



## Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri  
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### Episode 007: Photos call a community to conversation

Deborah Nelson-Linck is this episode's guest. She's the founder of the Hands On Black History Museum, a recently retired educator, and a member of Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis. Debbie created an exhibit of photographs of African Americans from late 1800s through the 1950s comprised of church members' relatives and other curated images titled "As If We Weren't There.". The exhibit spawned much conversation in the church family, and several smaller projects, that are still discussed today. Shug Goodlow hosts.

**Shug:** Welcome to Jesus Hacked, a weekly podcast on storytelling faith. I'm Shug Goodlow, Head Verger and Acolyte master at Christ Church Cathedral in downtown St. Louis. Today we are talking with Deborah Nelson Linck, creator and curator of the Hands On Black History Museum. Welcome to the podcast, Debbie.

During Black History Month in 2013, you installed an exhibit at Christ Church Cathedral. It was a photographic exhibit entitled "As If We Weren't There". First, why this title and what is the significance of the title?

**Deborah:** The title came about ... I was collecting pictures at an antique mall. Found some vintage African American photos that are not something that I commonly find. And I thought that the pictures were speaking to me. I thought I would take

these pictures and I would do something with them. Then the ideas started to evolve that I could have a photography show. So I was going to implement this with some additional things from magazines and advertisements and things like that just to kinda tell the story of African Americans.

It was difficult to find any advertisements and things in even history books that told about African American everyday life. The idea came in my head, how could we tell the story of America without telling the story of African Americans as well woven in? They were trying to tell the story as if we weren't there. And the title was born.

Shug: Well, that was a stroke of genius, if I say so myself. So what do you think was the real motivation for you in undertaking this project?

Deborah: I think that the thing that motivated me most were the pictures themselves. The pictures, the eyes of the people in the pictures, their stories needed to be told. Here, this particular group of pictures that I found at an antique mall were someone's relatives. Someone who had lived this really full life and all of these different shots of men and women, and they were well dressed. I thought, "We never see pictures like this in everyday life." So those pictures continued to speak to me in that way and as I began collecting pictures for the exhibit, those pictures also spoke to me and began to tell it's own story.

Shug: So did you have pictures other than those that you collected?

Deborah: The initial group of pictures were 30 to 50 pictures that I had. I thought, "Oh, if I could gather maybe 100 pictures for an exhibit, then that would be really good." So I went to members of the Cathedral community, the Black parishioners and said, "Bring me some pictures from your treasure trove and share them with me." I think I gave a specific number. You donated pictures so maybe I asked for 10 pictures or something like that.

Shug: Yes.

Deborah: The idea was to kind of go through those ideas and carefully pick which ones I would use but all of the pictures were really good.

Shug: So where and how did you display the pictures?

Deborah: So what I did was I took pictures from family and friends and parishioners. I carefully scanned the pictures and I made copies of them so that I had a real photograph. I gave people back their original copies of their pictures. Then I took the copies of their pictures and I sorted them into categories. There were celebrations, there were schools, there were Blacks at work, Blacks in the military, high occasions. I started to put them together that way and in a scrapbook kind of way, I mounted them in old picture frames.

Shug: I remember the exhibit so well and I wonder, were there any pictures that spoke to you in particular that really had an impact on you?

Deborah: My very favorite picture that was part of the original collection that I found was a Black man that was on a mountain. And that picture just spoke volumes to me. There were so many thoughts about how did he get there? Why was he so well dressed on a mountain. This was a picture that I had never seen anything like this before. And it was just ... It just drew me in. It was very symbolic.

Shug: Well, in general, what was the reaction to the exhibit? What did people say?

Deborah: I think the exhibit was really well received and I wanted ... Initially, I wanted people to just see African Americans doing what we do, is living our lives aside white Americans. Those pictures that appear in History books, are the picture of the slave with the lashes on his back. Then next pictures we see are of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. Again, as if we weren't there, there is no story in between that bridges that time period.

The pictures were from the late 1800s to the middle 1950s and those pictures all kind of worked together to fill in that gap to tell the story. So we got to see that Blacks were graduating from colleges, and they were celebrating with their families, and they were having large weddings, and that they were being baptized in the river and working at hospitals, and any number of things. I think people, because they had not seen pictures like this before, that was an eye opener, plus there were amazing conversations that came from the pictures.

Shug: Sure. You know, when we talk about faith journeys, we tend to individualize, I think. Did this affect your personal faith journey at all, and if so, in what way?

Deborah: The journey that I think this led me on was how we look at history and how we see each other. How it made me think about how very different the world would be if we saw ourselves as a part of this living history with this legacy of these lives well lived behind us, what we owe to those people, and how we move forward because of what they've given us. The pictures showed a little bit of that. They worked hard. People that were living dignified lives.

One of the hard things about sorting the pictures and deciding which pictures I would use, all the pictures were good. People had amazing pictures of their families-

Shug: They sure did.

Deborah: And on these long journeys of our lives. It just kept reminding me that we owe something to these people. That we need to do something with our lives to continue that legacy as we become history.

Shug: Did you see the community changed in any way, either during the exhibit or after the exhibit?

Deborah: Because of the pictures ... The pictures evoked conversation. It drew people in. I purposely didn't glass the frames. I purposely didn't glass them so that people could get up close and look at the pictures very much like you look at a scrapbook. They could touch. There were things interactive on some of the

frames. I had magnifying glasses for some of the things when I used the picture frames.

In that way, people began these really kind of deep conversations. We speak on a really different level when we just meet somebody. "Hello, how you doing?" There's a really light conversation. Then there's a little bit deeper conversation that comes when you start to reveal yourself and your story. The thing that happened with these pictures, it went to that lower level of conversation of this is who we were, this is where we lived, this is what my mother had to struggle through. These are the jobs that we had to do. This is how my family proudly participated in wars.

So there were these conversations about things, about African Americans that people had not thought about before. People had very similar pictures in their own scrapbooks with white faces in them. So those were conversations that got started but I loved the idea that there were these really deep, rich conversations that people could have instantly because the pictures went there for them.

Shug: So I'm wondering then, where did you see God's hand in this? In the viewing, in the conversations, and ...

Deborah: That's an interesting question. So I will go with, when I found the pictures and I was trying to figure out what to do with them. I just honestly, the pictures, the eyes in the pictures that were looking at me. It was like, you gotta do something with these pictures. It was nagging.

It was that kind of thing that comes of a calling. So these pictures were like, "Use us. Tell our stories." I felt like that I was being called to do this. The work became obsessive. It took me six months to put the exhibit together but it was just, "I have to finish this. I have to share this with people. People need to see this. This is ..."

I was driven in a way that just kind of led itself. But as a calling always comes with that nagging-

Shug: Yes, yes-

Deborah: Idea in your head or in your heart that you have to do something and you can't help but do it. I imagine that's where God's hand was there and guiding me along. It's like, "Yes, I'm here with you. Walk this journey, tell these people's story, start these conversations that would not normally be there." And it did that. That was really satisfying.

Shug: I remember I could not stay away from the exhibit. I found any excuse to go back and look. I certainly saw God's hand in that exhibit and then the activities and the conversation surrounding the exhibit. I'm wondering where you might've seen moments of grace?

Deborah: I think, or feel, that one of my callings is to bring people together in community. I've done that any number of ways but it seems to be at the core of what I do. Is to bring people in community. So just that though, we had a grand opening for

the exhibit and that evening, people came into the nave of our church where the pictures were hanging and the 300 plus photographs that were all over the cathedral in these different frames and settings. It brought people into this space in community.

Just that part of it was an answer to what I was called to do. Then I saw it continue to happen on Sunday mornings. Then the exhibit got left up longer than a month. It was a month and a half that it was like ... 'Cause we had started to live with the pictures and really ... The really interesting thing that I would watch for, is people would continue to go and visit the pictures on Sundays. Children would come up and ask questions. People would ask questions about the pictures or have conversations over the pictures or people who had contributed pictures were telling their stories as well, taking people to their pictures of relatives and loved ones. So that was a marvelous part of the exhibit.

Shug: One of the things that I really enjoyed doing was standing back and watching other people's reactions to the pictures and then listening to some of the conversations and comments. There were many grace filled moments that I overheard or observed. But there were also a few not so graceful moments and I'll give you a personal story on that.

There was a picture of my great, great grandfather. You may remember it. If you looked at the picture, he looked like a white man. He was very, very light with blue eyes and straight hair. I overheard a conversation where two of our white parishioners were standing there and they said, "Well, how did this picture get in here? This is a white man." And I said, "No, that's my great, great, grandfather. Not a white man." And they looked at me like ... And one of them actually said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yes, his name was William Owen Van Vaxen Goodlow." And they ...

So there were those moments too but out of that, there was an opportunity for me to educate and share a personal story, a family story about that we had many looks, we had many ... There's many iterations of us and if you'd like for me to tell you why, I'll tell you that but ...

Deborah: That was a conversation that would not have happened before. I think for a lot of people that, because it was in church, it was a safe space that the conversation could happen in. Your reaction to that conversation made a world of difference. It planted a seed in their heads that families look different. That's just a truth. That families look different and families are families. We have no control over what our families look like. They look like they look...

Shug: They look like they look.

Deborah: They looked like they love.

Shug: Right, right.

Deborah: So those pictures are there but as those conversations that I'm always very interested in. Very politely, people would not say things like that. But in this

space, people are allowed that opportunity to say things even if they were a questioning kind of thing. Even if they weren't the most polite kinds of things.

Shug: Yes, yes.

Deborah: But they allowed opportunities for us to educate and to still live and appreciate each other.

Shug: Sure, sure. Did you have a big take away from this or perhaps an "Ah-ha" moment, as Oprah would say? Did you?

Deborah: I don't know that I did. Again, I was fascinated with the fact that it was able to bring people together. That was big for me. The other part again, that I continue to talk about, is the conversations that came out of this. Because I did this exhibit several years ago, it continues to live. The pictures continue to haunt me and the project has actually morphed into some smaller projects that I'm doing with the pictures. I get a chance to continue to use them. I pull them out and I look in the eyes of the people and they still are begging for their stories to be told.

Shug: Well, Debbie, I have to tell you. I am not a stranger to art galleries and museums. I grew up in New York and spent a great deal of my time in such locations. I have to tell you, this is one of the most powerful exhibits that I've ever seen. I want to thank you for sharing this powerful story with us. You have helped us to envision the wonderful imagery presented in the exhibit and you've given us a glimpse into a part of American history that has remained hidden far too long. Thank you.

Deborah: Thank you for letting me share my story.