

SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

SESSION TEN STUDY GUIDE



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SESSION 10: BECOMING BELOVED COMMUNITY

To watch beforehand or in the session

- *Dawnland* (abridged, 54 min.)
- *Repairing the Breach: The Episcopal Church and Slavery Atonement* (31 min.)

To read beforehand

- Selections from book: *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* by Jim Wallis (Chapter 4 and p. 215 to the top of p. 217 of hardback edition)
- Core book: *Jesus and the Disinherited* – Chapter 5

Notes for facilitators

- Please have the group decide whether to end the *Sacred Ground Dialogue Series* by watching one or both of the films together, if you've been primarily watching them separately.
- If you are going to watch together, and even if not, a longer amount of time is recommended for this closing session, such as three to four hours.
- The films and readings are intended to support a deep conversation about reparative processes undergirded by Christian faith and the way of love.
- Use this time to synthesize what circle members have each learned or deepened into: What patterns have you observed in the history covered in this series? What would be your definitions of racism now? (Consider revisiting the "Key Distinctions" document from Session 1). What do you see as the roots/nature of our sinfulness? (Ask participants to read the Rev. Stephen Phelps' theological reflection if the group hasn't already read it). How has the idea of "becoming beloved community" taken shape and form, in the group and in your imagination? What do you want to bring to the public square?
- Walk the labyrinth (if there is one), and reflect on the journey (or use another reflection tool).
- Discuss next steps and hopefully move toward action – toward repairing the breach.
- Discuss how to share the learnings with the rest of the congregation(s) and hopefully inspire a new dialogue circle to follow in your footsteps.
- Express appreciation and gratitude.
- Close with prayer and ritual, ideally a Eucharist service.

SESSION THEMES AND OVERVIEW FROM THE AUTHOR

Repentance (Etymology): In Biblical Hebrew, the idea of repentance is represented by two verbs: *shuv* (to return) and *nacham* (to feel sorrow). In the New Testament, the word translated as “repentance” is the Greek word (*metanoia*), “after/behind one’s mind,” which is a compound word of the preposition “meta” (after, with), and the verb “noeo” (to perceive, to think, the result of perceiving or observing). In this compound word, the preposition combines the two meanings of time and change, which may be denoted by “after” and “different”; so that the whole compound means: “to think differently after.” *Metanoia* is therefore primarily an after-thought, different from the former thought; a change of mind and change of conduct, “change of mind and heart,” or “change of consciousness.” – Wikipedia.org

You perhaps now have come to the center of the labyrinth. By way of coming home to God and each other, you’ve walked back through time and placed markers to notice and name the ways we humans have gone astray and the ways we have grievously hurt others and have been hurt. Your group has walked through many chapters of racial oppression in the United States and your own relationships to it, your own pain and the pain of others. You have perhaps *returned in sorrow* – the Hebrew concept of repentance.

Perhaps there is a still point of clarity. Perhaps not. What does the symbol at the heart of the *Becoming Beloved Community* labyrinth evoke for you?

Perhaps you have been met along the way by the New Testament concept of repentance – *metanoia* (a spiritual change of heart) – and you want to turn around and walk in a new direction. Perhaps you now see more clearly the internal and external work that lies before you, as individuals and as collectives.

Processes of repentance, repair, and forgiveness cannot be prescribed or insisted upon. They cannot be induced through internal or external applications of guilt, shame, or moralism. They must be chosen in freedom. They can be called forth in countless ways by the spiritual power of *agape* love – love of God, of neighbor, of stranger, and of self.

Dr. Howard Thurman names this call to love as the high call for both the “privileged” and the “disinherited.” He invites each of us into the deepest possible moral reflection on how we choose to live our lives in light of where we stand in the social fabric and in relation to power.

As you conclude this chapter in your journey, reflect on how you feel called to tell the truth, proclaim the dream, practice the way of love, and be a repairer of the breach.

As a group, this is an occasion to consider together ancient and time-tested spiritual/Christian teachings about restoring relationships after harm has been done. Even though we are not the living perpetrators and victims of the past chapters of racial oppression that this series visited, we arguably inherit the unfinished work of restorative justice and healing. And just as significantly, since many harms that grow out of this unhealed past are still with us, and since we continue in new ways with our patterns of “mis-taking” (see the Rev. Phelps’ theological reflection), we have reason to contemplate repair processes in a very personal and present-day way.

Please reflect together on the core spiritual processes below (and what they stir up in you). This list is not meant to be prescriptive or necessarily linear, nor does it presume to cover all the bases or to mandate that all bases be covered for healing to take place. It is an entry point for reflection and dialogue.

- Acknowledgement/truth-telling
- Apology/grief
- Action/repair/justice
- Asking for forgiveness
- Forgiveness
- Reconciliation/healing

Some of these are arguably the calling of the dominant group, and some the calling of those who have been harmed. But upon consideration, you may find that these can be internal processes for all people, as well as external processes. And they are certainly about a conversation with God and with Jesus of Nazareth, who came to radically reconcile us to God and each other.

The reading from evangelical leader Jim Wallis will no doubt be a great aid in this reflection process. He delves deeply into the theology and the *practice* of repentance. The film *Dawnland* and the short film I produced collaboratively with the Rev. Canon Edward Rodman, *Repairing the Breach*, make these principles and processes concrete. *Dawnland* shares the unfolding of a truth and reconciliation process under the auspices of the state of Maine for decades of child welfare policies that were destructive to Native families and culture. *Repairing the Breach* shares the efforts and some of the results of The Episcopal Church's grappling with its complicity in slavery – notably, the passage of an apology for slavery and the call for repair processes via resolutions A123 and A127 at General Convention in 2006.

It likely will make sense to use the readings and the films as a chance to reflect on modes of repair writ large – on principles that are applicable in many situations. But hopefully your group will be eager to transition to these questions: *What is the history of race in this place? How do we repair harms here, as well as more broadly?* This is the time to see where the spirit is leading the group going forward.

NEXT STEPS

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in the parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. – Isaiah 58:6-12

Indeed, your last session is a time to gain a sense of where participants want to go next. Perhaps the impact of the *Sacred Ground* journey is different enough for each person that the calling with regard to next steps also is different for everyone. It may be that individuals feel inspired to take into their respective lives a new commitment to contribute to racial healing and repair – manifesting it in their workplaces, schools, or neighborhoods, for example. Or it may be that some or all participants desire to remain together as a group that discerns collectively what form of action to take. Perhaps you already are operating within a frame of racial healing and justice ministry in your congregation. Or perhaps you are feeling called to create such a ministry, which can be the vehicle for ongoing discernment about what the next steps are and how to be of service.

This series has obviously been about broad sweeps of United States history. In your story-sharing with each other, you undoubtedly have been surfacing histories that are much more local. For those who wish to continue to meet to discern next steps, we invite you to consider more fully these key questions: What is the history of race in this place? How might the *Becoming Beloved Community* labyrinth quadrants be used to walk into the terrain of what can be even more difficult – facing where these unhealed histories hit home? How might you engage in truth-telling, proclaiming the dream, practicing the way of love, and repairing the breach in your community?

That might mean broadening the conversation to your larger church congregation or multiple congregations, joining existing ecumenical bodies or secular efforts, or being the catalyst for new efforts. Any and all of these spheres would no doubt benefit from your energy and insight about historically- and spiritually-grounded reparative processes. If you have been constituted as a group doing white work, it is of course very important not to charge ahead with ideas for racial healing and justice without first seeking healthy relationship and collaboration with people of color – whether in your congregation, with another church, or in the local community.

This session is not realistically the time to sort out all of the above, but rather the time to open the conversation about next steps. We recommend you have a process whereby everyone in the circle shares what is calling them. You can consider a journaling process or discussion in small groups to help surface these visions.

Finally, this session is also an important time for reflection, appreciation of each other, closure, prayer, and perhaps a labyrinth walk and/or a Eucharist.