

Gayle Fisher-Stewart, ed. *Preaching Black Lives (Matter)*. New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2020. 284 pages.

“Black Lives Matter” is more than a catchphrase; it narrates the persistent struggle of Black people in the United States and around the globe as we demand that individuals and systems acknowledge our humanity. *Preaching Black Lives (Matter)* begins with the understanding that a range of institutions were built on the backs of Black people, and at our expense, and that Black people are still situated in these institutions, trying to find generative space.

The book is framed by the introductory reflections of the Rev. Kwasi Thornell, an Episcopal priest and lecturer in pastoral theology. Thornell recounts the death of an elderly Black Episcopalian layperson, whose funeral, which is both classically Episcopalian and authentically rooted in the Black church tradition, prompts an internal tension in him, leaving Thornell to wrestle with the question, “What does it mean to be Black the Episcopal Church?” This question is proverbially picked up by Fisher-Stewart, who constructs a paradigm of the church that challenges broader institutions to question embedded white supremacy and calls on stakeholders to take seriously a call to name and live into the reality that Black lives matter as a theological presupposition.

Fisher-Stewart draws on Bonhoeffer’s offering of Black Jesus, who understands the suffering and isolation of a people. She reminds the reader of Bonhoeffer’s sense that Black Jesus gave African Americans room to construct a theology outside of white social norms and thus gives Black people both philosophical and praxical space to deal with the imminence of God, who cares about justice in the here and now and not just in the afterlife. Fisher-Stewart then outlines a brief history of Rev. Florence Spearing Rudolph, an AME Zion pastor from the early-to-mid-twentieth century, and the Rev. Dr. Anna Pauline Murray, an African American Episcopal priest from the 1970s and 80s. Here, Fisher-Stewart briefly uses a sample of their sermons as examples of how Black Jesus challenges the white paradigm. Finally, she lays down a challenge for her contributing authors and readers of the book to consider the responsibility of the preacher, regardless of their race, class, and/or gender, to examine the need to preach that Black lives matter.

Subsequently, the first section of the book includes a series of sermons and short homilies from Episcopal clergy from a range of social, racial, and geographic locations. The sermons do not always explicitly name the context of preaching; however, they are seemingly situated in a variety of contexts: some are clearly addressing the Black church while others are situated in white or multiracial congregations. They offer biblical reflection within the worship context of ordinary time and the liturgical calendar.

Part 2 focuses on what it means to advocate for a message of Black Lives Matter in and around the church. The section addresses the history between Black activism and the Black church, highlighting both the symbiotic and contentious relationship between the two. In particular, authors like Claudia Marion Allen, a Seventh-day Adventist activist, name the silence of large pockets of the church in the wake of Ferguson. Allen traces a history of Christian silence in reference to Black suffering and death. Various authors also pick up on issues of intersectionality, naming the ways that the church has been complicit in said suffering and offering ways the church can participate in cultivating systemic change.

In part 3 Fisher-Stewart begins with a brief conversation about how Black scholars have changed the landscape of theological education, specifically naming James H. Cone, Kelly

Brown Douglas, and Cain Hope Felder as pioneers and leaders in shifting theological imagination for Black people. This section also includes reflections by Kelly Brown Douglas who offers a four-part framework for theological institutions and teaching. Brown Douglas says that seminaries need to facilitate moral dialogue, which affirms the whole of humanity as divine creation and sacred. Next, seminaries need moral memory which requires an honest telling of our histories without an intention to exonerate or valorize institutions and individuals but simply for the sake of truth-telling. Third, there is a need for moral proximity, which requires theological institutions to create environments where people can be around others who are different from themselves. Finally, theological institutions should see themselves as called to co-labor with God in racial healing and reconciliation, which means that institutions must actively participate in difficult, generative dialogue about racism and racial trauma for the sake of communal healing.

Fisher-Stewart et al. offer a series of faithful sermons and prophetic social commentary about how the church and theological education must proceed if there is any desire to be relevant in our contemporary context, be faithful to a witness of God, or make any claims on the nature of morality and ethics. Each section of the book offers concluding reflection questions to help guide the reader into an interrogation of how they are situated within the racialized paradigm of the church. Fisher-Stewart and her co-authors help guide a deeply practical, theological conversation about who the church will be in the midst of an American reckoning around race and race politics.

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