take the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for instance. A celebrated national hero. Many people actually do not know what he fought for. Many people have not heard the words that he spoke. His message has been distilled into something palatable for the masses. But Rev. Dr. was deeply unpopular. He was under FBI surveillance and a 1966 poll showed that 72% of Americans disapproved of him. Some even thought his views were Anti-American. Antiracist work is deeply unpopular.

One of the reasons for this is that racism it's structural and systemic. Meaning its seeped into every fiber of our society. We cannot just pull out one thing, fix that, and racism be over. Culture, policies, institutional practices, history, ideology reinforce racism, and other types of oppression.

And it is easy to think we are doing the work. Some of you may have worked with or in communities of color your entire careers. But if you have not worked to explicitly chip away at the structural causes, you haven't. I remember talking with someone (a fellow believer) when the movie Black Panther came out. He said, "I saw it and I don't understand why everyone is making a big deal out of it". You do not have to like Black Panther. You do not have to like Black Panther. However, if you work with Black adults and children day in and day out and do not understand the concept of representation and how powerful it was for Black people to see positive images of themselves in this movie, you are not really doing the work, and you are not really part of the solution.

Lake Shore is antiracist. As a church body or individuals. Every single story I have heard about current members or past members reveal a faith community deeply concerned for others and justice. We value the work. But are we doing it ourselves?

Dr. Brittney Cooper, Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Africana Studies at Rutgers University, uses the term co-conspirator to describe the work we should be doing against racism and other forms of oppression. Co-conspirator, versus our usual term allyship or being an ally, best articulates that we should be part of the "good trouble" as Rep. John Lewis puts it. Planning and organizing the work and not just liking the work other people are doing on social media. Actually being in solidarity with people who are marginalized. John 15 verses 12-13 reads "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends". Co-conspiracy. Kyndall, can you speak to some of the work you have done in this area?

*Okay, so, my first instinct is to start listing things off, right? Oh, I helped plan the Jesse Washington Memorial, I attended the Black Lives Matter protest in Waco, etc. But I really want to dig deeper than that. Sure, I've done a few things here and there, but the truth is that I'm often hesitant to talk about race or preach about race or engage on topics of race, mostly because I'm so afraid of getting it wrong. I don't want to mess it up or accidentally be offensive, and so often I just choose silence. Or, there have even been times when I'm in a conversation where only white people are present, and someone makes a demeaning comment or joke about people of*

*color, and I feel really uncomfortable, but I don't say anything because I tell myself it won't do any good, but I know that falls short of the allyship bar and certainly the co-conspirator bar.*

Right. This makes me think of my own desire to be more than an ally to the LGBTQ community. I am so excited about the formation of our Rainbow Sunday School class. But I am not sure how to be a co-conspirator as a cisgender heterosexual person. I thought about attending the class but I am struggling with what I would contribute to the space. I do not want to just sit there like other people's experiences are my entertainment. I know I have to do the work and read and learn from my LGBTQ brothers, and sisters, and nonbinary siblings to move from just labelling myself as an ally to being a co-conspirator with them.

*Co-conspirator implies that I am not just lending my support; I'm actually willing to put myself at risk. I am reminded of the Paulo Friere quote you shared with me about how "solidarity requires" that we "enter the situation," that solidarity is a radical act. I keep thinking about the incarnation of Christ--how God's decision to be with us put God at risk.*

*I've been reading the book, White Fragility—which, by the way, is a book I think every white person should read—and the author, Robin Diangelo is a white woman who works as a diversity trainer, and she explains that in her years of work, she faces the most resistance not from overtly racist people, but from progressives. Basically what she says is that we've been conditioned to think of racism as being about the individual prejudice of one person against another person, when really racism is a complex system, and it must be understood as such if we are to make any real headway disrupting racism. Because racism is so against our value system as white progressives, we tend to be the ones who are most resistant to understanding racism and confronting it for what it really is. She writes this, "White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives: engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual antiracist practice. White progressives do indeed uphold and perpetrate racism, but our defensiveness and certitude make it virtually impossible to explain to us how we do so." Her words are reminiscent of MLK's Letter from Birmingham Jail in which King states that the greatest stumbling block to black freedom was not the Ku Klux Klan but the white moderate. As he said, "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection." I think the very first step in becoming a co-conspirator is the willingness to admit that our understanding of racism as white people has been shallow and our acceptance of true equity lukewarm at best.*

Yes, which is why the term co-conspirator best articulates how we should be supporting efforts of justice and equity. Allyship allows us to be shallow. To change our Facebook profile pictures and put bumper stickers on our cars to maintain this illusion that the work is being done. But being a co-conspirator means you have responsibility. You take ownership of the antiracist work. That you do not distance yourself from things when you start to feel uncomfortable.

*I'm always in the process of learning. For example, Natalie Webb and I have worked really hard to make Nevertheless She Preached into a space that is truly welcoming to all and that centers*

*the voices of people of color. However, it wasn't until after we booked our next venue at First Austin that someone pointed out to me that the venue itself was a white space. It was the sort of space I'm comfortable in because I've grown up in those sort of churches all my life. I didn't stop to process what the space might feel like walking in if you are a person of color. When someone pointed out to me that it was "white space," I had a choice to make. I could get defensive and say, "Hold up! I'm not racist! We chose the venue for these very sensible and logical reasons that have nothing to do with color . . ." and I would have felt very justified in saying so. OR I could choose to listen to that feedback and let it inform choices about venue in the future. If I really want to be a part of the solution, I have to be open rather than dismissive when people point things out to me that I didn't see before. **I don't have to be behaving in a purposefully prejudiced way in order to need correction.** Being white means I inevitably have blind spots because I have grown up in a culture that works to accommodate me and keep me comfortable. Part of what it means to do antiracist work is to choose that I don't want to be blind anymore. I want to see color, and the way color affects the world around me. To do antiracist work means I have to drop my defensiveness. I need to get beyond the desire to prove myself as a non-racist and good person, because that effort at proving myself once again centers me and my experience.*

*Instead I need to educate myself, and not expect people of color to do my education for me. I need to be open to learning the ways our society, our history, and our laws are racist, despite the discomfort that makes me feel. I need to get over my aversion to discomfort and recognize that the only reason I've been able to live my life relatively free of racial discomfort is because I am white and grew up in white spaces. This discomfort I feel the more I learn is only a fraction of the actual hardship people of color face every day and are not able to escape. I am a free to avoid the discomfort of knowing if I want to, which is a sign and stamp of my privilege.*

*Whew, okay, so how's everybody feeling? This isn't a particularly comfortable conversation, and I honestly don't think I've felt this nervous to preach in a long time!! Me too! To be honest Kyndall, when I approached you about the idea of co-preaching on this topic I was sincere but I never thought you'd say yes! Well, I immediately said yes, and then afterwards was like, "Oh no! What did I just agree to? This could be hard." But what I have been telling myself for months now is that entering the discomfort is part of the work. It's what Jesus would do--enter the real-life dilemmas people face and not back away. So now that we've made ourselves uncomfortable, what now? We did not want to simply leave the hour of worship with feelings of white-guilt or general despair. How do we make the radical demands of the Gospel a reality? We KNOW Jesus took real risks in his ministry. But what does it mean in our own context to follow the Jesus way?*

First, we need to look at what we consume and see what voices are missing and add them in. I use consume in the most broadest of terms. Are you reading things by authors who do not look like you? Are you reading books to your kids and grandkids with characters who do not look like them? When you hear or read news stories about communities or people of color, are they being reported by people of color, or people who know the communities well enough to represent them accurately? Think about your sources of information and take steps to diversify them. As Christians, we use the song be careful little eyes what you see and be careful little ears what you

hear to remind our children to consume Godly things. But are we limiting that to how one group of people sees the world?

*What if we named an all-white culture as explicitly ungodly because all-white does not reflect the diversity of our Creator? Was my education at a “Christian” university learning from all white faculty truly a “Christian” education? How could it be if I was missing such a significant part of the body of Christ?*

Once we start to think critically about who is present, it is incredible how pervasive these issues are. Thinking about my own upbringing in the church, the only black preacher I was exposed to living in England was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and he had died years ago. My early church years, were very White and very Anglican. Second, think about the spaces you occupy. Do the people you socialize with only look like you? Who are the members of the organizations you belong to? Do you go past Lula Jane’s when you visit Elm Street? Do you alternate between the Waco Family YMCA and the Doris Miller YMCA or colloquially referred to as the “white Y” and the “black Y”? **\*\*pause\*\*** If you are always in spaces where you are the majority, consider the places you can enter where you can learn and be in solidarity with people who do not look like you. Thinking about the questions we’ve posed is part of doing one’s own internal work. You have to be responsible for your own learning about race and racism.

*It seems to me we can also think about how those of us in positions with visibility can step down to make room for others. I know one thing that made an impression on me was the first year Natalie and I were planning Nevertheless She Preached. When we invited one particular white woman as a guest speaker, she asked first if we had also invited women of color because she has made it a practice not to accept speaking engagements if women of color aren’t also being featured. It really made me stop and think about how many times I’ve accepted opportunities for myself without stopping to ask whether others had been invited to the table.*

Yes, we have even witnessed this recently at the Oscars with an actress committing to only produce projects where at least 50% of the crew are female. If you claim to be doing the work, you need to think about if you are bringing people along with you. Who sits on your board of directors? Who are the members of your advisory councils? Are you relying on your own perceptions of what should be done to make communities more equitable, or are you letting the people you are trying to serve lead? With all the economic development happening in Waco, have we stopped to consider how this impacts lower income residents? Are they being considered as our community grows and changes. A powerful quote by Lilla Watson an Indigenous Australian activist states “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” The only way you can know how to do antiracist work is to be in relationship, reciprocal relationships, with people of color.

Kyndall, will you share the ways Lake Shore as a faith community can work together?

*When I think about Lake Shore, particularly during the season of Lent, where so much of the liturgical language centers around repentance and death, I am asking myself, what do we need to repent from, specifically as white people and specifically as people of privilege? I find myself asking what part of us needs to die, and I can tell you one answer that keeps coming to mind for*

*me regarding Lake Shore is that we need to die to our White Savior Complex, you know? It is SO easy for a “helper/social justice” congregation like ours to see ourselves as the rescuers who dive in to help or fix the underprivileged, which is just another form of hierarchical “othering,” in which “we,” the elite, assist “them,” the downtrodden. What would we mean if, as a church, we no longer viewed our calling as one of being saviors but rather one of being co-laborers? What if, like Christ, we found a way to stand on a level place with our neighbors?*

*In order to help us with this movement forward, Ross and I have been working on a contemplative Wednesday night prayer series for the season of Lent. I find that sometimes contemplative practices and meditation can be misused as escapism--this notion that I can insulate myself from the stresses of the world on my private little yoga mat and not have to deal with it. What I want to do is look at how the practice of prayer can move us deeper into the world and deeper into antiracist work with grounding and courage. Next, post-Easter we are going to have a Wednesday night seminar series on Unpacking Privilege with a different dynamic speaker each week, and I really hope to see above-average attendance during that series, because we all have a lot left to learn, no matter how long we’ve been at this work.*

*As a pastor, I think part of what I want my congregation to know is that if you are person who experiences marginalization in this place, I want you to hear me say that you can tell me. I want to hear your stories. If you’re a white person trying to explain to me why you experienced this sermon as reverse racism, I’ll listen, and then I’ll explain to you why you’re wrong. But if you’re a person of color, or a person who hasn’t been fully welcomed here, I want to be open to knowing what you really are experiencing, even if it challenges me.*

If this sermon has been uncomfortable for you, we are okay with that. Ministry is messy, and we should not shy away from what is true, noble, and right. Antiracist work and anti-oppression work in general are all part of Jesus’ second commandment “love your neighbor as yourself.”

We are travelers on a journey, fellow pilgrims on the road. *We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load. I will weep when you are weeping, when you laugh, I’ll laugh with you. I will share your joy and sorrow ‘til we’ve seen this journey through.*  
Pray that I might have the grace to let you be my servant, too.

Amen