

Vanessa: Greg, it's so wonderful to be with you today. Thanks for being with us.

Greg: My pleasure and glad to see you.

Vanessa: Well, I would love for you to start with you sharing a little bit about the justice work that you're involved in, and then some parts of your own personal story that led you to this work to begin with.

Greg: Sure. Thanks. So my vocation bears witness to a confused mind. I'm doing a lot of different things in terms of the race and equity space right now. Some of the listeners will know that I've written a book on reparations which came out last year and that's a good theoretical framework to understand everything I'm doing, which is really an expressing of reparations. Particularly this category called reparations truth where right now my work really revolves around public storytelling around African American cultural history and trying to promote that history in places where it has been forgotten.

Greg: So I'm the executive director of an organization called Voices Underground which has really taken the language from God's words to Cain in Genesis, where he said, "I heard your brother's blood crying out from the ground." The idea is that there are all these African American cultural history stories that are just buried around us and a lot of my work is to try to understand those stories and then work with communities to resurrect and tell them.

Greg: To that end, I'm building the national memorial to the underground railroad. That's the largest scale project right now. But in general, trying to promote African American cultural heritage in this place called Chester County, Pennsylvania. So that includes, creating a new Juneteenth festival, opening a restaurant and cocktail bar based on the history of black cocktail, making things like that. My work is generally around public storytelling and race and I see it as an expression of reparations.

Greg: In terms of my own story--how I got here—it's really a combination of spiritual autobiography, intellectual journey and then what I can only really describe as cultural crisis. Autobiographically, I grew up in South Carolina. I'm the great, great, great grandson of clan members of South Carolina. And I was aware most of my life of this very complicated racial situation in our community. But when I became a Christian in the eighties, it was during that kind of evangelical racial reconciliation movement, some of that was expressing itself through CCDA. Some of it was expressing myself through Promise Keepers and things like that. So that was very much a backdrop, this notion racial reconciliation that was kind of the first step.

Greg: But when I moved to St. Louis to go to seminary, I started working at a gospel rescue mission downtown. I was leading a 13-month men's residential program--which I had no business doing as a 23-year-old but I was there--and I realized that all the people that I was working with were coming from the same neighborhoods. And that's the first time that I really began to understand the nature of structural issues. I didn't have that language at that point, but there were things happening outside of personal intention

that were more structural and systemic in nature. And that's the first time I really began to understand that.

Greg: When I went to UVA, I did my PhD on Martin Luther King. I began to get language from him and from the black church tradition and the black intellectual tradition broadly conceived about what I was experiencing. That really, really changed me. Over time I began to realize that the real challenges to the gospel here were secularization or global capitalism or technology and pluralization, things like that. And that's true. There are challenges in each of those, but it was really through King and through my decade long study of African American cultural history that I realized that the biggest missiological challenge that we're facing in my view is the American churches neglect of the racial apartheid that's happened here. And its support of it and the church's unwillingness to really set it's shoulder against American white supremacy as an idolatrous system.

Greg: And so I was thinking about that more and more and then the Charleston shootings happened in 2015. And that's the cultural crisis that I was really referring to where some of my African American brothers and sisters just came to me and said, "Dude, you're a white guy from the south who spent over a decade studying African American cultural history. And you're hiding out in this big white church at the University of Virginia, and you're not out here with us." And about nine months later, I quit my job and have gone on this completely bizarre and wonderful journey to figure out what it means to be a part of this work. So that's sort of how I came to this moment that I'm in, such as it is.

Todd: Yeah. Thanks Greg. That is why you are here. That backstory is what makes it so great to be with you today. A lot of people who know you would think of you as a thinker, a professor and a thought leader and an activist. I know you enough to know that you're also trying to bring together something that's important to us at The Center. And that is the intersection of justice and formation. So say a bit about what you do to keep yourself in this game. How do you conceive of your own spiritual formation into Christlikeness today and then has it morphed over the years?

Greg: Thank you for that question because I actually think that's the most important thing. And without which I wouldn't really be in this space, to be honest with you. When I started pastoral ministry, it became pretty apparent to me that, in Eugene Peterson's words, nobody was really going to ask me if I was praying or what kind of moral life I had. They just want to know if I have the guts to preach and lead. And that terrified me especially because a mentor that I had had revealed that he had been a drug addict. He's a very successful pastor but was abusing opioids for a number of years. And I just got really scared. Again, this was probably when I was like 30, 31.

Greg: And I went to a friend of mine and said, I feel like I need to understand the model of the spiritual life that goes beyond theological knowledge and the "quiet time". And I don't know what it is. I landed in the Benedictine tradition after about a year and a half of study. It was actually 11 years ago yesterday that I vowed into a modified version of a Benedictine rule and began to order my life by morning prayer and Sabbath and manual labor and domestic labor and friendships and silence and things like that. And it's been the most protestant thing ever, right? It's like this elective thing that I'm just doing

(laughs) on my own or with the community, but I realized that I was not going to make it if I didn't reorient my life then.

Greg: And I think it's that decision, that grace that was given all those years ago that actually oriented me more and more toward this racial space, because remember at the heart of the contemplative life is the renunciation of control. And white supremacy is about the amassing of control. And so as I was being spiritually formed away from control and more towards the God who is with the weeping, the more that I began to be not just intellectually opened up through King and Howard Thurman and DuBois and Fannie Lou Hamer and Tony Morrison, the more I began to be also morally opened up through these practices, to a life that is not my own in which I'm not in control.

Greg: And I think that's really fundamental to the work of justice. And I'll say this. It was when I really studied James Lawson, who was from Nashville. He was working in Nashville for the sit-in movement and realized that he was forming all these students from Fisk in essentially moral and spiritual practices, as they were preparing for the freedom rise, as they were preparing for the sit-ins. There's a profound history of moral formation as a precondition for social activism. King was in that tradition, James Lawson, Byard Rustin, John Lewis, of course, Gandhi was also a part of this. And I think that it's been an interesting integration of the Benedictine path with this James Lawson sort of social formation part. And I think that's part of what we have to do together.

Todd: So Greg say a bit more about that in this sense, if our dream comes true here at The Center we'll have an audience that includes young people who are maybe dipping their toes in issues of justice and also some nones and dones and skeptics. If you were talking to them, give them a rationale for why formation has to go with justice.

Greg: What we're trying to form here is a beloved community. What we're trying to form is a culture where neighbors recognize one another as such and bring the bounty that we share for one another's good. That's the vision. It's not just a transactional view of justice. Justice here is removing the obstacles to love and to flourishing. But in order to do that, you have to be the sort of person who can embody that and who can care about that in your own life. And I think that Lawson and King and Louis and these other folks, Diane Nash, they were really on to something deeply important in understanding that you can only build an expression of what you are. And if we're just working in this transactional, punitive, angry, sort of exclusively angry (I mean, I also am angry just so we're clear) movement of justice, then that's the kind of social order that we're going to get. But if we were to work into a community where it's about love of neighbor, about resisting obstacles to flourishing, if we're going to create a beloved community, we must be people formed by love. And that is the only way that this works in my view.

Vanessa: You're speaking to something that I have come back to again and again, and that's this idea of Jesus and the pool of Bethesda. And this question of, do you want to be made well?

Greg: Yeah.

Vanessa: Do you want to be made well? Do you want to be formed from the inside out to do this work, to sustain this work? And to that end, you mentioned your book that you co-authored with Duke Kwon called *Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair*. As we shift to talk about that a little bit, I'd love for you to give us a working definition. You guys kind of spell it out really plainly in the book, but in your own words, what do you mean by the word reparations?

Greg: Great. So it's not a pithy definition. So I'll just prepare you for that. (laughs) The idea here is that American white supremacy, which is a social order, was fundamentally an act of theft. And that theft had three forms. 1.) It stole the truth about who African Americans were and what it meant to be a human being. 2.) It stole power. That is to say not only bodily and psychological power, but also political and institutional power. 3.) It stole wealth. By extracting wealth from black labor and also obstructing black opportunities and efforts to accumulate wealth. If we understand that what we're dealing with is a cultural history of theft, then the Christian question is, "What does the Bible say about theft? What does the Christian tradition, ethical tradition say about theft?" Well, what it says is return.

Greg: And as we began to think about that, we looked at two stories. One is Zacchaeus who was culpable in a theft, who returned what he had stolen fourfold and gave half his possessions to the poor. We also looked at the good Samaritan--and this is somebody who was not culpable--who came upon a theft that was wrought by somebody else and still gave what he had to return this person to wholeness. And that is what we mean by reparation. In short, reparations are a deliberate attempt to return the things that were stolen by white supremacy, namely truth, power, and wealth through the ethic of restitution--if you're culpable or if you're not culpable. The idea is to do whatever it takes to restore those that have been harmed to wholeness. And that's what we mean by reparations.

Vanessa: I love that. You've kind of alluded a little bit to that in the creative nature and re-imagining what that can look like. And for you that looks like storytelling which is something that is near and dear to my heart. Just being able to tell the story and trace not only the history, the individual story, but the collective story as well. And so I'm curious as you have kind of been uncovering more and more of these individual stories, the history that you've come from as the great grandson of Klansmen, where do you see those stories kind of fueling what you do and why do you want them to be told?

Greg: Well I think honestly my movement into the storytelling was born of my own sense of what I'm good at and what I'm gifted to do. I mean, I think that there are people who have very clear opportunity and calling to do restoration, reparative work with respect to power and with respect to wealth. And I'm also involved in those things, but my primary work is reparations of truth. And I think that part of what I saw when I was a pastor working in pastoral ministry is that people just did not know the truth about their own history. They just did not know the truth of the cities in which they lived. And so they were acting out of this like blind instinct, defensive instinct. And I thought, if we could tell the truth and do it in a way that is compelling and beautiful and transformative, then we could actually heal the American racial imagination.

Greg: So I worked on stories in Memphis with respect to the sanitation workers on the Memorial there and restoration of Clayborn temple. And the underground railroad is obviously the big project now. And the goal for that project really is to have this whole community--Chester County, Pennsylvania--be as significant to African American cultural history as say Selma and Montgomery. There's just no memorials here. To have this community realize that this struggle for freedom happened here and let that act on them, let that change and shake the way that they view one another, their history, their land. And so that is really been the strategy for me. To say, how do we get at the imagination where a lot of this is? Where a lot of the malignancy is harbored and shift that imagination through storytelling. And that's how it's working for me. And you referred to my own story. I mean that's a part of it.

Greg: I'm trying to understand more and more of my own story. That said, I feel like the stories of white dudes like me are the ones that are most often told. And so a lot of my focus really is on working with my neighbors to tell other people's stories and build memorials to those stories to actually re-narrate the American landscape in a more truthful way. So that when we and our children see these memorials they'll shape how we understand ourselves in the world.

Todd: So Greg, thinking of your time as a pastor and just knowing the work that we've been doing together the last few months as we've been putting The Center together, why do you think the church fairly regularly--I don't want to caricature here in a wrong way--but why do you think the church fairly regularly declines the invitation to deal seriously with racism? Seems like it should be right in our lane, but I see huge pushback.

Greg: So I think that's a great question Bishop, and I think there are historical reasons for that. I think that the church--which in this context is the largely white church in America--and is what I'm referring to when I'm answering this question. Because the fact of the matter is that the African American church has been a faithful source of resistance to white supremacy from the beginning. And so have certain other branches of Christianity that are whiter in nature. I think of certain Quakers and certain Northern Presbyterians and Mennonites and people like that. But in general, the WASP establishment has resisted this, and I think that there are historical reasons for that. This historical alignment of American Protestant Christianity with the nationalist project and viewing the nationalist project as an expression of Christian mission. I think Willie James Jennings book on the Christian imagination is like the goldmine on this. How there's this sort of imagination of structure that is historically mediated here where churches have just come to believe themselves to be representatives stewards of a nation in a certain way.

Greg: And that has led unfortunately to theological reasons, meaning I think a lot of our theology, and this is in my judgment beyond controversy, historically, a lot of our theology has been shaped so as to support that historical imagination. And so there are people who are sort of stewarding this, not only historical, but theological project that have a profoundly vested interest in not having been wrong, (laughs) and having been on the right side of history. And I see that that is a very, very deep pathology in American Protestant evangelicalism, especially this need to have done it right and been

on the right side and to be a part of God's mission and to constantly make our real enemies exogenous to us, it's either the liberals or the Marxist, or it's the Russians, or it's the Chinese or somebody else, it's certainly not us.

Greg: And so I think there are historical and theological and cultural reasons for that but ultimately I think that there are moral reasons for that. I think that this is a moral failure and a profound need by the quote "thought leaders" of the American evangelical church to be right, and to believe themselves, to be the ones who ought to be in discursive control of the way the conversation takes shape in America. And I think until they renounce that and repent of that and begin to lead people into a real world in which we're not actually right but in which we have to learn from the black church and other people that have been resisting this pathology, that we're going to stay morally sick. And I think that I see it as Ralph Ellison saw it, as Frederick Douglas saw it and I always see it because they saw it and told me--I see it as a form of moral blindness. And that is what, in my view, we're really actually facing.

Todd: Yeah. So Vanessa, I'm wondering as my friend, a black woman, not only how do you hear Greg, but what's been your experience of feeling like the church hasn't been with you in this?

Vanessa: Coming from the background that I come from--we talked a little bit about just being trauma informed--the word that keeps coming to my mind Greg, is enmeshment. When we talk about family systems, you're talking about Christian nationalism and the white evangelical church--there's this enmeshment. And what happens in a family system is that to perpetuate that narrative, I have to buy into a delusion myself. So when truth is being told to me, when truth is being communicated to me, either by an individual or from a community, then in order to re-establish that delusion and keep that narrative in play, I have to gaslight you, right? I have to make you think that you're crazy that you're not seeing what you're actually seeing. And so until that sort of differentiation can occur and we can separate out and tell the truth about each other and what's going on and what caused the enmeshment to begin with I think we're a little bit up a creek.

Greg: I 1000% agree with that. Because remember American culture, especially white Protestant culture is predicated upon denying something that you actually know to be true. (laughs) Okay. The whole thing is predicated upon seeing something with your eyes and then saying, it's not really that. "Black people are in fact happy," et cetera, et cetera, all of these like mythologies that we've had to perpetuate. And again, I think that makes us very morally and psychologically sick as a community.

Todd: So, Greg, we're aware that you and your co-author Duke Kwon have gotten both pushback about reparations, but also questions. So let's set aside for this moment kind of cynical pushback and get into maybe the one or two biggest questions about reparations, the first one being, are you serious? Like how can this be done?

Greg: (laughs) Yeah, I'm absolutely serious. And to see how it can be done, all we have to do is look at our own national history. We have in fact paid reparations to slave owners. So if we're interested there are some paradigms that exist within American culture. And let

me say, I don't believe that what we're talking about is unmaking something that has been wickedly made absolutely. It's not like we can wind the clock back. But what we can do is make meaningful investment and engagement towards recognizing a very real moral wrong, taking responsibility for that, asking what the consequences have been and how we can address those. This is the basic structure of the moral life, okay. On a day-to-day basis. So it's not like we're asking for some other thing. This is what we teach people to do every single day of their lives, whether they're six years old or whether they've been married for 50 years, when you do something wrong, or when something wrong has occurred, you participate in redress. You take responsibility for it, where it is yours, take as much responsibility for, and you work for the wellbeing of your neighbors.

Greg: This is not a morally complicated case. Okay. There are things that we do both as a Christian and at a Christian Church. It's not morally complicated at all. Remember our entire faith is predicated upon somebody who was not guilty taking responsibility to heal his people. Okay. So this is not a morally complicated argument in terms of Christian theology. And the fact that we treat it like it is, is simply a sign of sickness. It is. So I'm not saying that there aren't any questions about execution and all that kind of stuff. That's where I actually think the really difficult stuff lies, but of course we're serious, we believe that he who knew no sin became sin so that in him we might come the righteousness of God, right? I mean that's what we think. And we are just applying that to the social order. So we're absolutely serious about. And I don't think America can ever heal from its racial past until the church takes responsibility for this.

Vanessa: Yeah. And to that end, in the contemplative practice, this idea of what's life giving and what's life taking and constantly drawing your awareness toward those things. And I'm curious for you Greg--alluding again to the pushback that you've received, you and Duke on your book Reparations--number one, what keeps you in the game and where have you seen really life-giving gains individually and/or collectively?

Greg: Yeah, that's a great question. This book is sort of a "those who have ears to hear" sort of book, and we knew that when we wrote it. So I did, because I'm a realist about the depth of the hold morally, psychologically, culturally, economically of American white supremacists history and American exceptionalism on the kind of Protestant imagination, because I'm a realist about that. I did not write this book with the expectation of persuading the stewards of that fantasy. And with one exception, I have not engaged them at all. Because I am trying to actually just do the work and get out here and do the work and build partnerships with what brothers and sisters out here in different cities with people who are asking in good faith, "Hey, how do we do this? And how do we understand this and think about it." I got all the time in the world for that. And that is life giving. And I think that's what we're doing.

Greg: What I don't have time for, again, with one exception, is for these folks who are really not interested in this at all, but who seem to me to be more interested in showing that they are correct about these matters and that showing that the real enemy is allegedly some critical theorist Marxists has come in to take over the world and not the white supremacy that we've actually stewarded for these years. I don't have any interest in talking about that. And the reason is not because I don't think that those people deserve

to be heard or whatever, it's just I have other things to do. And, and I think that actually doing the work of reparations is important here and not defending the idea of reparations to people who have shown zero evidence of caring about racial issues in our country in the first place. And I think that's actually the most substantive pushback that we've gotten is astonishment that we weren't bowing to the epistemic control of the powers that be. I am not engaging that because I'm not under their epistemic jurisdiction. You know what I'm saying? I have an actual stuff to do in this world.

Greg: And it's not like an intellectual decision, it's not even an emotional decision. It's a spiritual decision to say this community, this discursive world is not life-giving. It is a quagmire, and I'm not going into that because we have actually important things to do with our neighbors. And that seems to me to be a really important moral choice that we have, that we have to face. Are we gonna let ourselves be distracted by these fake conflicts that are out there? Um, or are we just gonna say what we need to say and do the work that needs to be done and go forward. And that feels to me to be a moral choice that we have to sustain each other in on a daily basis.

Todd: That systemic jurisdiction.

Vanessa: I just keep hearing, "Do you wanna be made well?"

Todd: Oh yeah.

Vanessa: I can't get away from that. That's what I hear just echoing in what you're saying Greg is, "Do you wanna be made well?" And if you don't wanna be made well, I don't have time.

Todd: Yeah.

Vanessa: I don't have time. I'm too busy.

Todd: Which really fits our vision here of trying to be formed well, trying to become a truly good person so that we can do the true good.

Vanessa: Right.

Todd: Well Greg, we're so thankful that you're a part of the community of the Center. And we like to end these episodes of Peace Talks by asking our guests a specific question: where is God or how has God mediating hope to you these days? In this big struggle, where are you finding hope?

Vanessa: And let me caveat that, because this doesn't have to be a large thing. It can be watching bubbles, watch your kids blow bubbles. It can be art, it could be a person, it could be a song. It could be a book. It could be a sunset like we're thinking really broadly here.

Greg: I'll probably answer it in two ways then. I think with respect to the work at hand, I am hopeful, because I believe that God actually wants to destroy American white supremacy and all the harm that it causes. And I see him raising up people who care

about that and who wanna do it from all different kinds of corners and those people are finding each other. And I think it's beautiful. And one of the things that's been most exciting for me is once you get out of that kind of like echo chamber that I was describing a moment ago, that angry and victimized and self-righteous and punitive and all that kind of stuff, once you go, I am not doing that anymore, I'm gonna go over here, there's all this life over here. There's all these like amazing creative, hilarious, beautiful self-giving people who don't have it all together, but who are trying to figure out how to do the thing that to all of us seems obvious and needs to be done. How to heal our communities from this longest standing apartheid in Western history.

Greg: That is thrilling. I think that the way that that has expressed itself for me is I'm working in this food world and I'm opening this restaurant and I'm working with these chefs and they're African-American chefs and together just the joy of putting a menu together that tells the story of African-American cultural history and commissioning the art. I've got an eight foot tall portrait of Harriet Tubman painted as a medieval icon that I cannot wait to hang. Those small acts are bringing me extraordinary joy and hope in this and I really wanna encourage the listeners to understand that this world over here that we've been talking about that is so self-absorbed with its own rightness and victimization and blah, blah, blah, it is just killing us. And if we could just step away from that and follow Jesus into the margins here and make some food and tell the truth and welcome people into our home and put up new memorials and new paintings--that is going to bring us joy in addition to hope. And that seems all together good to me.

Vanessa: Just come to the table y'all. Come eat some food.

Todd: I'm with you.

Vanessa: I love that. Have you seen High on the Hog, Greg?

Greg: Of course, of course. Yeah. I mean, when we get together in person, I am deep in this African-American food conversation right now. For two years, I'm spending all this time, reading, tasting, meeting with people. I think that is a really thrilling horizon of this reparations of truth, because it's not only something that you see, it's something you put in your mouth and you're creating sensory memories that actually bear witness to black glory. That is power. And I can't wait to participate in that.

Vanessa: Amen.

Todd: Thank you so much Greg.

Greg: Yeah, thank you. God bless you.