

Lenten Book Study 2020 – Week #1

Bonnie: Hi, my name is Bonnie Perry and I am delighted that you all have tuned in for this Lenten book study, and we're going to be talking about Jim Wallis' *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*. And as I said, I'm Bonnie Perry.

Sister Veronica: I am Sister Veronica. I am the curate at the Community Church of St. Paul.

Bonnie: And let's start with prayer. Sister Vee.

Sister Veronica: The Lord be with you.

Bonnie: And also with you.

Sister Veronica: Let us pray. Gracious God, every day we undertake the new and the sacred. Bless our work, crown our efforts with dignity and discipline. May our first recourse, our first refuge and our first response always be love. Open the ear of our hearts that we may hear you laughing with us and hear you weeping with us. And give us always a ready understanding as you speak to us. Amen.

Bonnie: Amen. We decided to do this book study because it's something I'm really interested in and I hope that we, as a diocese and people of faith in the southeast corner of the state of Michigan, I really want us to look at issues of race, issues of racism and white privilege, white supremacy. And for me, I thought it would be fun to engage this in a group and to do this with more than one of us so that we have conversation partners.

And I'm not someone who likes to go about these things alone. I've given it a lot of thought, but I'm extroverted and I like to talk about stuff because that's how I learn and listening is also how I learn.

Sister Veronica: So for people who might be thinking this is a scary conversation to have, it might be an uncomfortable conversation, but that's not a bad thing. Sacred conversation and holy conversations are often uncomfortable. That doesn't mean we turn away from them. It means that we go into it knowing that God is present in that discomfort. So if you're worried about, you know, this is going to be kind of scary, go to places that scare you because God's going to be there with you. And remember to keep it a sacred space and a brave space so that you can be honest about your own story and your own experiences and being able to say, wow, I didn't know that, and to encounter something new.

Bonnie: Because I think what we're going to be able to do is to use our own individual context, our own individual experiences, to own those and to also hear about other people's context, other people's experiences, which is one of the reasons why I invited Sister Vee. to join me in this conversation because she's grown up in a different world than I've grown up in. There's a slight age difference and we've both gone in the midst of the East Coast. She's been here in Detroit a whole lot longer than I have. And I've been in other parts of the country too.

But I really wanted us to be able to hear each other. And as you hear our context, our individual experiences, perhaps that will strike a chord for you and you can start thinking about how your life and your lived experience is completely different from ours, or were there some similarities and overlaps.

Sister Veronica: For the conversations that you might be having with your own group, we're going to be using the VISIONS, Inc. guidelines for equity and inclusion. You're probably, if you've been around the diocese for the last few years, you're probably familiar with them. You've probably gotten a handout at Convention, but they are available on our website if you want to read them over. And they're really about making sure that people can be honest and open in the space that we're making for this conversation.

Bonnie: In terms of the logistics, we're going to do it every Wednesday evening. We'll have a video, a new video, that'll show up every Wednesday evening through the course of Lent, but we're going to have three opportunities for large conference calls, hosted by myself and Sister Vee. And those will be on March 4th, March 18th, and April 8th.

Now, who knows how those conference calls are going to go. They may just not be good at all. It may be mayhem, but it might work, and so we're going to give it our best shot and see. Nevertheless, the videos will be online. They'll be YouTube'd and you'll be able to find them and reference them and go back to them if that seems like a good idea.

In terms of getting your hands on all the materials, Jim Wallis' book is readily available in our libraries. You can order it online. There's a section of it that is free, first three, four chapters of it is downloadable. Google that. The study guide is free, and so check it out. I have been listening to it on audio books as I've been driving around our diocese, so I can also recommend that as well.

A bit about Jim Wallis. He's been around for a good long time. He is a white evangelical man. He's a heterosexual fellow. He started the Sojourner community. He's written, I don't know, 11 books or so. And

he's really interesting in that he comes out of the evangelical context, but very much has always talked about race, has lived in Washington DC most of his adult life in community, and as an evangelical, he has skewed out of what some might consider to be the norm and really pushed evangelicals on outreach and justice, which has ruffled some feathers.

On the other side, with progressive, mainline Protestant Christians, some folks would say that Jim Wallis, although great on justice and outreach was not so good on LGBTQ issues and sometimes people would say, "Hey, you're not doing that. You care about that." And so what I like about him is that he annoys a number of groups of people, speaks the truth also to a number of groups of people, has evolved over the years, and I think he's got a very good theological take on the sin of race, which is why I thought we ought to start with this book.

[Pause]

Bonnie: "The Talk," I didn't know there was a talk until about three years ago. Until I started really finding out, and doing some work on racism, some serious work on racism. I didn't know "The Talk" existed. Sister Vee, you knew about "The Talk."

Sister Veronica: I knew about "The Talk." It's slightly different for me because I'm female, but, particularly my African American male colleagues in seminary, and actually some of the young men who've come into my ministry here at the cathedral have talked about, I have to be super friendly because there is an assumed threat to the male, the Black male body. That presence is assumed to be dangerous. It's assumed to be, there's an assumed criminality that's there. And so they're constantly working themselves out of this stereotype. When they first meet someone, they know that I have to dig myself out of this hole.

Bonnie: So "The Talk" begins with –

Sister Veronica: "The Talk" begins with an acknowledgement that there is going to be an assumed criminality. There's going to be an assumed threat just about who someone is as a Black man and how do you navigate a society that's going to assume those negative things about you? How do you make sure that it doesn't endanger you? Whether you're coming in contact with law enforcement, or, you know, someone like Trayvon Martin, if you're coming in contact with someone who just knows you're that thug that I have to defend people against, right? So how do you negotiate a society that's built around an assumption of criminality and threat?

And so, being very friendly, making sure that when you walk into a

shop, people see your hands and you're not taking anything. And it's just all these little rules that I think as Black people maybe we don't consciously think about very much, but we know that we have to live up to.

Bonnie: What one of my parishioners, one of our parishioners in my previous context told me is that I had to sit my daughter down and tell her that when you go into the store, because you happen to be Black, people are going to assume, White people are going to assume that you might steal something. And so her whole talk was letting her daughter know all the things that she needed to do to make sure she didn't arouse suspicion.

Sister Veronica: Right. Yeah, and it's strange that unless I'm doing something like this, I just know what the rules are and I don't consciously think about them. But when I was preparing for this, I remember actually just a couple months ago, I went into a store and they didn't have what I was looking for, and I realized I just can't turn around and leave with my hands empty. I need to buy something, however small it is, and go through the cashier line so that no one will have that suspicion that, wow, why did she just come in here and walk out? What did she walk out with? And so it's, and I didn't really think about until afterward that other people don't have to live according to that rule. Yeah.

Bonnie: Now, another one that I was struck by, I was, driving home back from Christmas vacation, two years ago. And this was right in the midst of police stop after police stop after police stop resulting in Black men being killed. Black men presumed to be guilty. And I'm on Lakeshore Drive and I get pulled over and I haven't done anything. I haven't gone over the speed limit. I haven't done anything. But then I went, "Oh, my registration is expired." And I didn't know that. I get pulled over and I'm like, "Yes, sir?" And he said, "Your registration's expired." And I was like, "Oh." And then I thought, oh, because the State of Illinois at that point was so broke, they stopped sending notices to tell you you had to renew your registration, so I hadn't done it. And I was like, "Oh! Oh my goodness!" And the police officer looked at me and said, "Well, ma'am, you might want to get that sorted out." I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Have a nice day." And I pulled back into traffic and I thought, huh, I wonder if I had been 20 years younger and Black, if that would have been the response.

Sister Veronica: Yeah. You know, it's a kind of a strange, I guess, sort of realization. I mean, I thought about it when Sandra Bland got pulled over for not using her signal and ends up dead three days later. And that's a realization this could happen to me. So, I'm a really boring driver. And maybe that's my personality, but maybe that's also a socialization as well.

Bonnie: Well, okay, let's move from driving. And I'm making a note to myself that, okay, I don't think I'm going to drive with Sister Vee. because she might go too slow, but, I was wondering about talking about the Mother Emanuel shooting in Charleston, South Carolina.

[Pause]

And it was on June 17th in 2015 and 9 church people were murdered. 3 were wounded but survived. They were doing Bible study. They weren't out and about, they weren't doing anything other than studying scripture. And a young man comes in, a White man sat with them for over an hour, and they welcomed him.

They welcomed him, they welcomed the stranger. And then at some point after an hour or so, I believe he said something to the effect of, "You people are taking over my country and you need to be gone." And then he shot them. Do you remember where you were?

Sister Veronica: I don't remember exactly where I was when I heard about it. But I think what I remember most was being very, very saddened by it, but not shocked. And realizing that for me, once, particularly after Obama got elected, there was part of us as a society saying, wow! We elected the first Black president.

Bonnie: We did it! Look at this! Look at this! Minority –

Sister Veronica: Yeah. But almost immediately from me was, okay, there's going to be a backlash. And so I had been watching throughout Obama's presidency, the rise in hate crimes and the rise in activity of hate groups. And so when Mother Emanuel happened, no, I wasn't shocked. And that's also very sad that it was not shocking to me at all.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Sister Veronica: And then, as a person of faith, what do we do after that? Because we still have to welcome the stranger.

Bonnie: Right!

Sister Veronica: We can't lock our doors and stay in.

Bonnie: No, we can't lock our doors. No. Or worship places. We have to keep our worship doors open. We have to welcome the stranger. And I think I was away and found out about it like two days later. And I remember I was shocked, just stunned. And this has happened after Ferguson and Eric Garner, I think even Tamir Rice in Cleveland. But I was stunned that in our country, church people could be killed for being Black while praying. And I thought, oh, there's something huge about this. And then listening to the press and hearing some of the

press talking about it as race and others just saying, we need to deal with mental illness and struck by those two different ways of going about it.

Sister Veronica: Yeah. It's one of those interesting things that kind of goes back to "The Talk." Because there's an assumed criminality about Black men, if they commit a crime, it's because they're criminals. Whereas, a white person even committing an atrocity like this, it was an anomaly. Something went wrong.

Bonnie: Right. So something went wrong with this individual, whereas this whole other class of people, it's presumed.

Sister Veronica: Yes. Right.

Bonnie: And then to know when I say that, that I have to think to myself, really? Is that really how we work? How our country works? And I think for me, that this has been what I've been grappling with is grappling with the idea that, in fact, I as a White person can live in this country that I have deep, deep, deep love for, and to wake up and to realize that the structures that I have never questioned have embedded in them an advantage for people who happen to be White. An unconscious perhaps, but – unconscious for me – perhaps overt, bias against people who happen to have more melanin in their skin. And when I began to hear bits and pieces of that and begin to think about that, that was when I also found myself trying to slice that out and say, is it true? Is it true? Is it a true or is that just a liberal agenda?

Sister Veronica: And when I've had this conversation with other White people, I try to remind them, you're not supposed to notice any of this. It's supposed to be invisible to you. We have this mindset of who Black people are and who people of color are versus what White people are.

This goes back to the roots of slavery. White people had to rationalize how we're treating these other people who might be the image of God. Well, they can't be the image of God if we're going to treat them this way. And so you've had centuries of theology and sociology and all of these messages that just make it so that it's normal that this is the way things are and that you don't have to see it. And that you can go through life actually pretty well without noticing it.

Bonnie: Without noticing it. And I think this is the thing, there's a moment of a bit of awakening I had when I was watching the unrest in Ferguson and watching the riot taking place and thinking to myself, when was the last time I saw Black people rioting? Right? Because that's how I viewed it. God bless me. Somebody has to. And I thought to myself, I think it was Rodney King. I was like, when in the heck was that? And I was like, oh my God, that was 20 years ago. And then I thought, well wait, nothing's

changed. And then I thought, how is it that two decades could go by and nothing's changed?

And then I realized, how was it that two decades went by and I gave nary a thought to it. And then I wound up writing a piece and I called it *The Deep Sleep of Racial Oblivion* because I didn't have to notice.

Sister Veronica: Right. Yeah. And I think that's the difficult part for people engaging in this conversation and where I have a deep sense of compassion really for White people coming to this conversation is because I realize you guys haven't had to think about it. And, in fact, this society is structured so you don't have to think about it. And for me, when White people come to this conversation, I realize they're doing something very sacred that they could actually be pretty successful in the world without doing, but without which you won't bring about the Kingdom.

Bonnie: And so, I guess my hope is for us, in the coming week is, I invite all of us to try to enter into more of this conversation and to talk with folks, folks who look like you and folks who don't look like you and listen and hear the stories. And then maybe for each of us to figure out how if you happen to be White, how you swim in a world with the buoyancy aid of White privilege, and what happens when we take that buoyancy aid off?

That's my hope for us. Any last words, Sister?

Sister Veronica: Remember that this is always rooted and grounded in love. We don't complete the work of redemption alongside of God without loving each other, and we can't love each other without knowing each other. And we don't know each other unless you talk to each other.

Bonnie: And listen.

Sister Veronica: And listen.

Bonnie: Thank you.

Sister Veronica: Thank you.

Bonnie: Have a great week.

[End of Recording]