

THE THIRD RECONSTRUCTION

by the Rev. William J. Barber
and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

a devotional series for UCC congregations



UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST



This devotional was created as part of the United Church of Christ's 3 Great Loves initiation.

3 Great Loves is a denomination-wide storytelling initiative. In the coming years, the UCC will collect and lift up the stories of our local churches and affiliates: Stories about how we are living out God's love and expressing love of neighbor, children and creation.

The hope of this initiative is to tell, and share the story, of how individuals, churches and organizations of the UCC are impacting and transforming the world as covenantal partners united in our common purpose, vision and mission — work that lives out the love of God and leads to creating a just world for all.

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1

Doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God

Scriptures

- ◆ Zechariah 9:12
- ◆ Proverbs 11:14

REFLECTION

Barber's grandmother taught him "to go and hope somebody." At first, he thought grandmama was pronouncing the word "help" incorrectly, but then he began to wonder if the two words could be used interchangeably. His father's ministry taught him that the church could "be a network through which people could share information, organize around issues of common concern, and mobilize for collective action." In other words, the church can bring both help and hope to people on the margins. Barber has expanded a traditional understanding of reconciliation by nurturing a movement based on "fusion coalitions." He has brought together a diversity of citizens, through painstaking processes of community organizing, based on their commonalities of disenfranchisement. Like his grandmother, Barber declares that faith and works, belief and practice are inseparable. Yet, what does it mean to reconcile the space between the what is now and the not yet; between immoral political practices and "I got a feelin, everything's gonna be alright."

Reread Zechariah 9:12, and Proverbs 11:14 and reflect on these questions that Barber asks:

- ◆ What never changes from age to age with God?
- ◆ What is always God's focus for God's people?
- ◆ What transcends our labels, our political alliances, and our situational ethics?

PRAYER

Lord, You have shown us what is good and what you require of us. That is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with You. (Micah 6:8)

RESOURCES

I am a conservative Christian — Rev. Barber speaks to a church in Appalachia on YouTube.com: <https://bit.ly/2I9el7I>

I've got a feeling Everything is gonna be alright — Clinton Wike on Youtube.com: <https://bit.ly/2I6HcJC>

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Think about the community in which your church is located. Brainstorm a list of hopes and helps for your local community.

2

Faith rooted moral dissent requires that we always look forward to the vision of what we know we were made to be

Scriptures

- ◆ Hebrews 10:39
- ◆ Psalm 94

REFLECTION

Barber writes, "It seemed as if I heard God's voice saying, 'Come out of the exile of false religion. Come out of the exile of the religion of idolatry and self-worship, which can only sustain oppression. Come out of the exile of religion that serves itself and avoids real people, the vulnerable people who God adores. Come out of the religion that has liberally removed itself from the unchanging values of God and dared to call itself conservative.'"

Most of us tend to identify our actions as moral, while seeing the actions of those who disagree with our actions as immoral. Are we moral in our eyes as well as in the eyes of God? How do we connect our thought life, our intentions and our actions?

Read Psalm 94 in its entirety and reflect on these questions.

- ◆ What does it mean to be moral?
- ◆ What is moral leadership?
- ◆ When you read these scriptures, what is the Holy Spirit speaking to you about your morality?

PRAYER

Lord, help us not to shrink back from your truth.

RESOURCES

ucc.org/privilege

<https://bit.ly/2LcVA5i>

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Make a list of issues in your local community that demand a moral response from you.

3

Holding up Moses' Hands

Scripture

- ◆ Exodus 17:10–13

*Joshua did what Moses ordered in order to fight Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went to the top of the hill. It turned out that whenever Moses raised his hands, Israel was winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, Amalek was winning. But Moses' hands got tired. So they got a stone and set it under him. He sat on it **and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on each side. So his hands remained steady** until the sun went down. Joshua defeated Amalek and its army in battle."*

— The Message

REFLECTION

In the chapter "Learning to Stand Together," Rev. Barber shares his testimony of how an unexpected change in his very body not only affected how he was able to physically move among others and in the world, it provided a life lesson that forever changed him into a leader who created a movement based on the understanding that victory will only be ours when we come together.

The world we live in, based as it is on corporate economic interests thrives on the marginalized and oppressed vying for relevance, fighting over crumbs and elbowing one another for a seat at the table. Burnout, frustration and bitterness are real. The mistrust is exhausting and the scapegoating is futile. We lose sight of the real enemy and the source of injustice. We forget that no one is free — until we all are free.

Is God calling us to a new way of being in this season? Today we are reminded that there is *real power in coming together*. There is *renewed vision when we truly see one another*. There is *strength for the struggle when we accompany one another* towards victory. As Jesus promised, the burdens are lighter when we do not carry them alone. Love wins! Let this be our life lesson today as we march together towards Jerusalem. In light of the scriptures, what is required to be part of a team of justice advocates? How do we keep ourselves from bitterness in this work of social change?

What are the self-care routines that need to be in place for a continued and sustained social justice journey?

PRAYER

Lord, we thank you for an enduring vision of justice and cooperation. We are grateful to walk alongside your servants who are seeking to make this world better. Thank you for the strength that comes from the power of agreement.

RESOURCES

The sites below represent examples of self-care practices. Particular work may require specific kinds of self-care to minimize or heal trauma.

<https://indivisiblesomerville.org/new-to-activism-grow-your-practices-of-self-care/>

<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/4-self-care-resources-days-when-world-terrible>

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Identify those who labor among you who may need their arms to be held steady. Offer a gesture of support.

4

Lest We Forget

Scripture

◆ 1 Corinthians 11:23–26

*I passed on to you the tradition the Lord gave to me: On the same night the Lord Jesus was betrayed, He took the bread in His hands; and after giving thanks to God, He broke it and said, "This is My body, broken for you. Keep doing this so that you and all who come after will have a vivid reminder of Me." After they had finished dinner, He took the cup and in the same way said, "This cup is the new covenant, executed in My blood. Keep doing this; and whenever you drink it, **you and all who come after will have a vivid reminder of Me.**" Every time you taste this bread and every time you place the cup **to your mouths** and drink, you are declaring the Lord's death, **which is the ultimate expression of His faithfulness and love**, until He comes again."*

REFLECTION

Rev. Barber powerfully reminds us of how important it is to *not forget*, in his chapter, "From Banquets to Battle." As our voice and power and movements grow in the work of love and liberation, we have to remember *Who* it is that loved us first, has called us each by name, and to what purpose. We do not have the luxury of forgetting where God has met us, time and time again. The lives of generations to come are relying on our remembering.

Empires are built on us — *all of us* — having collective amnesia. The African teaching of Sankofa symbolizes the importance of looking back in order to move forward. We cannot effectively change oppressive systems if we do not understand when and why they were created, who they benefit and who they further marginalize. We cannot truly hold on to victories if we do not know and honor those whose sweat and blood made them possible. We will not endure unless and until as followers of Jesus, we center our ministry — our very lives — on the One that sent us. Let us remember our ancestors go with us and God's Spirit dwells within us on our journey towards freedom.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we re-member Your broken body in our brokenness as a body. May Your hands be our hands.

RESOURCES

Kathy Taylor Corinthian song at Mt. Zion Nashville on youtube.com:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahqIPGj31aY>

Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others*. Harvard University Press. 2017.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Ask God to show you who you might invite to share the Lord's Supper. Then, do it.

5

Many a Conflict, Many a Doubt

Scriptures

- ◆ Matthew 7:24-7
- ◆ Acts 17-28

REFLECTION

From trenches of adversity the commonwealth of God unfolds. Rev Dr. Barber describes facing many challenges in campaigns seeking to rectify racial disparities in legal and education, and to ensure just compensation for exploited factory workers. Still, even within these hinderances, transformative possibility exists. Through relentless coalition building and faithful truth-telling, potential obstructions instead became opportunities to guide possibility toward desired outcomes. The victories of equitable labor contracts; John McNeil's freedom; passage of the Racial Justice Act; and a successful injunction against a draconian North Carolina state budget all bear witness that the future we know if possible will not emerge from the stagnant narratives to which we are too often bound. Through creative imagination and collective solidarity, a new nation will be called forth from the very midst of our struggles.

Conflict and doubt are catalysts of transformation. However, all too often, the "gospel" we place our trust in is not built on an expansive and liberating truth, but one confined to the limitations of our own misguided narratives. How then do we move from mere endurance of adversity to an expectant embrace of the challenges we face? We need an agile foundation.

First, love as a strategic approach to freedom embodies hope in moments that bear significant evidence against it. When vision is anchored in transformative love, as exemplified by Jesus Christ, we can become icons of an unwavering hope. Second, paradoxically, just causes — and those within them — that remain fixed to worn-out ways of being will surely not last. If the fruit of our work for justice leaves a wake of people struggling to stay afloat, we need enough creative capacity to tell a new story that prioritizes people over pragmatism. Finally, the ability to see beyond intractable division to a yet-realized horizon is rooted in spiritual abundance. It is in entering the dynamic flow of the Spirit, regardless of the myths of scarcity which will inevitably arise, that we can say "we shall not be moved." Therefore, show up, and trust that the Spirit will, too.

PRAYER

O God, you are present when we are discouraged. Open our eyes to the movement of your Spirit, and guide our actions that we might embody an unwavering hope. Grant us courage in our doubts, that we might participate in your commonwealth here on earth.

RESOURCES

- ◆ <https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/transformation>
- ◆ *A Lever and A Place to Stand: The Contemplative Stance, the Active Prayer*
by: Richard Rohr

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Read the assigned scripture passages with members of your congregation or community and share your responses to the questions below. What do you notice happening as people share?

- ◆ What is the foundation for your vision of justice, and how does this reflect the words of Jesus?
- ◆ What does an “expectant embrace” of conflict make you feel? Why?
- ◆ In what specific ways do the themes of scarcity and abundance manifest in your vision and action?
- ◆ What might it look like to build justice movements that live, move, and have their being in the Spirit? What opportunities or challenges does this present?

6

The Darkness Before the Dawn

Scriptures

- ◆ Luke 12:2&3 (NIV)
- ◆ Matthew 5:14-15 (The Message)

"We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, patience creates unity."

— Malcolm X

REFLECTION

In Chapter 7, Dr. Barber and the moral fusion movement are slammed by dark-money, secrecy facilitating laws, vote and voice suppression laws/policies, and lawyerly verbal covers that are purposely constructed as "angels of light" but serve hate and prejudice. C.S. Lewis's demons Wormwood and Screwtape would be laughing and dancing at such powerful principalities and powers can be so cleverly constructed and wielded by humans without the aid of demons. As Dr. Barber says, "Power plus secrecy guarantees conspiracy in human affairs."

THEN — The moral fusion movement absorbs the pain and gets back on its feet to create light and space for friends and enemies to speak their truth. Through speaking and listening the many-colored light of God becomes clearer to a far more diverse population than had the moral fusion movement taken the wide, easy paths of shouting barbed slogans at their enemies, or pulling into their own "inner rooms" and speaking only to their friends.

How can you create bright, safe open spaces for all, so that the Generous Parent in Heaven can build a loving human family?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, Thank you for prophetic voices whom You use to You reveal the hidden things to us. Jesus, you are calling us, like You, to bring the light and color of Your love and justice to a darkened world. May we be generous with the light You have given us. May we boldly proclaim the truth and sufficiency of Your love from the rooftops!

RESOURCES

Collin Woodard, (2011) *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*, Penguin Books.

Peter Heitzel and Alexia Salvatierra, (2014) *Faith Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World*, IVP Books.

Van Jones, (2017) *"Beyond the Messy Truth: How We Came Apart * How We Come Together*, Ballantine Books.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Identify an issue in your local community where there is deep polarization, particularly where you might find yourself in opposition to a publicly articulated position. In prayer, ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate for you how to pray, not just to voice your opinion, but to hear God's voice. How then do you approach those whose opinions or actions are in opposition to yours?

7

The Jazz that is Justice

Scripture

- ◆ Matthew 8:5–11

REFLECTION

The beauty of jazz is that at its core, it is collaborative and ripe with expectation yet steeped in particular rhythms and forms. These forms emerged as a community's response to lived realities, revealing creativity in spite of systems of oppression and constraint. But even so, it was also at its core, invitational and left room for others to participate and join the sound that would be called America's classical music. In Reverend William Barber's chapter on the Third Reconstruction and the reach of the Moral Monday movement in the mountain towns of North Carolina, one gets a sense that this sound in the streets is not a respecter of red or blue towns, but an invitational rhythm to a jazz whose cadence is justice and where the most unexpected persons from the most unexpected places become instruments and collaborators.

One wonders what it must have been like at the time of the gospels to see this liberating movement in the person of Jesus, to hear the proclamation of good news to the poor and the promise of freedom for the oppressed. What would it have been like to see the motley crew of people who joined this liberating movement (which after all would not have necessarily been good news to those who held power and privilege)? Even so, none of those present that day in Matthew's account were probably prepared for some of the very hands who symbolized oppression as a Roman centurion would, to experience healing in his very household and be invited to the table. But we would be remiss if we didn't also notice some of the postures present in this miraculous event that also showed up in some form in the mountains of North Carolina as the most unlikely became part of the Third Reconstruction.

First, the centurion had to leave his place of comfort to seek Jesus. The solution was not going to be found in isolation or in his own power. Secondly, he confessed Jesus as the only real power to change desperate situations and bring freedom from paralysis. Thirdly, he took a posture of humility while surrendering his own sense of authority. Finally, Jesus ultimately invited him into the faith and the movement of a different kingdom and heritage. He invited him to the table of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which had new rhythms and cadences that were not of the empire but of the oppressed. When the phone call came to express a need for Moral Mondays in the red mountain towns of North Carolina, no one could have expected what followed.

Places of paralysis turned to places of movement as they joined the sounds of justice. The traditional power players recognized the limitations of their ways and were awakened from their hibernation and lulled complicity. And yet those miracles are awaiting us even now with new rhythms to learn and new parts to play.

PRAYER

Lord God, we thank you for the invitational rhythm of your movement, empowered by the Holy Spirit and embodied by the person and sacrifice of our Savior Jesus Christ. You call the unlikely together from east and west, from red towns and blue cities, from mountains and valleys. May those of us who have benefitted from that which is akin to empire learn to leave comfort and embrace confession, to acknowledge our true powerlessness and embrace humility so that we can be instruments in the collaborative expression of your justice and liberation. And for those that have long been playing this song and know the ways of those who have gone before, may they find laughter and joy in the way you bring the most unlikely instruments to join the jazz of justice and may they find rest when it is time for another to play their part.

RESOURCE

Any artist will tell you that you can't become proficient in an art without careful attention to the masters. You have to know your history, practice the moves of those who've gone before you, and make their music your own. But you haven't mastered the art until you've learned to improvise — to take the wisdom passed down to you and write the next verse of humanity's collective song. The art of improvisation is about negotiating the unexpected."

— *America's Third Reconstruction, p.111*

Find a quiet place where you will be undisturbed for a time, ask God to show you images, words, music, movements that capture your longing for a beautiful world. Journal, sing, dance, draw, or make what you were given.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Organize a "creative gallery" where others can share their visions. The emphasis is not on the quality of the finished product, but on the experience of sharing God's creative Spirit.

Read (and practice) more about the arts as tool for spiritual development and social change.

Seek out a diversity of creative expressions that you don't normally see or consider creative. Look and listen for God in these voices and visions.

8

Fourteen Steps Forward Together:

Reflecting back on the previous scriptures, prayers, and essays, create a 4-step action plan for your local community. Remember, this work is best done collaboratively and will take time, research and planning.

EXAMPLE:

1. Engage in indigenously led grassroots organizing across the state.

Q. What is an issue in my community that lacks moral leadership? (Example)

A. Disproportionate rates of asthma.

Q. Who is affected/who is involved?

A. Children are affected, disproportionately African American children. Effects are also reflected in ER visits, even by adults. Also linked to absentee substandard housing, lack of affordable quality of housing citizens, environmental degradation, absentee landlords, insufficient policies to protect residents etc.

Q. Who are local leaders/contact people in my community?

A. Community empowerment projects, green teams, health service organizations, block clubs.

Q. (Prayerfully), where (why) is my moral involvement?

A. I'm interested in the policy aspect because people are making a profit off the misfortunes of others, particularly poor people and children. I could first educate myself about rates of asthma and the numbers associated with the problem.

Q. (Prayerfully), what is the first action step?

A. I will schedule a meeting at the public library and invite 7 diverse others who may share my interest or concern. I will listen more than I will talk, making sure to encourage others to speak. We will brainstorm and a beginning action. We will make plans to meet again soon and follow up with each other.

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