



## Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri  
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### Episode 031: Becoming Beloved Community- the context

In this special episode we hear from the Rev. Charles Wynder, Jr. He's the presiding bishop's Staff Officer for Social Justice and Advocacy Engagement. This November he spoke to the annual gathering of the diocese at convention on Becoming Beloved Community, the Episcopal Church's long term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and justice. The first part of his conversation sets the context for this work, and how it is vital to our faith and our church.

Chuck Wynder: Good afternoon. Good afternoon.

Group: Good afternoon.

Chuck Wynder: Again, it's good to be with you as we talk about becoming a beloved community and engaging in opportunities for dialogue and sharing at this convention, whose theme is the mighty waters of baptism and reconciliation: a theme that invites us to live into our call as Christians, living into the ministry of the baptized and the priesthood of all believers. A theme that invites us to engage in the mission of the church as discussed in our book of common prayer. What is the mission of the church?

The mission of the church is to restore all people to the unity with God and each other in Christ. How does the church pursue its mission? The church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the gospel, promotes ... What? Justice, peace, and love. Through whom does the church carry out its mission? The church carries out its mission through what? Through the ministry of all of its members. This theme of baptism and reconciliation invites us to join in God's mission, the [inaudible 00:01:39] of love and justice and healing, renewal, and transformation.

I'm excited about your theme. Are you excited about your theme?

Group: Yes.

Chuck Wynder: I think it's perfect for these times. You know, we've been, in these times, mostly been talking about a time like this for a time like this. I think your theme fits within that notion, within that notion that we see in scripture. We are, in fact, in many respects, in a time of crisis. We are in a time of crisis. Not only is our healthcare system on life support, but being so much a part of the economy, it's economics driven instead of healing and wholeness. That's been true for some time.

Not only is our educational system rapidly collapsing with its foundations eroding underneath us, for we never did really fully commit to early childhood education, and our K-12 system is living out a tension between public schools committed to all children and a neoliberal profit-based, market-driven charter school approach. Let's not talk about the increased challenges of our colleges and universities, all of them increasingly built on the province of unforgivable debt of student loans.

A crisis that all of this has exacerbated by the erosion of the notion of the common good, and are failing the body politic. Being from Virginia, I would like to say the commonwealth, the common good, the notion of the commonwealth. Our crisis does not stop, however, at the borders of these institutions' and systems' names. It is at the heart of the crisis that we face, also, the criminal justice system is connected in that crisis. In fact, the brokenness and fallen nature of our institutions and public life, the commonwealth, if you will, is integrated and woven into the crisis of the criminal justice system.

So we have a crisis that's, in its embodied state, manifest in the school to prison pipeline, mass incarceration, in the dynamic of millions of men, women, and children of color missing from their communities, for they're either incarcerated or in a halfway house or a juvy center or juvenile prison. This crisis, which causes disruption and pain and alienation for individuals and communities, is racialized, it's gendered, in

ways that are often spoken and yet not fully seen and definitely not addressed adequately.

Our criminal justice system is broken, and it is continuing to collapse based on practices and policies and procedures that denigrate the humanity of girls and boys, trying them as adults, criminalizing behavior that's natural for children, and failing to recognize the human rights approach and protocols for children in schools. I say this as a former prosecutor and also a former defense attorney, so I have some knowledge of what I speak with regard to the system. It's broken. It's not operating, as these other systems are not, as intended.

As much as what lies before us in this crisis is racialized and gendered, it's also complicated by an intersection of race and class. We live in increasingly segregated neighborhoods. You see that in St. Louis. It's historic. It's structured. But it's not unique to St. Louis. It's all over the country. But unlike other periods, we don't even talk about it anymore. It's as if we've thrown up our hands and decided to walk like my two-year-old son, Chase, and knowingly just close eyes and just walk like this.

But we're adults, and we know that if we close our eyes, we're going to bump into something. We're going to hurt ourselves seriously. So we've chosen to close our eyes to segregation and what it does in terms of the life changes, the life changes for children, all of our children, that happens from segregation. The whole industry around supporting a notion that if certain people live beside me, my property value is going to go down, and I've got to move again. There's a whole industry around it. Right?

Chicago, it used to be called Chicago-style block busting. But then when I was in Boston, I learned that Chicago-style block busting is what happened to the neighborhoods of Roxbury and Mattapan. The same notion. So it's around the country, this cost of segregation that we no longer talk about. And our schools are increasingly segregated, actually worse than they've been for decades. You in Missouri had a plan to address it. You had a plan and you began to implement it, and then, folks, that same old thing about certain kids can't sit with other kids or take advantage of other programs because, at the core, we don't believe that all our children are all our children.

We want to pit our children in a competitive environment from the very beginning: "My child has to win. My child has to get into the best," as opposed to creating and fostering the Christian notion of all of God's children being able to flourish as human beings. It's against this background of all that's going on that our immigration system, while broken for some time, is now further stressed and broken by the un-Christian talk of mass deportation, turning away of refugees and migrants. Much of this, again, is racialized.

Bishop Smith has contextualized your particular situation here in this diocese, the particular history of Missouri from the slavery, half-slave half-free, from the Dred Scott case. He's written about it. You know it. It was compelling, even the racialized history here in Hannibal. Huck Finn, that's a racialized piece, the story. Go back and read. Look at it again. I read it as a child. I'm not putting it down. I'm saying that inside, hidden in plain sight is the notion of race.

And it's here as well. The Missouri Compromise, Michael Brown, Ferguson, the recent trial and acquittal of a police-involved killing and ongoing demonstrations. So this just introduced that. And yet, I also wanted to say that you all have done and continue to do the work of justice-making, of truth-telling, reconciliation, and learning. You've got a new program, a new curriculum. You've had a very good curriculum with your anti-racism commission, your Dismantling Racism Commission, and you're about to launch another program that will be a resource not just for you, but shows leadership that will be helpful to the broader church.

So I commend, and why don't you join me? We have some members here of your anti-racism commission. You have Chester Hines. Not the author Chester Himes, but Chester Hines, and you also have some other members. They're demonstrating leadership in this work, and it's not easy work. So why don't you join me in expressing some level of appreciation for them. [Applause]

As I was preparing, I noticed that you also have a program that you developed. It's a development of children and, in children, the will and the capacity. You know, the KSA. How many educators do we have here? Our parents were public school educators. There's some other things too, but the KSA's right in the knowledge, skills, the aptitude and ability. You've got a curriculum and a program to develop in children the knowledge ... the KSAs, that also apply and are needed for us, but the KSA is the knowledge, the skills, the aptitude, and the ability in children so that they can dismantle racism and live into and promote and foster an environment and communities of racial healing and equity.

So you're doing the work, and yet the brokenness, the oppression of racism, is still there. With all of this, we saw as a nation the situation of Charlottesville. I'm from Virginia. I'm from Hampton. I watched that. I was supposed to be there, but I had been in Columbia and Charlotte, and I just can't drive down the 29 and then show back up on Sunday. So I didn't make it. When you saw the explosion, my colleague Melanie Mona was present. That was one of the places, just like Ferguson, where the Episcopal Church showed up in a leadership role.

I don't know if you know that, but the Episcopal Church and the chaplaincy there, they played a leadership role, not in a way where they

were up front by themselves, but in an ecumenical interfaith way. As did their bishop. Bishop Shannon and the bishops of the Diocese of Virginia were present for so much of what had been happening before that day. Before that day, the same group of folks had marched through a park in Virginia. They had marched through a park with torches. Before you saw it on national television, they had marched through a park with torches.

That had remnants not just of Krystal Nacht, but it also has remnants of the Klan. And the church showed up each of those times. I think there were three different times that summer where this group of Nazis, klansmen and women, came into the Charlottesville. But Charlottesville ... It's not Charlottesville alone. It's throughout the country. What we saw in Charlottesville is sort of like the military. The military reflects society, for every sense, reflect the United States. Charlottesville reflects the United States. None of this is in a vacuum. Particularity matters. Place matters. There are nuances.

But it's part of the work that we have as Christians, in this context as Americans, but these issues of race and structural racism are global. You have the right all over the world, and I'm not going into partisan piece. I'm talking about the piece of the nationalism in France, England, Belgium. Now people are concerned about what's happening in Italy. The church has been here before. Right? Christ the King Day, the pope made the Christian or Christ the King Day. What is it? Anybody know?

Group: Yeah. One of the Pope's wanting to resist growing to a totalitarianism in Europe.

Chuck Wynder: Right. And nationalism particularly, right? And said we're not going to follow, we're not going to worship the nation, the notion of nation, above Christ the King. Right? Tried to invert that by doing what Bishop Curry is calling us to do more and more, which is to put Jesus in the center. What would happen ... Bishop Curry has been asking us. He asked recently at the executive council meeting: what would happen if we put Jesus at the center and more at the center in all that we do, all of the ways that the church is church? In its business, in its worship, its diocesan work, its congregational work, in our individual lives.

"If you did that," he said, "If I did that," he said, "If we all did that together." That was what the pope was trying to do, and now we're, again, this ricing piece of ultra-nationalism, which always comes very close, if not going all the way into, the mess of severe racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and it creates a situation where we're talking about a less than, greater than, superior, inferior, some people are throw-away people and need to be removed.

So we're in a crisis, and we saw that in Charlottesville, and Bishop Curry spoke to it. Everything else that I was saying is, Charlottesville can't be looked at without looking at the other notions of how we are in a crisis. And then, what are we called to do as a church within that crisis? And referencing, hmm, a moment of crisis is a moment of decision. A moment of crisis is a moment of decision. It was true then, and it is true now. Where do we go from here? Chaos, indifference, avoidance, business as usual, or beloved community?

Let's look at beloved community, a way of engaging a critical work of truth-telling, racial healing, and transformation as part of our ongoing spiritual formation that you also heard Bishop Smith speak about. An invitation and a plan for addressing systemic racism through justice-bearing and healing, and contesting with what Dr. Gale Christopher, who is an architect of Kellogg Foundation's Truth to Racial Healing and Transformation Enterprise. Dr. Christopher, who met just before her retirement in August, she met with Presiding Bishop Curry. They had a very good meeting looking at where there may be possibilities for the Episcopal Church as a denomination to join in that enterprise.

Dr. Christopher talks about the need to contest and expose this notion of the hierarchy of human value, that some are not only better than others, but some are more intelligent, more deserving, some superior and some inferior, that some people in this hierarchy of human value deemed as throw-away people. Beloved community equips us to move into our baptismal call to address racial reconciliation as part of our ongoing spiritual formation. I mean beloved community, the Episcopal Church, as Bishop Smith highlighted, long term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and justice. The notion of reconciliation, the theological important notion of and work of reconciliation.

You have to have justice in order to do that, and you should do it in a way where there's racial healing.