



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

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Episode 006: Faith Being Tested

Shug Goodlow is in the guest chair today. She's the head verger at Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis and also one of the hosts of this podcast. She's interviewed by Barbi Click. The conversation began about Shug's memories as a black child traveling with her family across the Mason Dixon line, the planning gatherings beforehand, mapping out safe places to stop and eat, the shoebox her grandmother prepared of food to take. The conversation continued to sharing memories of racism and how faith weaves in and out of those painful narratives.

Barbi Click: Welcome to Jesus Hacked, a weekly podcast on storytelling faith. I'm Barbi Click. I'm a member of St. Paul's Carondelet, plus I manage the Food Ministry at Trinity Church in the Central West End. Today, we're talking about shoe boxes and family gatherings and other things with Shug Goodlow, Head Verger and member of Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis. Welcome, Shug.

Shug Goodlow: Thank you.

Barbi Click: Shug, I remember a dinner at Christ Church Cathedral commemorating Black History Month. It was the second one I had attended, so it must have been about 2010. At that dinner, several people were sharing their personal stories, and you shared your story about shoe boxes. It touched me so profoundly, because it made me see things that I had never seen before that I hadn't even imagined. I had seen some racism from my

white eyes, but you allowed me a glimpse, a tiny glimpse, into your life as a black child of the 50's and 60's. I get cold chills thinking about it right now. Could you tell us that story? The shoe box story or about the gatherings that your family's had?

Shug Goodlow:

Sure. I grew up in New York, but we had family and friends that lived in the South, the Deep South. On occasion, we'd travel south by car. This was 1950's, 60's Jim Crow America. A black family in a car simply couldn't move about the country freely. That just wasn't done in those days. By the way, traveling from New York to the South by train or bus wasn't a picnic either, because once you got to the Mason Dixon line, if you were sitting in or near the front of the train or bus, you had to get up and go to the back. That was the rules in those days. We certainly observed it because we didn't want any trouble. If you were traveling by car, there would be a gathering, a meeting. People who had recently or most recently made the trip south would come and we'd gather around, generally it was my grandmother's table, and talk about their experiences on the trip. Someone would unfold one of those old fashioned, giant maps and we'd lay it out on the table. Someone would put their finger on the map and show the route that they had taken.

Then, the discussion would spring from there, whether or not that was a good route to take or not so good. We had discussions about where it was safe to stop to go to the gas station, to go to the bathroom, to maybe stop along the side of the road and have something to eat. That's where the shoe boxes come in. My grandmother would fry chicken, she'd make boiled eggs, and a pound cake. That would go into the shoe box. Generally, it was one or two shoe boxes. Once we found a safe place to stop, we would stop and either eat in the car or get out of the car and have a little impromptu picnic, if you will. We'd go along our very way until we got to our designated spot.

You need to be very clear to understand that there was peril in all of these trips. You could be stopped by unscrupulous police. You could be stopped by unscrupulous people along the way that wanted to do you harm, simply because you were black. I remember one time, we were stopped because the police officers that stopped us felt that the car was a little too nice for black folks. So, we were stopped and my step father was questioned and berated and a number of things before we were allowed to go on our way, which probably was an hour after we had been stopped. Those are the kinds of things that we had to deal with in those days.

Barbi Click:

You would be in the back seat of the car witnessing all of this?

Shug Goodlow:

Sure, absolutely. In those days, people who sought to humiliate or emasculate, especially our black men, that was part of the strategy ... Was to do it in front of their wife or their children or their mother or whatever. That was part of the-

Barbi Click:

To demean them.

Shug Goodlow: Absolutely. That was part of the strategy.

Barbi Click: Wow. I know the way that your story makes me feel now. I feel angry and ashamed at that, at the way you were treated, at my own ignorance. I just can't imagine. I realize that I was young and fairly sheltered as a child growing up in rural Texas on ranch lands. My first opportunity to experience any type of racism was when my grandfather was in a VA hospital in Temple, Texas. We were there visiting him. He was actually dying. My Daddy and my uncle took the kids outside to play outside. Actually, they went outside to smoke and took us with them so we could go run off some excess energy. They told us, "Go play", so we went and played. There were kids down there on the big lawn. It was a big, gigantic green lawn. We were playing chase, or some kid game. I was about 9, I guess.

Then, my Daddy whistled for us to come back because it was time to go back in. I go running up the steps, and as I go running past my uncle, he jerked me up and twisted me around, took out his handkerchief, spit on it, and started scrubbing on my face. I was, first off, appalled that ... Shocked that he would grab me like that, because this is a guy I love, and he's my uncle. He's my mom's sister's husband. Daddy said, "What are you doing?", and he said, "I'm wiping the nigger off of her face." I just burst into tears. I looked up at my Daddy and my Daddy's face had turned bright red. He reached over and he grabbed me and he put me under his arm, and we just turned around and walked away.

I knew, even though we never talked about that, we never said anything about that, that my Daddy was really mad and he wasn't mad at me. He was mad at my uncle. He didn't really know what to say or what to do about it. Your story brings back that shame that I felt. Shame of my uncle, this man I loved, and shame for my Daddy. For the shame he was experiencing. I can't imagine how you must have felt as a child, sitting in the back seat.

Shug Goodlow: I guess the first thing that I'm wondering is if the little black children heard what was said.

Barbi Click: I doubt it. It was a ways down there, and the VA hospital had lots of steps. I hope not.

Shug Goodlow: Very often, when people today talk about racism, they talk about it as if it's a relic of the past.

Barbi Click: Yeah no kidding.

Shug Goodlow: I hear a lot of stories about things that happened to people and their families when they were growing up ... Talking about white people and their families when they were growing up. Having been born black in America, I have an instant detector for racism. It can be very subtle and it can be very overt, but even the most subtle forms of racism are obvious when you've lived with it all your life.

I'm reminded of a story ... I went with my grandmother to a woman's house out on Long Island who was looking for someone to cook and clean for her. We went to the woman's house, and when we got there, she instructed us to go through the back door. That wasn't an unusual occurrence at the time, so we went. When we went around to the back door and presented ourselves to the woman, she asked my grandmother, "What is your name?" My grandmother said, "Mrs. Elmore." She said, "No, I want to know your name." My grandmother repeated, "Mrs. Elmore." She said, "No, I want to know your first name." My grandmother said, "My name is Mrs. Elmore." The woman looked at her and she said, "I want to know your first name, gal. I'm not calling no colored woman by her married name." At which point, my grandmother looked at her and she said, "My first name is reserved for use by my family and friends. I doubt that you will ever be either." We turned around, my grandmother grabbed me by the hand, and we we walked away. I learned a very valuable lesson about respect that day.

Bringing it to the present, just a few days ago, I was in Kohl's and my wife and I were in line. There was an elderly white woman behind us with a child who was obviously her grandchild. The little girl kept bumping into us to move up in line. Her grandmother kept saying, "Stop that, stop that! You have to wait your turn. You have to wait your turn. You can't go in front of people." She just kept on with this. Finally, the little girl turned around and said, "Why?" She said, "Because they will hit you."

Barbi Click: Oh my gosh.

Shug Goodlow: At which point, we turned around, both ... The girl behind the register was black, as well. I said, "Don't tell her that. We do not all hit." Doris said, "And I'm not going to hit you, little girl." I said to the woman, "Why would you tell her that?" Again, this thing of teaching children to have the expectation that black people are going to behave in a certain way that is inappropriate and inhumane, whatever you want to call it, rude, it continues to this day.

Barbi Click: Very definitely. I see it every day with my grandson's friends. I do. Living in South City, for sure.

Well, okay, so The Green Book.

Shug Goodlow: Oh, yes.

Barbi Click: You have The Green Book with you.

Shug Goodlow: I do.

Barbi Click: Can you tell us about it? Can you tell us what it is?

Shug Goodlow: Sure. The Green Book was the first, if you'd like to think of it this way, the first black travel guide. It grew out of what I described to you earlier, of having all of these table top discussions about where it was safe to go,

where it was not safe to go, where you could eat, where you could do just about anything in traveling, especially to the South. It also included northern cities, but the real intent of it was safety in traveling to the South. It was first published, I believe in 1936 through like 1966. When the Jim Crow era died, at least legislatively anyway. There really wasn't as much for a need for the book. Actually, was out of publication for a long time, but there's been some renewed interest in it. There's a lot of things in it. Where you can eat, where you can ... Accommodations, hotels, even perhaps things like where you can get your hair done, and things of that nature, because if you're traveling to a city you don't know about, you don't know what parts of town you can go in and things of that nature. I like to think of it as the first black travel guide.

Barbi Click: I think that's an appropriate travel. I did glance through it, and I noted that me, being from Texas, I looked in Texas and sadly I noted there weren't very many places.

Shug Goodlow: Not very many entries from Texas, whereas opposed to, if you look in New York or New Jersey pages, there was just pages and pages and pages. I believe there was less than a handful of places that were, shall we say, accommodating in Texas.

Barbi Click: I still remember the sign in Greenville, Texas. Big billboard that said, "The blackest land and the whitest people." Proud of it. Wow. Well, okay. I look back a lot, personally. Not for reasons of nostalgia, but to examine the events and the roles that I played, and the things that I could or couldn't change. It helps me see how to live in the now, in the here and now. Mainly, it helps me to see where God was during the problem moments. Can you look back on these times and remember your emotions or how you felt as a child that lived reality? Where was God in it all?

Shug Goodlow: I distinctly remember being confused about why my grandmother was so devoted to a God that would let us be treated the way that we were treated. My grandmother was Baptist.

Barbi Click: I can understand that.

Shug Goodlow: I did trust her implicitly. She had an intellect that was uncorrupted by formal education.

Barbi Click: I love that. That's beautiful.

Shug Goodlow: She always said that our reward was in Heaven, and that in Heaven, everyone was going to be treated the same. I just had to believe that. In my mind's eye as a child, I thought, "Well surely Heaven is a place where I can go and sit at any lunch counter and have a sandwich if I want to, a soda. Surely there will be five-and-dimes in Heaven." This was just what I related to. Otherwise, what's the point in going if they don't- Yeah. There also would be a place where the men in my family didn't have to look down at the ground when a white person approached or have to cross

the street or have to be hung from a tree. For me, that was Heaven and I just had to believe that that was where it was all going to come together. Not just for me and for black people, but for everybody. But especially for black people because that was a kind of theology that we, even though we really didn't use that word, that was the theology in our minds of that day. It was kind of like a linear theology. You're born black. You grow up basically in a subservient role. You suffer, you die, and you go to Heaven. That was the path for everyone. Heaven was your reward. That was where all the good stuff happened.

Barbi Click: That's harsh. I must admit that somewhere in the storytelling, the question when we first started discussing this ... The question, you talking about the Mason Dixon line and crossing that line, I just have to wonder why in the world? What family-

Shug Goodlow: Why would we go?

Barbi Click: -would be so important? I can't think of too many important reasons. I worry sometimes when I go through some of the states now, just being who I am.

Shug Goodlow: To be clear, I hated, with a capital H, going through the South as a child and I still do. I'll be very honest with you about it. I could not understand, as a child, as a teenager, why we would ever leave New York to go to the South. I just could not understand it. I thought New York was the promised land, and in a lot of ways it was. My grandmother's sister lived in North Carolina. They were very close and she loved her dearly. From time to time, we would visit her. I was absolutely miserable there and the only thing that made me feel better was this giant pecan tree that she had in the backyard. If I could only climb to the top of that tree, I thought, I could get to this Heaven that everybody's talking about. I thought it was probably the most majestic thing I had ever seen. I saw God's hand in the majesty of that tree and those delicious pecans, which I would overdose on every time we went to North Carolina. I was never really angry at God.

Barbi Click: What about white people? I know how I would have felt if I had ... I would have been righteously angry.

Shug Goodlow: I think why I wasn't just outright angry at all white people was because there were white people in my family.

Barbi Click: Oh.

Shug Goodlow: The white people that were in my family had come into the family at great personal expense. They were disowned from their own families. They either married into the family and ... I knew they were suffering too. I had a kinship with them. It also gave me the opportunity to observe that not all white people were out trying to hang us from trees. These were very decent people. I've never, even as a child, been able to group a

whole bunch of people together in one group and decide I'm going to hate that group of people.

Barbi Click: I can't either.

Shug Goodlow: The Yankees come to mind, but I digress. I, as an adult now, thank God that he gave me that kind of insight at that age or that kind of heart. Whatever you want to call it.

Barbi Click: That experience.

Shug Goodlow: I would be angry at the adults in my family for going down there in the first place. Not only that, but insisting that we kids went. I thought, "Why do you want to go there? Everything's so different down there. I don't like those dirt roads that we have to travel on. I don't like how dark it is down here." Those kinds of things. I just hated seeing too many images of people hanging from trees. I hate seeing the images of Emmett Till and his casket. I had been in groups of people that had dogs turned loose on them, had water hoses turned loose on them. I was actually at the March on Washington. All of that, and I thought, why? As a child, I could not understand. I understand better now as an adult. But, I did not ... I guess I was selfish. I just didn't want to go. Just didn't want to go.

Barbi Click: Kids have a way of seeing things in a black and white, if you will. It's either wrong or it's right.

Shug Goodlow: Exactly.

Barbi Click: I can see where I would question why. So, what impact do you believe that these times as a child had upon you as a woman of faith that you are now?

Shug Goodlow: I spoke a little bit earlier about what I call a linear theology that we had at the time. That's a very loose term for it. This whole notion of being born, living this life of subservience, and then dying. Then, if you're good, you go to Heaven. As I matured in my spiritual life, especially as an Episcopalian, I will say that, that I came to understand what it means to live out the Gospel in a way that makes it relevant to my life and the life of other people around me as a lived experience rather than something I just read about in the Bible or something that I hear from the pulpit. I have been changed by change. Our baptismal covenant tells us that the hope of transformation through the generosity and grace of God is so powerful. Today, I'm filled with hope because of our Eucharist, which encourages us to look forward rather than being drug down by the past.

Barbi Click: That's beautiful. That is giving thanks in all things. That comes to my mind, even in those times when it seems like there's not much to be thankful for. There's always something to be thankful for.

Shug Goodlow: Always.

Barbi Click: When I was thinking about all of this, I came across "Giving Thanks" in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. It seemed to fit somehow. "Be at peace among yourselves, and we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers to encourage the faint-hearted to help the weak and be patient with all of them." That seems to me, to be a requirement, especially the "be patient with all of them". I don't always have patience.

Shug Goodlow: Lord, give me patience. But hurry up.

Barbi Click: Yeah. What hope do you see coming out of all of this? Do you see that much difference? Do you see hope today for the way things are? I think very much, even in this mayoral race today, that very much the idea of systemic racism is on our minds. Ways that we can overcome it?

Shug Goodlow: I'll have to admit to you that my sense of hope and my faith both are being a little challenged right now.

Barbi Click: Amen to that.

Shug Goodlow: Probably because I have lived as long as I have, I'm seeing things I saw back in the 50's and 60's that are upsetting. Also, because I've lived it and I know where certain things can lead to, it's got my hope shaken up a little bit. My hope looks a little different now than it looked a year ago. It feels a little different. Do I have hope? Yes. Does it look like it looked a year ago? No. My faith sustains me. My community sustains me. Those things are all important. All important.

Barbi Click: Amen to that. I consider you a friend, and I just want you to know I'm very thankful for that.

Shug Goodlow: It goes both ways.

Barbi Click: Thank you for indulging me all these questions today. There's a fine line to walk in trying to understand and grow into a better person. Just trying to know, understand more, to be able to see the differences ... I don't think that colorblindness is a good thing. I think that we need to see each other's differences, because unless we see them and acknowledge them, we can't understand them. Differences are good. It's good to have differences. This is a long process though, and one I hope that I'm much further down the road now than I was 10 years go or even a year ago. Jesus has a way of hacking through all of our personal issues to get to the crux of it all. I'm thankful for you helping me and I appreciate you being here today.

Shug Goodlow: Thank you for your time today.

Barbi Click: Thank you.