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Theological and Vocational Essay
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“The Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with- second sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

W. E. B. Dubois

Make it Plain

One thing is sure: God’s Word’s mysteries and revelations are endless. The more I learn or know, the more I discover I do not know. There is always more to learn. John had this to say: John 21:25 NIV: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written, I suppose that even the entire world would not have room for the books that [somebody] would be written.”

As a seminarian and novice theologian, I know theology has held power to build and tear down empires, knowing theology has given voice to the powerful and has stifled the cry of the neglected; theology has saved lives and painfully taken lives. The importance of theology and its influence in shaping civilization for centuries should and cannot be taken lightly. I have learned that theology differs from faith, but they are intertwined. Faith depends on one thing, and that is God. However, the communication of faith, the confession of faith, requires a language, and that language is theology. Theology is nothing more than giving a voice to faith. Theology is the struggle to give faith a suitable vocabulary or terminology, an appropriate expression to speak through. Faith is an expression that needs to be heard, so theology opens the door to the expression of faith so that faith can speak eloquently and unambiguously concerning the reality of God. Theology exists so that when bodies of believers assemble, they can articulate their faith in worship. Theology should always be responsible in its response to the Christian community and God.

The dialogue of theology cannot occur without diversity and must intersect with race, class, and social economics. In its simplest form, theology should dictate hope for the hopeless, love for the lonely, and shelter for those whose misguided objectives have harmed them in the past.

As a nation, we understand and pride ourselves regarding freedom, education, political power, price, and mileage. We find none of those to be a concrete attribute within our theology. We have chosen not to battle with our depriving minorities of freedom in the name of white prosperity and with our tolerance of legalized racial segregation and discrimination. Too often, Christians not only fail to defy oppression and condemn tolerance of racism; they support it and benefit from this evil and ignore the very Gospel pledged to preach.

Walter Brueggeman has said: “If there is to be Shalom. It will not be just for the isolated. Insulated individuals: It is rather a security and prosperity granted to a whole community- young

and old, rich and poor, powerful and dependent. We are always in it together. Together, we stand before God's blessings and receive the gift of life. If we receive it all, Shalom comes only to the inclusive, embracing community that excludes none." (Brueggemann, Peace 15)

Those who embark upon this broad task of demystifying theology must do so with great care and commitment, as scholars. The sharing of theology cannot be taken lightly, and its message must include a complete and all-inclusive foundation to address the shortcomings of mainline denominations and doctrines. If we are to fill the empty pews in America's churches and set the captive free, we must pay greater attention to the concerns of marginalized populations. This talk of theology can become a powerful teaching tool that reminds us that we are no longer to support unfair sentencing acts and laws that were purposely written and designed to warehouse generations of Black and Brown people in America's penal system. The conversation of theology must include and encourage language, which provides for those who sit at the back of the bus where economics is concerned.

These conversations of a liberating theology must occur in schools of divinity and seminaries across this nation. If the fires of inequality are ever to be extinguished, it will only have been done through a true liberating theology and America's pulpits.

Liberation Theology has been preached in the Black church since the mid-1960s. Black Theology as liberation theology is also born out of the following facts: God has revealed God's self to the Black community, and this revelation is inseparable from the historic struggle of Black people for liberation. Black theology equates liberation and salvation. It allowed formally enslaved people to see themselves as beloved and affirmed the Bible. Although new as it relates to the study of theology, Liberation Theology allows formerly enslaved people to walk in freedom, liberation, self-determination, and confidence. It is not enough to go to the Bible with only our story or goals in view. We must incorporate and embody the needs and concerns of others, more so those marginalized and living on the fringes. In all we do, as servant leaders, we must visualize the disenfranchised in all our sermons.

Dr Martin Luther King III suggested that if the white church in America had wholeheartedly indicted racism and taken a stance from the pulpits, seminaries, and ballot boxes decades ago, issues relating to color would be nonexistent today. We find today that the church still is not committed to eradicating racism.

Seminary-trained individuals can learn from the views of great theologians who have passed on; however, reciting past theologies and philosophies of great women and men is only helpful if applied critically to meeting the current needs of society. Simply put, a congregation that lives out the values of Christ-like examples of graciousness, forgiveness, and compassionate love in its actions is more Christian than a congregation with rigid doctrines and self-righteous piety. Most importantly, we lean on God's presence and the Holy Spirit.

When we dig into the world of theology, we do so with intellect, logic, and emotion; I have found failure and pain to be par for the course. Out of the pain, liberating sermons have been preached, and new revelations have been born.

We must not have our agenda when we go to the Bible. We must consider the needs and situations of others, particularly those who are different than ourselves. What the text intends to say and do becomes what the preachers hope to say and do in the sermon.

Seminary and life take you on a journey of your perspectives and ask you to reflect upon the things that have influenced you, shaken you, disoriented you, and left you disbelieving or dumbfounded; you quickly find out that some things no longer serve a purpose along your journey...

Stony the Road We Trod

I am , a Black male, same-gender, loving son of . My father, , handsome brown-skinned, alluring brown eyes, broad-shouldered, a blue-collar worker with a uncompromising personality, frowned upon loafing and tomfoolery. Not allowed to attend school and unable to read or write, he took extraordinary pride in being a master craftsman. My mother, , stoic, strong, never showing the toll life has taken on her, a domestic for many years, and later employed in the local county government, was forever loving, kind, thoughtful, and welcoming to all; she eventually taught my father to spell and sign his legal name. As a child, I loved hearing how Dad smiled the day he no longer had to use the letter X as his signature. In the South, the letter X was commonly used as a signature by many of those who were illiterate during the era.

My maternal family, the s, have served and worshipped faithfully at African Methodist Episcopal Church for 99 years; the good-hearted people of this congregation taught me to pray and to serve my community, and scholarship and higher education were staunchly encouraged. Sunday after Sunday, we were ushered into the presence of God by women of the choir with ample bosoms and stern faces, wearing royal blue choir robes, adorning perfectly coiffed hair and wigs; fanning with fans. The fans were compliments of the local mortuary. The choir would proclaim through song:

“We have come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord.

Trusting in His Holy Word, He has never failed us yet.

Oh, we cannot turn around; we have come this far by faith.”

No Sunday morning at our home would have been complete without the sizzle and smell of bacon, eggs, homemade biscuits, and Gospel Music blaring from our home stereo; radio announcers of the day were both ministers and entertainers. Famous artists like the Reverend James Cleveland, Evangelist Shirley Caesar, Reverend Clay Evans, and the Florida Mass Choir brought celebration, peace, hope, and joy to weary people.

Weekly, we experienced economic struggle. Overburden and underpaid conditions made my folks sing the blues. On Sunday, we took pride in surviving racial subjugation, found joy in not being arrested, wiped the sweat from our brows when realizing we had escaped one more week and had not ended up on the wrong end of a nightstick or a blackjack, prayers were lifted in celebration of surviving the odds of cancer, heart disease, ‘sugar diabetes’ as the old folks called

it. Sunday mornings were the times to celebrate. We did so with love, care, and kindness; we were all we had.

Because family was a priority, our family did not always consist of a nuclear family. Due to economics, someone falling upon tough times, or other scenarios, our home was open and filled with extended family members, making room for them and giving hope in a world that was sometimes unfair

Growing up in , in the shadows of the civil rights movement, I witnessed firsthand the cancer of racism, discrimination, prejudice, and bigotry. I heard frightful stories from family and community members. I have seen the cancer of racism's attempt to level the souls of humans, individually and collectively, attempts that were made to dehumanize a people through means of bombings, fires, attack dogs, lynchings, drownings, and mutilations, giving the entire world insight into the evil that lurks in the heart of humankind.

It has become clear that segregation and its evils were not the issues at hand; the evil of human hearts is what we are battling. Laws that made segregation illegal have done nothing to change the heart of the evil; laws will never regulate the human spirit. "Black suffering from injustice is not simply corporate: it is deeply personal. It invades the homes, the bedrooms, schools, churches, and delivery rooms of Black families." (McCaulley 81)

REDACTED PARAGRAPH, SELF DESCRIPTION

My father was my example of manhood; like most men of his generation, he withheld emotion and showed no vulnerability. Uneducated and forced to work with his hands, he provided well for our family. As I look back, at times, he demonstrated unhealthy masculinity. Occasionally, I would accompany him to a job site, but it never worked well; it became abundantly clear that I was not designed to perform manual labor in the sun. I have found that one of the bitter parts of shame is that it hangs around for a long time. I was ashamed because I was not a model student, I was ashamed I was tall and thin, I was ashamed because bullies told me I was unattractive, and shame convinced me I did not matter.

God is Still Speaking

Prayer is relational. Prayer allows us to get deeper into and closer to God. Prayer, for me, serves as an introduction to God. The Elders and the grandparents who dragged us to church and prayed for us when we lacked the faith to pray for ourselves left an invaluable gift. It is their petitions and supplications that carry me today.

I have spent much time trying to reconcile church and community. The realities of the physical hardships of poverty, hunger, murders of unarmed Black bodies, homelessness, attacks on alternative lifestyles, transphobia, racism, white nationalism, gun violence, mass shooting, literacy, and on and on and on, then adding wrestling with my inadequacies, leaves me mentally, physically, and spiritually challenged.

Mainstream church somehow feels that the world needs to conform to the ways of the church. I argue that the church might learn a few valuable lessons from the secular world regarding tolerance and acceptance. In my personal life, I have served God by advocating and acting for justice and peace. I have worked toward the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, and transgender beings in society, congregations, and ordained ministry.

Prayer does not relieve us from our other responsibilities as Christians; prayer does not take us out of a world filled with war, hate, and hunger. I believe prayer to be an action that should lead us into service, and service leads into reflection, and reflection leads us back to God.

“Quite remarkably, it is Jesus as the master who says, do not look to me for answers: you are alone. If you want my advice, and it is the last I will give you, it is that you work things out with each other; do not look to me. I am not the boss, simply a friend who has soon died and gone.” (Comstock 99)

Intercessory prayer has been one method of spiritual practice; my communication with God during this time is filled with asks. Asking and believing God to intercede in places of war and oppression and asking God to will peace and justice where we are troubled: around the world, in our churches, our homes, and our communities., wherever we need acting for social justice and peace.

Prayer is transformative. Prayer of renewal allow me to step away from matters that weigh me down and go deeper into my own relationship with God. I find music, particularly older Gospel and hymns, to be encouraging. Walks, bodies of water, and stillness are places of renewal and revitalization. In deep contemplation with God, I gained the courage and strength to continue the work of truth and justice.

In a less-than-kind world, I intend to do God’s will, knowing prayer catalyzes change and renewal. It also challenges me to examine my spiritual self and personal ethics.

From The Pew to the Pulpit

My journey from the pew to the pulpit did not have the awakening I envisioned. There has been no climbing of brightly lit stairs to experience the mountaintop of God’s presence. You might say it was the total opposite; days and years filled with adversity left me searching and brought me to ministry and PSR. After committing to seminary, the plot thickened. By no stretch of the imagination am I an elitist or self-proclaimed intellect. And I was often reminded of that fact during my studies at PSR. My studies at PSR have been turbulent. There were multiple times on campus I felt unsafe. Being called a “black mother fucker” by a parking attendant was not an occurrence I anticipated in seminary, nor had I envisioned having to run to safety from the threats of another PSR student. Returning to after the second semester, I realized how unwell seminary had made me. I question if “the call “was to go into white spaces and to fight in sometimes toxic settings with toxic people. I work daily to deconstruct and redefine success. I have far too long lived with a very narrow version as depicted by whiteness. I had only experienced the Christian faith from the place of worshiping God with my heart. I clung tight to

my faith and call to the ministry to mask my fear and thoughts of being less than others here at PSR. Having insights as to the resilience of who I am has brought me purpose and peace.

The phrase “social justice” is a part of society’s popular vocabulary; it refers to principles of fairness and equality in housing, work, healthcare, education, etc. Social justice is like human rights; they share many of the same characteristics as freedom from discrimination. Social justice is equally crucial from the lenses of theology and ministry.

In ‘Lift Every Voice,’ James Cone says, ‘What would remain the same? I am more convinced today than in the 1960s that the God of the Christian gospel can be known only in the communities of the oppressed struggling for justice in a world without a place for them. I still believe that God is mother, rice, red and a host of other things that give life to those whom society condemns to death’ (Cone 83)

Community partnerships are a powerful force for good regarding ministry, social change, and impact. Building new connections with community organizations provides innovative ideas, resources, and ways of thinking to help improve the world.

The issues of religious freedom, human rights, judicial restraint, congressional ethics, and criminal justice reform cannot be attended to by the church and its members only. Partnerships serve a specific purpose. Some examples of partner roles are providing expert knowledge, lived experience, support with funding, volunteerism, financial support, executive leaders, and facilitation.

“Solidarity must replace charity as the appropriate Christian ethical behavior today. This constitutes a significant methodological shift, for there is an essential difference between solidarity and charity. Charity, the word we have used most often when talking about the love of neighbors, has been implemented mainly by giving what we have in abundance, a one-sided affair. That is not all that charity means. Nevertheless, I think that, in general, this is how it is understood and used. I am not saying that giving is never an appropriate and even necessary way of loving. I do believe, however, that giving is an ethical behavior today. Only if it is understood and carried out within solidarity.” (Thistlethwaite and Engel 32)

On Monday, May 22, 2017, I boarded an airplane from , in transit to Washington D.C. Upon my arrival, I was united with fellow PSR students from the Faith and Public Policy: Washington D.C. Immersion course.

The following morning, we gathered for breakfast in the Senate Cafeteria, flanked by images of former Senators. I sat in the halls where privilege was created and maintained, and passed on from generation to generation, from century to century. As we departed the cafeteria, I had an epiphany: I am the ancestor of formerly enslaved people who built this monumental building, but I was also there to lobby legislators on behalf of the sick, the marginalized, the immigrant, and the homeless. Following breakfast, we convened at the iconic United Methodist Building, the workplace of our host: the United Church of Christ/Disciples of Christ and Witness Ministries and the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society. During the days to come, our

conversations were engaging and centered around Theology and Public Policy, Church and State, and the Role of Budget in Public Policy, and we held meetings in the offices of elected officials and policymakers on Capitol Hill.

Having taken part in this historic immersion, I was allowed to engage in public policy, social change strategy, and advocacy in Washington D.C. This experience has and will allow me to continue to articulate and support my work as a spiritual leader, using both spiritual and social change for implementation.

Reflecting on my journey through the Pacific School of Religion, I can confirm that I have been equipped to translate and apply a critical understanding of spiritual tradition in public leadership. I will continue making space for others and their social location, context, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and class.

Growing Edges

In the spirit of honesty, I am still working through who I am. I know that I am an activist, a brother, a son, an uncle, and a father. I am intelligent, and I am powerful. I love God and the people of God.

Ministers are not made in seminaries. Seminaries train ministers; it is the church that nurtures and shapes ministers. We come to seminary to gain a more profound knowledge of the Christian tradition. We come to seminary to gain the skills of guiding, teaching, counseling, and speaking because “the call” has already discerned the gift of leadership in us. We leave seminaries to continue the work of service through ministry. Ministry is not like the old help wanted and answered in the local newspaper; we are entrusted with God’s beloveds.

One might assume that anyone who takes on the role of minister is eager to take on the role of preacher. Preaching is one of the most popular and public of all ministerial roles, and, in the mind of budding seminarians sitting on the edge of their seats wanting to preach. Truthfully, I am not one of those seminarians chomping to speak publicly. Although I continue practicing sermon writing and preaching and I have accepted speaking engagements, I deem preaching as a growing edge.

With some difficulties following instructions, complex decision-making and planning, and failure to complete assignments on time, others have labeled me as rebellious, having a bad attitude, lazy, and inconsiderate. At my core, I am none of those things.

Having ADHD makes it difficult to organize, plan, and deliver sermons without losing track of thought. I can easily get lost in the sermon delivery when handling too much information too quickly. I have established my sermon creation and delivery style. With prayer, discernment style, and practice, I am confident that my timing, cadence, and delivery will develop to a level that will benefit the people of God.

I would also consider the need for deeper discernment a growing edge: Preaching requires talent and charisma. However, we would be negligent not to impress the importance of theologically

sound sermons. When creating sermons, I desire the gift of perceptive discernment, which leads me to feel the people's weight. Understanding the power of preaching in the church's life, I desire to compel and cause an awakening related to social justice and personal relationship with Christ through prophetic preaching. Preaching requires sensitivity to human needs, faith, and the desire to tell the truth. These hallmarks cannot be taught in the classroom. Homiletics has seen its share of gimmicks and fads; thus, discernment is critical.

The critical theological study of the text involves pulling out the text thread by thread through a historical and contextual analysis. In *Building the Word*, J. Randall Nichols cautions, "...to shoehorn a text into the theological mold or lay an interpretative template over it. We are attempting to connect the narrative or poetic or historical content of a text with the ways of thinking the Christian tradition has used to make sense of itself." (126-127.)

Moreover, as biblical scholar, Elizebeth Schussler Fiorenza warns clergy ought not to depend solely on the established biblical scholars at this point. "Only by listening to scholars which spring from less traditional perspectives- liberationist, feminist, ethnic, poetic, psychoanalytic on can the 'vested interests' of all interpretation be exposed."

I have also identified pastoral care and moving into relationships with others as a growing edge. This will come naturally for those who are extroverts and outgoing. Some find it hard to believe that I am an introvert by nature. I am a private person, making it difficult for others to get to know me. Offering relatedness involves a certain amount of vulnerability critical to significant relationships. I am aware that my neurodiversity is such that it is difficult for me to step forward to initiate connection with others. I continue to work with this.

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