



*Feeding the 5000, Laura James*

# Our Faithful Response

BY SHANEA D. LEONARD

In the ever-changing landscape of our society, some people struggle with what it means to have a faithful, Christian response to the world. It can be argued that—given the diversity of opinions, viewpoints and political affiliations—there is no single Christian perspective to rally around. And beyond these differing outlooks, people prioritize different issues in their ministries and application of scripture. Some people favor the death penalty while others are advocates for divesting from the Middle East. Some Christians believe in pro-choice just as adamantly as others believe in pro-life. After all, how can we even begin to agree on current issues if as a family of faith, we are still debating our own fundamental interpretations of things like sacraments and ordination, or even who should coordinate the bake sale.

*As people of faith it is up to us to stand for what promotes the harmony of the world and those who live in it. We have never been called to capitalism, racism, bigotry, xenophobia, homophobia, ableism, or to pursue our own happiness and individual goals at the expense of other people. Nor are we called to be silent in times of social distress.*

Amidst a variety of scriptural interpretations and ministry emphases, I believe there are essential, biblically-based, core values in what God calls us toward. Modeled frequently in his three-and-a-half-year ministry on Earth, Jesus continually stood for what was just and equitable, even when that ran counter to what others around him expected. He admonished those who followed him to not only put God first, but to be good stewards of the Earth and their bodies, and to love those around them.

Jesus echoes the sentiments of prophetic voices who spoke the heart of God long before Jesus' earthly ministry began. For our Savior still stands on the words of great proclamations such as, "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly" (Micah 6:8) and, "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice" (Proverbs 21:3). Furthermore, Jesus is recorded as admonishing his followers through the words of the prophet Isaiah, stating that his work is to bring freedom to those in captivity and liberty to the oppressed (Isaiah 61 and Luke 4). As disciples of this teaching, is it not the responsibility of the believer to follow suit? Is it not the work of the faithful to seek ways to ensure that justice, liberty and equitable treatment be the norm for everyone?

### **No Justice, No Peace**

To be a Christian means that we treat all people—particularly those who are

marginalized in our society—with grace, mercy and love. If we truly read the Bible as the liberation document it can be, we as faithful believers can never turn our backs on those most in need of the love of God and the tireless support of the faithful. In the words of another revolutionary prophetic voice, civil rights leader John Lewis, ". . . peace cannot exist where justice is not served."<sup>1</sup>

The church has a collective call to follow Jesus' example of radical love and care, creating the "good trouble" that John Lewis saw as essential for justice and building God's kingdom on Earth.<sup>2</sup> In this season of social uprising, we must examine our moral response to children being held in cages and separated from their parents just as deeply as we consider the future of our buildings. We must respond with an intensity of furor concerning state-sanctioned murder of Black people, knowing that it is our duty to bring about justice where it does not exist. The church must return to its role as a leader in the continued fight for the dignity, liberty equity and equality of all people.

### **Rebuilding Our World**

Some people think that politics or social issues is out of the realm of what the church should discuss or be involved in. They argue that to be followers of Christ means we pray about the world rather than get involved in the muck and mire of politics and how our government operates. But I disagree. As people of faith it is up to us to stand for what

promotes the harmony of the world and those who live in it. We have never been called to capitalism, racism, bigotry, xenophobia, homophobia, ableism, or to pursue our own happiness and individual goals at the expense of other people. Nor are we called to be silent in times of social distress.

Following the Matthew 25 vision, our denomination has committed to eradicating white supremacy and dismantling institutionalized racism as we create vital congregations and eliminate poverty. None of these goals can be realized if we do not involve ourselves in institutions and policies that bring about systemic change. We must care about that which matters to those in the pews, especially as those who prepare Bible studies and sermons on a regular basis.

We must continually remind ourselves that Jesus cared for the physical needs of the 5,000, feeding them fish and bread, so they would be stable and strengthened enough to hear the gospel message. The needs of our congregants and communities often go beyond needing to hear a moving message and an uplifting song. We must look at how the world around us is helping or hindering the humanity of those most disenfranchised. Who is in need of safety, nourishment, shelter, education or other essentials? We cannot lose sight of our moral obligation to care for our neighbors in an effort to circumvent political landmines.



## Dignity and Freedom for All

Let us not forget that the *Book of Order* states, “God sends the Church to work for justice in the world: exercising its power for the common good; dealing honestly in personal and public spheres; seeking dignity and freedom for all people . . .”<sup>3</sup> This is the foundation of our denomination and the stance we must take in the world today.

Finally, as we proclaim the need for a faithful, Christian response, we must stand on what it means to actually *be* Christian. To be a Christian means that we adamantly declare that Black lives matter and that all lives cannot matter until Black lives matter. To be a Christian means we lovingly ensure each citizen has the

uninhibited liberty to exercise their right to vote. It means that we do what we can to make sure transphobia is eliminated, particularly as an epidemic of unsolved murders of Black and Brown trans women receive very little attention.<sup>4</sup>

To be a Christian means that we take notice of those who are suffering all around us because of injustice in housing, education, wages and basic human rights. It means that we take cautions to ensure the welfare of others amid a global pandemic. To be a Christian means that we follow the example of Christ and the leading of the Spirit as we stand for justice, show examples of mercy, and continually walk humbly before our God. For this is what the Lord requires of us all. 🍷

Shanea Leonard is a pastor and serves as the associate for gender and racial justice in the PC(USA)’s Racial Equity & Women’s Intercultural Ministries (REWIM).

### Notes

1. [https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/john-lewis-quotes/?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=share&\\_branch\\_match\\_id=735327431511222801](https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/john-lewis-quotes/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share&_branch_match_id=735327431511222801)
2. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/july/died-john-lewis-baptist-minister-civil-rights-leader.html>
3. *Book of Order*, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2019), W-5.0304.
4. National Center for Transgender Equality, “Murders of Transgender People in 2020 Surpasses Total for Last Year In Just Seven Months,” August 7, 2020; <https://transequality.org/blog/murders-of-transgender-people-in-2020-surpasses-total-for-last-year-in-just-seven-months> or “What’s Behind The Killings of Several Black Trans Women in Dallas?” June 14, 2019; [www.npr.org/2019/06/14/732863528/whats-behind-the-killings-of-several-black-trans-women-in-dallas](http://www.npr.org/2019/06/14/732863528/whats-behind-the-killings-of-several-black-trans-women-in-dallas).

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