



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Learning Womanist Hermeneutics During Covid-19

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Blog Series: Social Justice and Civic Engagement

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Thanks to the collegiality of Dr. Mitzi J. Smith and the generosity of the Wabash Center, I have the opportunity to engage in learning that moves beyond professional development to include personal transformation. This summer I will participate as a learner in an intensive that Mitzi will teach on The Gospel of Luke and African-American Interpretation. Mitzi is J. Davidson Philips Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary and a leading womanist biblical scholar. She and CTS have graciously agreed to include me and 21 students from Bethany Theological Seminary and Earlham School of Religion in the course.

Mitzi and I are also co-directing a Wabash Center small grant project titled, "The Challenges and Effective Pedagogy of a Trans-Contextual Online Collaboration for an African-American/Womanist Hermeneutics Course during Covid-19." Dr. Marcia Riggs (also of CTS), and Dr. Mary Hess (Luther Theological Seminary) have joined the project as consultants, bringing expertise in the areas of ethics and education. The grant creates space for us to reflect on pedagogy and social justice in ways that go beyond our usual reflective practice. This blog is a way to make our learning public.

Both the course and the grant project feel challenging to me--a white, straight, cisgendered male with a history of privilege. Unlike Mitzi and many of my students, I have not experienced biblical texts being used as a basis for marginalizing me, requiring me to be submissive

because of my gender, or excluding me from leadership. In most churches I have attended, it is socially acceptable to ignore biblical texts that challenge my middle-class lifestyle, such as Luke 14:33. Students in my courses are welcome to “talk back” about the Bible with or without the “sass” that Mitzi encourages;[1] I, however, have been more inclined to emphasize that New Testament texts are inspiring and worthy of careful study despite their flaws. Mitzi’s hermeneutics of suspicion may challenge me to critique biblical interpretations and texts more assertively in light of core biblical values such as justice, mercy, and love.

My approaches to hermeneutics and pedagogy have long emphasized inclusion of a wide diversity of interpreters with the understanding that Jesus often speaks through people who have been marginalized. My revised introductory survey course is now titled “Reading the New Testament Contextually,” and it includes *True to Our Native Land* as essential reading.[2] I am fluent enough to teach in Spanish and have enjoyed leading bilingual intercultural hermeneutics seminars in Puerto Rico and California. I have also had the privilege of team teaching with several Nigerian scholars through video-linked classrooms in Jos, Plateau State, and Richmond, Indiana. Those efforts, however, have not qualified me to foreground the experiences of African-American communities in all the ways that justice, love, and good teaching require.

In order to understand and embody Jesus’ teaching faithfully in this time, I need to recognize the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on communities of color, especially on African-American communities. I need to speak out more forcefully against the discriminatory police violence that has continued unabated even as other activities shut down for the pandemic. I need to engage more deeply with African-American neighbors and biblical interpreters in order to hear what Jesus is saying now through them and through scripture. And I need to step up efforts to recognize and confront racism in myself as well as in society.

In a recent consultation, Mitzi, Marcia, Mary, and I exchanged ideas for helping students become aware of their own contexts and identities, including their experiences of race. Marcia reminded us that storytelling rooted in personal and communal experience is an essential practice of womanist theology. Mary and Marcia each suggested prompts that could encourage students to write thoughtfully about the identities and experiences they bring to a course in African-American and womanist biblical interpretation. For example, “What are systemic patterns of racism that you observe in general society today? How do you participate (even inadvertently) in these patterns?”[3] We agreed that it is important for both students and professors to know their contexts, to remember their own stories, and to tell them in ways that create space for honest conversation.

I plan to share more of my story and learning as the project continues, and I look forward to interacting with posts by Mitzi and other participants. As a reader of this blog, your constructive comments are also welcome as we journey together toward deeper understanding.

Read about Mitzi Smith's Experience with Dan Ulrich

[1] See Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018); also Mitzi J. Smith and Yung Suk Kim. *Toward Decentering the New Testament : A Reintroduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

[2] Brian K. Blount, ed. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

[3] Rima Vesely-Flad, "'Saying the Wrong Thing': Experiences of Teaching Race in the Classroom," Spotlight on Teaching, *Religious Studies News* (November 5, 2018), <https://rsn.aarweb.org/spotlight-on/teaching/anti-racism/saying-the-wrong-thing>, accessed June 18, 2020.

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