

SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

SESSION NINE STUDY GUIDE



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SESSION 9: LEGACIES: RACISM'S LONG LIFE

To watch beforehand or in the session

- *Healing Justice* (66 min.)

To read beforehand

- Selection from book: *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome* by Joy DeGruy (pp. 8-10 of paperback edition)
- Article: “Ghosts of the Masters: Descendants of Slaveholders Reckon with History” by the Rev. David Pettee and Susan Hutchison
- Selections from book: *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander (pp. 1-4, 16-19, and bottom of p. 202 to p. 208 of hardback edition) (permission cost in negotiation)
- Core book: *Jesus and the Disinherited* – Chapter 4
- Core book: *Waking Up White* – Chapters 26-27 and revisit p. 175

Session themes and overview from the author

This session looks at some examples of multigenerational legacies of racism in a range of communities. In the readings, the focus is on the legacy of slavery in black families and white families. Given that since the 1960s, American society “officially” has foresworn overt racism, this session invites consideration of how the history of racism still casts a long shadow and how, even in a country containing many well-intentioned white people, inequality and “disparate impact” can persist, as a result of the way certain wheels are in motion. The housing discrimination and redlining of the mid-20th century, which we learned about in Session 7, are prime examples of how racist policies in one generation can ripple long into the future in terms of family wealth-building.

This session is not geared, however, toward statistically proving that there are still racial disparities plaguing our society. (The “deeper dive” graphic from *National Geographic* briefly provides that data in summary fashion for those who wish to see some measures.) Rather, the focus is on what might be called “psychological legacies” – specifically trauma – and what tangible shape and form those take, which begs the question of how to “repair the breach.”

Dr. Joy DeGruy’s book, *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, is a seminal work that asks readers to consider how the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder might apply to those who experienced the chronic brutality of slavery over their entire lives and how it might be passed down to succeeding generations. She shows how the adaptive strategies that emerged for enslaved people and families to help them survive have lasted through the generations as beliefs and habits of behavior (just as all families pass down habits/ways of being). She argues that some of these beliefs and behaviors are deeply helpful in the present day, and some are not.

The film *Healing Justice*, which is resonant with the reading from Dr. DeGruy and in which she appears, explores the idea that “hurt people hurt people,” thus linking the hurt to the generations of trauma caused by racism. As expert Fania Davis says, “If the trauma isn’t healed, the trauma will be repeated. Either you are going to act out that trauma and hurt somebody else as you were hurt, or you will act in and hurt yourself.” Harmful behaviors in low-income communities of color are put in the context of the beliefs and actions of white people who enacted, over hundreds of years, the many forms of racial oppression and violence this dialogue series has been reckoning with. In addition to grappling directly with the film’s content, you might consider this an apt moment to hark back to Session 2 and the materials on how various groups of European lower classes had been exploited prior to coming to the Americas. Were they in some ways reproducing what had been done to them?

The Rev. David Pettee and Susan Hutchison’s essay explores a rarely discussed question: What are the psychological legacies of slavery in families of slaveholder descendants? Not all white Americans have this heritage, but more do than realize it. Now it is our turn to risk being “pathologized.” It is deeply important for us to name our unhealthy legacies because, on the flip side, some of what Dr. DeGruy and *Healing Justice* discuss can be very risky for people of color to name in mixed company. Such naming risks being misused and turned into a “blame the victim” dynamic. European Americans need to share the burden of airing dirty laundry because so many of our forebears were the source historically of so much of the dirt (not just slavery, but all we’ve been exploring), and some of our “nice, polite, and proper” ways in the present day run on a parallel track with still-unfolding structural/systemic harms, as *Waking Up White* shows so well. It is also worth naming, in this tender realm, that liberals lose credibility with conservatives when they strictly avoid naming challenges in low-income communities of color that defy government solutions.

These are very sensitive topics; please proceed with great care and respect. A question your group may wish to discuss: Who gets to name what the problems are in a given community? Consider the idea that it is easier to talk about one’s own dirty laundry than to have someone outside talk about yours. What right to “self-name” do we owe each other?

Dr. Howard Thurman again reminds us always to come back to the humanness of all this: the attitudes and behaviors of the “inherited” and the “disinherited” are not surprising given their relative relationships to power and resources. His chapter, “Hatred,” shows how natural it is for those with their backs up against the wall to judge and hate those who have put them in that position.

The reading from Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* and the film *Healing Justice* look at one example of the legacy of racism in this country: the deep-seated problems with the current criminal justice system. This is one particular public policy issue, among many that could be explored – and that we hope you will explore if your group continues to meet to discern how you can contribute to positive change. I selected these resources to help make real this crisis that is a clear legacy of the past. The film shines the light on restorative justice processes, which recognize the humanity of both victims and offenders and call for taking personal responsibility. These processes defy simple categorization as “liberal” or “conservative.” All of the readings and the film can, I hope, contribute to new angles for

questioning “tough on crime” policies – again, in a way that harks back to the values of both conservatives and liberals, and of Christians too.

This session can help your group begin to shift toward thinking about how – as individuals, as a group, as a congregation – you might contribute to healing the harms. The final session in this series will look explicitly at the *theology* of repentance and repair, and invite you to consider next steps.