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**Together in Christ: A Lenten Study on Beloved Community**

**A Radical Inclusion and Racial Justice Resource**

**Rev. Dr. Hee-Soo Jung, Bishop**

## Preface

My beloved Wisconsin siblings in Christ, I offer this Lenten Bible Study as a gift for thought, for reflection, for meditation, and for deep conversation. I understand that this is not an easy study for many. It challenges our beliefs and perceptions. It deals with some unpleasant and difficult issues. It has potential to offend and discomfort. And for all these reasons, it is very important that we explore it together.

Our Council of Bishops made Dismantling Racism a priority initiative for our leadership in The United Methodist Church. The devastating impact of ongoing institutional and cultural racism prevents us from truly living God's will for unity in beloved community. We want to invite as many people as possible into the examination of causes and symptoms of racial injustice in our world.

This study was written in collaboration with my assistant, Dan Dick, who worked with me to outline and develop the concepts and format. He prepared this study with helpful review and feedback from Carrie Riesen and Edelira Huertas, two lay people with a heart and passion for peace and justice. Barbara Dick provided careful editing, and our Director of Communications designed, formatted, and produced the curriculum. A project like this takes a team, and this team worked with me to offer this excellent study.



Bishop Hee-Soo Jung

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#### **Introduction**

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13, NRSV)

Each year, we take a journey, from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday, called Lent. This is a time of introspection and devotional reflection. Many people make commitments to *give up* something they enjoy throughout this period, a symbolic gesture of sacrifice and self-denial. But beyond giving up chocolate or coffee or sweets or television, the Lenten period is a time for deep personal evaluation and reassessment. Lent can also be a time to think about what more we can *give* as well as what we can *give up*.

This year, I invite us all to give more time and attention to what makes us faithful Christian disciples. Our challenge is to enter into a wilderness time with Jesus, to give Jesus our companionship throughout the weeks leading to Easter. Day-by-day, step-by-step, we journey into wilderness—a place that is unfamiliar, dangerous, challenging, unknown, and filled with temptations. This is an invitation to make a conscious and intentional decision to go places that might be uncomfortable, threatening, frightening, or overwhelming for some; but we all enter knowing that “angels wait on us,” and protect us.

This wilderness region stands between where we are now and truly foundational beloved community, where God is calling us. Our current reality is that we tend to stay where we are most comfortable, where things are familiar, seem safe, secure, and *normal*. One of the “beasts” we will encounter in our wilderness journey is *normativity*—the deceptive perspective that, what is normal, comfortable, and beneficial for us is also normal for everyone else. In the glorious and divine creation of God, where the global community is one of widely diverse cultures, rituals, practices, values, moralities, preferences, and tastes, there is simply no one-size-fits-all *normal* for everyone.

The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church has committed to a priority of Dismantling Racism. Much more than a theme, Dismantling Racism is a core value and a concrete goal. There are many significant challenges to such an audacious and ambitious goal, and we will encounter many of them in this Lenten Study together. Many of us may feel threatened and discomforted by such phrases and concepts as *racism*, *white privilege*, *white supremacy*, *white normativity*, *colonialism*, *oppression*, and *racially based injustice*. We may feel our defenses rise; we may even be offended and alarmed. This is what happens in the

wilderness. Wilderness is never a safe place, but we must enter and cross the wilderness if we ever want to arrive at the Promised Land of Beloved Community.

Our journey will be uncomfortable, offensive to some, and challenging to all. We openly and honestly admit this up front. But this is an important journey—an essential and inescapable journey—for The United Methodist Church to be faithful to its bedrock commitment to social justice through the unconditional love of God for all God’s people.

Keep in mind that we make this journey with the angels, the emissaries of God who will keep us grounded in God’s Word and Will throughout our days. This will be a prayerful time, a discerning time, a time for individual introspection as well as shared conversation. It is my prayer and desire that, in this journey, we will all feel God’s guiding hand and empowering Spirit, and that we will arrive together at a greater, deeper, and wider understanding of what it means to be a citizen in the Beloved Community of our Lord.

**Note on this study:**

Each weekly session of this study offers a Scripture passage, a reflection, a set of questions for group conversation, and suggested assignments for the days in between sessions. There is also a book or film recommendation for individuals or small groups to read or watch and talk about together.

Our recommendation is to begin with a special session on Ash Wednesday, then follow with seven weekly sessions through to Easter. There are also specially focused daily reflections for Holy Week that will prepare all participants for the closing Easter session. This study may easily be used by individuals, but it is designed with small groups in mind.

All quotes and references come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

## Session One: Ash Wednesday

So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’ See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10)

“As we work together with God,” “putting no obstacle in anyone’s way,” we truly fulfill God’s will in our world. Our Ash Wednesday observance launches our journey through wilderness time, and we know it is a journey of ups and downs. We will see the jubilation of Palm Sunday, the confusion and betrayal of the disciples, the acts of friendship in foot-washing and the celebration of the first Lord’s Supper, the despair of trial and judgment, and the horror of the crucifixion. The eternal question of *why* arises: Why did it have to happen this way? Why did it have to happen at all? Why would someone voluntarily go through what Jesus did? Why can’t we just jump to the joy and glory of Easter?

Ash Wednesday is a day to set these questions aside and simply be present. It is a day of contrition and confession. It is a day for humility and repentance. It is a day to refrain from judging others as we self-reflectively judge ourselves. It is not a time for defensiveness, but it is a day to ask—even beg—for forgiveness. It is a time to admit we are not the people we need to be. We fail to do all the good we can; we fail to refrain from doing harm; and we confess that we are not even aware of the many ways we have yet to grow and change. We ask God’s grace and guidance. And we acknowledge that there is no such thing as “cheap grace,” but that much will be required of us if we truly seek to become like the Christ.

On this Ash Wednesday, I want to raise the idea that perhaps one way we are “putting obstacles” in the way of others is through an unconscious and invisible *normativity* of our own perspective. Many people find the word *racism* to be offensive, judgmental, condescending, and unfair. From white, Western, United States cultural normativity, *racism* conjures up images of violence, terrorism, brutality, rage, and hatred. The vast majority of us do not support or engage in such activities, and so we feel that we are not *racist*.

But at a fundamental level, we are all *racist*. Ibram X. Kendi, in the introduction to his excellent book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, speaks eloquently of the universal and inclusive nature of *racism*. And it is essential for Christian believers to understand a simple but powerful fact: *Racism* is sin, and all have sinned and fall short of the desire of God.

**Normativity**—an individual’s or group’s perspective on the world that assumes everyone sees things the same way, benefits in the same way, thinks the same way, should act the same way, shares the same values, and should receive the same treatment. Normativity tends to judge difference as an aberration, and often difference is viewed as inferior, defective, or threatening. Normativity employs “either/or” thinking; things are right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, just or unjust according to the definitions embraced by the individual or group.

How are you feeling at this point? What is going on in your head and heart? Are you uncomfortable, defensive, angry, or upset? This is an indication that our normativity is being challenged! Don’t deny, resist, or reject the discomfort you feel right now. It is alright to be upset as long as you don’t let the upset rule you. If possible, step back emotionally and psychologically for a moment and assume that we all possess a measure of racism and that racism is sin, just as any act of harm or exclusion or division and injury is sin. What does this mean for us?

On this Ash Wednesday—this day of confession, repentance, and humility—ask God for forgiveness for any racist thought, word, or deed; conscious or unconscious; intentional or unintentional; and for any hardness of heart that makes this confession difficult for you.

#### Questions for Conversation

1. How does it feel to be called a *racist*? How does such labeling impact our sense of community, relationship, and unity?

2. What are the benefits of normativity? What are the potential problems and negative impacts of normativity?
3. What is the relationship of normativity to diversity? What impact do cultural, ethnic, social, and racial diversity have on normativity?
4. When you reflect on God's vision for Beloved Community, who belongs? Who is excluded? Who should decide who is acceptable and who is not?

#### Questions for Personal Reflection between Sessions

1. What does God look like? Do I have a race, ethnicity, color, or appearance in mind? Do I look like God? Does God look like me?
2. What do I need to be forgiven for?
3. How will I prepare my own heart and spirit for the Lenten journey?
4. What might I give up emotionally, spiritually, psychologically in order to make room for God's grace and guidance?

#### Closing Prayer (or one of your own):

God who meets us in the ashes, forgive us. We are not yet the people you need us to be, but we are here to ask that you rescue and redeem us from those thoughts and actions that separate us from you and your beloved creation. Let us seek to see the Christ in every other face we meet, no matter how similar or different they are. Make us one, Lord, make us one, we ask in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

#### Recommended Resources for Deeper Learning and Understanding:

##### Book:

*The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism* by Jemar Tisby. An excellent yet troubling survey summary of racism in our nation's history and the role Christianity has played.

##### Film:

*The Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith. This 2015 silent film depicts the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and southern cultural resistance to racial inclusion. It is important to understand this as part of our American cultural narrative that still has impact today.