

Opening

Still Sinners

Check-in & Introductions

Prayer of Confession

(Choose one person to lead the group in this prayer of confession from the African Methodist Episcopal Church)

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men, we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed by thought, word, and deed against Your divine Majesty, provoking most justly Your wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us. Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father for Your Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake; forgive us all that is past, and grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please You in the newness of life, to the honor and glory of Your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Scripture

Epistle Lesson

Romans 5:1-8 (NRSV)

¹Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Discussion Questions

1. Unpack the statement "salvation is a group project."
2. Define "sin" in your own words.
3. How do you participate in the dehumanizing structure of sin?
4. "Salvation therefore comes from seeing God, recognizing what God is up to, and joining in." How have you experienced salvation?
5. The book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, is a powerful exploration of the relationship between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black men and women in America. It discusses how God is able to redeem even the most dehumanizing structures. Reflect on these two quotes from the author, Dr. James Cone. What stands out to you from these quotes?

"Though the pain of Jesus' cross was real, there was also joy and beauty in his cross. This is the great theological paradox that makes the cross impossible to embrace unless one is standing in solidarity with those who are powerless. God's loving solidarity can transform ugliness - whether Jesus on the cross or a lynched black victim - into beauty, into God's liberating presence. Through the powerful imagination of faith, we can discover the 'terrible beauty' of the cross and the 'tragic beauty' of the lynching tree." (p. 162)

"I find nothing redemptive about suffering in itself. The gospel of Jesus is not a rational concept to be explained in a theory of salvation, but a story about God's presence in Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed, which led to his death on the cross. What is redemptive is the faith that God snatches victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair." (p. 150)

Diving Deeper

(Take turns in your group reading through and then reflecting on the Diving Deeper section)

This week's sermon explored the idea of "prevenient grace," the grace that is active in your life before you know that you need it. The love of God is proven by the fact that Christ "died for us while we were still sinners," meaning that we do not earn God's forgiveness, but rather that it is given independently of our awareness or acknowledgement. We may not realize or acknowledge that we are living in systems that are sinful, and yet the prevenient grace of God is seeking to redeem us.

Our sermon this week mentioned that *both* sin and salvation take place within community. Salvation comes from seeing God, recognizing what God is up to, and joining in. Sin is not an individual breaking a rule, but rather a structure or a system that breaks human relationships.

With everything that our country has seen since its founding, and with all that is going on in our nation right now, it is no wonder that when we think of sin, we may find ourselves reflecting on the structural sin of racism. Much theological work has been done on this topic.

This week's sermon contained a few quotes from prominent Black theologians. Rev. Dr. Katie Cannon is one of the founders of Womanist theology (Black Feminist Theology). Dr. James Cone is the founder of Black Liberation Theology. Both died in 2018 after dedicating their lives to Christ in the academic setting. Black church and the different branches of black theology are considered some of the most ground breaking work of the 20th and 21st century.

The black church's emphasis on the story of Exodus resonates so deeply with their freedom from slavery. And the trauma of the lynching of black and brown bodies points to the cross of Jesus Christ.

The structural sin of racism, the confession of it, and the deconstruction and dismantling of it are a *response-ability* of all who follow Jesus.

Closing

Prayer

Holy God, we thank you for community within which to witness to your saving grace. We thank you for diverse church traditions and backgrounds. We thank you for your grace. Teach us to extend that grace to others more, and more each day. Let your presence be felt in the work you have called us to do in confronting the sins of this world. **Amen.**

Study Link

<https://manchestermc.org/all-church-study/>

"Salvation is a group project."