

CORE ONE BIBLE STUDY: YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH

JOHN 8:31-38

PARTICIPANTS SECTION

Foreword: What does this study have to do with racism?

Racism is a topic that many good and decent people have successfully avoided for a very long time.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.” (See www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/martinluth133707.html)

Because racism has been allowed to go unaddressed for so very long, the sorrow of its suffering has been compounded. It hurts to go deep and to expose things that have been too long denied or ignored, but it is also amazingly cleansing.

In this Bible study, we are poignantly told: The truth will set us free. Seeing how racism and white privilege work and recognizing them as they occur will help us become free.

About the author

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Ishler, an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is now enjoying retirement. She is a practiced theologian and a passionate practitioner of anti-racism. At this writing, she is working within SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice).

Introduction: Knowing the truth

As I drove home from the counselor's office, I went over and over the words that she'd spoken: "You sound like a person who has been sexually abused."

My heart had been racing most of the time for about a month. After ruling out any kind of physical reason, the doctor suggested I see a counselor, which seemed like a great idea. I had seen counselors before because I grew up in a violently abusive family and had needed to deal with issues in my life relating to that reality. I figured that there was something currently in my life that was pushing the buttons of the anxiety that comes from that kind of background, and I was eager to deal with it and get back on track.

"You sound like a person who had been sexually abused," the woman had said at the end of the hour. "Well," I had replied, "that can't be true. I'd certainly remember a thing like that. The abuse I endured is enough, I'm sure, to explain my anxiety." We made an appointment for the following week.

But on the way home, I decided to cancel that appointment as soon as I got in the house. I decided she couldn't be right. She must be one of those therapists I'd read about who look for sexual abuse and make you believe it's true, I thought. *But* there was my fear of any sort of physical intimacy. And then there was that time I had to leave a class during a video on molestation because I couldn't breathe. "So," I thought, "maybe there's something to what she said, but I've lived this long without knowing about it and I don't want to know now. There's not reason to dig up old wounds. I'll just keep living the way I am and my heart will calm down. I *definitely* do not want to deal with this!" And so, I planned to make that phone call the minute I got home.

Then, as I pulled into the garage, confident in my decision, Jesus' words sounded in my head: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Was this the truth about me? I sure understood that I was often a prisoner of my fears and anxiety and self-doubting. Would dealing with this counselor lead me to healing and wholeness and freedom? Was this God's will for my life?

I kept the appointment the next week and for many weeks and years after. I discovered that I did have memories of sexual abuse deeply buried within me. It was a hard journey and there were days I wanted to stop driving myself to those appointments, days when I thought “This is enough!” And each time that occurred, my Savior’s words flashed into my consciousness: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” followed now by a gentle voice: “And I want you to be free.”

Discussion questions

1. How difficult is it for you to accept the ways white privilege has shaped your life? What is most frightening about such personal truth?
2. How might the realities of white privilege keep all people imprisoned?
3. Are you free in this world of diverse people and cultures or are you imprisoned by denial and fear? Look inward and see how well you can measure your sense of freedom regarding race relations in the United States.

The Bible study

John 8:31-38

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?” ³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.”

Let us focus on these verses one at a time.

John 8:31

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples . . .”

“If you continue in my word . . .” Jesus says in this verse. Jesus said many words and we each have our favorite quotes. Pastor Cynthia, whose story we have just heard, has said that her favorite is: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

Write down your favorite quote from among the many words Jesus said.

John 8:32

³² . . . and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

The Greek word used for *truth* here means: “non-concealment; full or real state of affairs.” In our work for racial justice, we seek to deal head-on with the reality of what white privilege has done and continues to do to people and our society.

Racism is what white privilege looks like in the lives of people of color. Whether we are among the privileged or among those suffering the oppression of racism, we have already discovered some uncomfortable truths in doing this work.

Write some of those truths here.

Now ask yourself: Which disturb you the most? How has uncovering these truths helped you to deal more openly with racism?

John 8:33

³³They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?"

These "Jews who had believed in Jesus" were denying their own reality. Politically, they had been enslaved by Egypt and Babylonia in the past, and at the time of this conversation were enslaved by Rome! And spiritually, as Jesus says later, they are slaves to sin. They deny that as well.

The Jews in this story can be thought of as people of privilege. Scripture scholar Raymond Brown writes: ". . . the sense of responsibility that accompanied the status of being a [child] of Abraham inevitably lost its sharpness, and for some it was replaced by a sense of automatic divine protection." Some Christians in the United States seem to believe something similar: As people under God's protection, we bear no responsibility to join God in the great work of bringing about the realm of God, a place of justice and mercy and wholeness for all people. But God certainly welcomes our partnership in this holy work. Indeed, we ask God to reform the earth and all people every Sunday when we pray the Lord's Prayer. How often do we follow this prayer with action?

How does the idea that God welcomes our partnership in working toward bringing God's will to this earth make you feel?

Write about it here:

John 8:34-36

³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

The freedom Jesus offers is, as the Scripture scholar Heinrich Schlier writes, “freedom from an existence in which sin leads through the Law to death.”

God’s grace destroys the power of sin, not sin itself. How does facing the truth of racism destroy its power? Write about it here:

John 8:37-38

³⁷I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.”

The call to anti-racism is a call to make room in our lives for the work of justice. That often means working to rid ourselves of our own internalized racism at the same time that we work to dismantle structural racism. Whether you are white or a person of color, what must you get rid of to make a place for Jesus in your life?

Write here at least three specific actions you will make every effort to take, with God’s help:

Conclusion

Like the person in our opening story, we all have truths that we would rather not face. White privilege and racism are truths about ourselves and our country that many deny. But we who follow Jesus Christ need not fear these truths! For in knowing them, in dealing with them, we will live toward the freedom that is God's will for us and for all the world. And that is Good News!

Bibliography

Raymond Brown, *The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to John, (i-xii)*, Doubleday and Co., Inc., Garden City, N.Y., 1966, 353-356, 361-363.

Heinrich Schlier, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. II*, Gerhard Kittel, editor, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1964, 487-502.