

Engaging Matthew 25 Through Film

Dismantling Structural Racism



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Engaging Matthew 25 Through Film

Video Discussion Series based on Dismantling Structural Racism

A well-chosen film, watched actively and then supported with discussion questions and a theological foundation, can help people understand how these abstract processes work out in faith and society.

It is important to note this video discussion series is designed primarily for white people to discuss racism through the genre of motion films. By viewing the films and wrestling with the questions and topics, it is our hope to raise awareness and provide a framework to help viewers consistently interrogate their own actions and maintain a posture of anti-racist action.

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Session One: Overview

What is Racism?

What is structural racism, and why is it important? The second part of the question should be easy to answer — because millions of Americans have been flooding our streets protesting one police killing of a Black person after another. It is urgent that the Church raise its voice in what is becoming a tidal wave of demand for change — not just in our police departments, but also within the larger legal system.

Structural racism refers to all the ways our society establishes and/or maintains inequities along racial lines. An example of this would be the documented tendency of school administrators to levy harsher punishments on Black students and other students of color than on white students for the same infractions. More than simply personal prejudices, structural racism is about the institutions, policies and systems (or “structures”) we create and how they consistently yield disparate outcomes for people who are not considered “white.” In his influential book “The Fire Next Time” (note the biblical origin of its title), author James Baldwin wrote this to Black people:

“You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.”

Racism: An Outer and Inner State

Baldwin, in both his essays and his fiction (along with other Black writers), has often observed that racism is both an outer experience and an inner condition. It is outer in the sense that for 400 years, white-dominated society has set the rules and terms for daily living. Even our language is permeated with racism — “white” is pure and good, and “black” is impure and evil.

Racism is an inner experience, and it shapes Black people as well, once scarring their psyches with its corrosive poison. This is the process known as “internalization,” whereby Black children accept society’s (white) definition of themselves. But before any people can achieve freedom, they must possess a sense of dignity and worth.

Three Problems/Hurdles for Leaders

There are three problems that planners of this study should consider:

1. The first concerns mainly White participants. From discussions that I have seen on such Internet venues as Facebook it is evident that many Whites are in a state of denial, believing that they are free from racism. In this they are supported by many national politicians who have stated that there is no structural racism in America. In resisting reforms in police departments, they claim that there are just a few bad apples that need rooting out, not any kind of top to bottom reform. Many Whites who consider themselves as liberals balk at the idea that deep down, as I have confessed above, there still lurks the imprint of racism within themselves.
2. There is the risk that the discussion will devolve into an over-heated debate of politics. The leader must be prepared to step in and defuse the situation if participants start bringing up names and political labels. If someone does, the leader might call a halt and suggest a cooling off period or switch back to the film itself. The discussion should be on policies and possibly government laws and policies, but not on specific politicians.
3. All the films but one discussed below are rated R, which will raise problems for some potential viewers, some of whom might have vowed never to watch an R-rated film. This was the case at one small church I recently served, which means it probably would be impossible to set up this study there. Unfortunate, because there are no comparable films minus the street talk that do as good a job of making us face up to reality of life outside our nice White havens as these. The makers of the five films are all Black, this giving them a unique perspective

on our topic. Though possibly subject to pressure from White financial backers, these prophets with a camera are not prone to toning down the language of their subjects nor the violence of their White opponents. If the resistance to viewing R-rated films is so great as to be disruptive, you might have to settle for giving copies of this booklet to interested members for their own use. Some might agree to a plan in which they watch the film on their own and then meet to discuss it. The main concern is to stir people to reflect upon the problem of structural racism.

The Films

From hundreds of good films available, I have selected five that help us see concrete examples of racism and its effects. The films force us to see racism as the ugly, concrete evil that affects all of us. Each film tells us a story that draws us in, helping us to *feel* how racism affects people and, in all too many cases, destroys lives. The movies might make some uncomfortable and elicit anger or remorse. This is good, and the group leader should acknowledge that any response can be legitimate if it leads to a confrontation with the dangerous topic — the racism in others, and the racism that still lingers within ourselves.

It is important to note that while racism impacts and dehumanizes all of us, it does so in different ways. Indigenous people and people of Asian, Latin American and African descent have diverse histories and experiences with racism in the United States. Race is a social construct that categorizes people into formal and informal hierarchies. Social hierarchies exist around the world, and it is the dominant social group — the group with the most power — that determines the hierarchies and inherent worth of all other social groups. In the U.S., the dominant racial group are those who are considered white. Anti-Black racism is a distinct form of racism targeting people who are categorized as “Black.” The selected films tell stories of Black people from Black perspectives. It must be said that the experiences of Black people, while similar in many important ways, cannot be interchanged with the experiences of groups who are considered neither Black nor white. Such stories require a specificity that cannot be achieved by focusing on one social group. With this in mind, we must be clear that this study focuses on various Black perspectives, acknowledging that Blackness has historically been cast at the “bottom” of the U.S. social hierarchy.

This study is set up as six sessions, though it could easily be 10 or 12. And if there simply is not time enough for a series, you could hold this first session, in which it is suggested that the leader show a scene from each film, and then have the participants watch the films at their convenience. All are available on DVD, in a public library’s collection or via internet streaming venues. In this first session, the leader should summarize the above exposition and then show and discuss briefly the five clips. Thus, participants will gain an overview of the entire series.

When discussing the individual films, leaders can either use the guides for themselves as they guide the discussion or reproduce them for everyone. The second alternative is best because the participants who are really into the topic can take the guides home for further reflection. Leaders should not worry about the probability that the time will have gone before all the questions are covered. Indeed, they might want to select just a few of the questions that they believe are most relevant for their group but leave some time for a participant who wants to discuss one that was left out.

The films

1. “12 Years a Slave”

Director: Steve McQueen. Rated R. Running time: 2 hours, 14 minutes.

A stark look at the ugly face of our national heritage — as long as slavery was legal no free Negro was safe, even those living in the North, well demonstrated by this true account of a Free Negro musician lured to leave the safety of his Northern home to Washington, D.C., where he was kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Scene

Fast Forward (FF) to 00:28:30; stop at 00:32:55.

In this upscale slave auction where refreshments are served to buyers, enslaved people are displayed like animals, and the seller and the buyer have no compunctions about separating parents and children.

For Discussion:

- a. What did you learn in school about slavery and its opponents? Do you believe it was adequate?
- b. How, until fairly recently, has Hollywood covered up the horrors of slavery and downplayed the progress made and the role of Black people during the period known as Reconstruction? Two good examples — “Birth of a Nation” and “Gone with the Wind.”
- c. How do we see that enslaved people are regarded as cattle?
- d. How has this view of Black people carried over today in people’s minds, from white nationalists and members of other hate groups to those claiming not to be prejudiced but who feel uncomfortable around Black people?

2. “If Beale Street Could Talk”

Director: Barry Jenkins. Rated R. Running time: 1 hour, 59 minutes.

Racism in the North in the mid-20th century. A young Harlem sculptor incurs the ire of a white cop who frames him for a crime he logistically could not have committed, if the white prosecutor and the judge had been truly dedicated to justice.

Scene

Long version: FF to 00:46:45; stop at 56:05. Short version: FF to 00:52:35–0:56:05.

Daniel, a middle-aged Black man recently discharged from jail, and his younger friend Fonny talk about the difficulty of a Black person to find rooms to rent in New York City and how horribly the racist police treat a Black prisoner.

For Discussion:

- a. Those who feel free to do so might briefly share their experience with racism. They may consider a time when they participated, unwillingly or not, in racist systems and practices, as well as when they bucked the system.
- b. What has your experience with a policeman been? Positive; negative?
- c. Ever since the early days of television, how popular have shows built around law enforcement officers been? List some you have watched. What has the view toward them been almost universally? Can you think of any in which a racist cop has been a character? Why or why not?
- d. Given Daniel’s treatment by the police, how must he and his friends view policemen? James Baldwin and many other Black people have called the police “oppressive,” an “occupation force” rather than protectors of public welfare. What do you make of this?

3. “Selma”

Director: Ava DuVernay. Rated R. Running time: 1 hour, 59 minutes.

When Black and white people join together — the story of the famous Selma to Montgomery March and the brutality of racist law enforcement officers.

Scene

FF to 00:05:51; stop at 00:08:47.

Annie Lee Cooper fills out a voter registration application and takes it to the clerk, who quizzes her about the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution and the number of county judges in Alabama. She answers both correctly, but when she cannot name the judges, he denies her application.

For Discussion:

- a. What is obvious from the start about the attitude of the Selma white voting registrar toward Annie Lee Cooper*? Does the term “public servant” seem appropriate for this man?
- b. Although a case might be made for a voter knowing something of the U.S. Constitution, what are the other questions obviously designed to do? Do you think the clerk could list all of the county judges?
- c. The 1965 Voting Rights Act** that sprang from the Selma March outlawed such tests as this one, but what happened when the Supreme Court majority removed this protection in 2013? What was the reason that the Court gave for this removal? How have we seen that the justices’ assumptions were ill-founded?
- d. In what ways is the current controversy over voter registration a throwback to the days of the Civil Rights Movement?

* See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annie_Lee_Cooper

** See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voting_Rights_Act_of_1965

4. “Do the Right Thing”

Director: Spike Lee. Rated R. Running time: 2 hours.

Life in the ghetto, where a trivial incident can lead to a riot, and a look at contrasting views by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. on resisting racism.

Scene

FF to 00:18:28; stop at 00:22:30.

Buggin Out is buying a slice of pizza from Sal. They argue over extra cheese and its cost. In his booth, Buggin Out looks up at the pictures of famous Italian Americans that Sal has posted on the wall. All of them demonstrate Sal’s pride in his heritage. The Black man complains that there are no Black people on the wall, and Sal responds that he is the owner, and that Buggin Out should get his own shop if he wants others put up. The two argue so heatedly that Sal’s two sons intervene. Upon Sal’s ordering his employee Mookie to kick out the complainer, Mookie does so, trying to reason outside with his friend.

For Discussion:

- a. Have you seen displays of pictures on a restaurant’s or shop’s walls similar to those in the film? What do they signify for Sal?
- b. Why is Buggin Out so upset? What do you think of the reasons given by each: Sal — it’s my shop so I can put up pictures of whomever I want; Buggin Out — but no Italian Americans eat here, and all your customers are Black people?
- c. What has apparently happened to the neighborhood since Sal opened his pizza parlor years before? How might he have been more savvy of the changeover in residents?
- d. How could the men recognize their similar hurt and trauma in their parallel histories?

5. “The Hate U Give”

Director: George Tillman Jr. Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours, 13 minutes.

Life for a young African American female teenager living in two worlds — with her family in a ghetto, and during school hours, when she attends an upscale private school consisting almost entirely of whites.

Scene: Short version: 00 to 00:03:09. Long version: Stop at 4:50. (Turn on the subtitles so that the group can see the lyrics of the soundtrack song “DNA.”)

Maverick gives “the Talk” to his young son Seven and daughter Starr, a talk that white parents have little need

for, but that is essential if young Black people, especially males, are to survive and make it to adulthood. It is about his inevitable first encounter with a white policeman, which we see played out a little later in the film.

For Discussion:

- a. What is Maverick warning his children about? Does the situation he is describing sound familiar? Why does he think this talk is necessary? What about for white families? How are the views of the police different in a family of Black people and a family of white people? Why?
- b. Upon what note does Maverick end his talk? What is his choice of words — “honor” and “worth” — meant to convey to Seven and Starr? How are they counter to what dominant American culture teaches about Black people? How does the song, “DNA,” playing beneath this scene reinforce what Maverick is teaching his children?
- c. If you see the long version, which Black leader does Maverick prefer? Did you notice that even the picture of Jesus on the wall is very different from what you would see in a white home?
- d. What do you know about the document Maverick calls the Black Bill of Rights, the Black Panther Ten-Point Program? Click [here](#) to read the Wikipedia article about it. Many dismiss it as being “socialistic,” but especially note No. 7, with certain words all capitalized. How does this coincide with Maverick’s talk?

Suggestions for All Films

Here are some questions that should be brought up for every film.

1. When you watch a film, with which character do you usually identify? Why do you think this is so? Remember David Copperfield’s observation: “Whether I turn out to be the hero of my own story or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these moments must show.” But, if the theory of structural racism is true, with whom are we really identical in such a film as “12 Years a Slave” or “Selma”? Using your imagination, try to see the Black characters through the eyes of those white characters.
2. Many have taken issue with the term “white privilege,” which refers to the advantages one is given as a result of being racialized as white. It is not to say that all white people have it easy, but it is to say that wherever life may be difficult, those difficulties don’t exist because one is racialized as white. Can you recognize how your whiteness has privileged you? Some areas to consider:
 - a. How you have been treated by police.
 - b. How you were treated by teachers when you expressed what you wanted to do when you grew up.
 - c. How store clerks regarded you as you browsed.
 - d. When you were a teenager and walking a street at night, how did white strangers react when they saw you?
 - e. What neighborhood did you grow up in? Did you ever see any signs forbidding people of your skin color from using a facility or requiring you to use a back door? What was the racial composition in your neighborhood or school?
 - f. Do you think you had more choices than people with darker skin?
 - g. Do you think your skin color made any difference in job interviews, and how do you think your wages compare to Black people in similar positions?
 - h. When you shopped for a home, were there some areas the realtor guided you away from? Do you think your skin color had anything to do with the approval of a mortgage loan?
 - i. If you come down with the COVID-19 virus, how do your chances for receiving good health care compare with that of the average Black person?
 - j. How have people of your skin color usually been depicted in the media — in advertising, entertainment and news stories? How many of the latter stories have been about whites being lynched?

Session Two

“12 Years a Slave” (2013)

Content ratings (1–10): Violence 7; Language 6; Sex/Nudity 4.

Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand;
do not forget the oppressed.
Psalm 10:12

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”
Luke 4:16–19

“We allude to the existence of the free Black population in the United States, than which a more indolent, degraded, corrupting, miserable class of beings does not exist within the pale of civilized society. Destitute of moral principle, and devoid of native energy, their mode of life is in unison with the base propensities of their nature, which they seek alone to gratify.”

From p. 491 of “A Plan of National Colonization” in “Bible Defense of Slavery” (an online version is at archive.org/details/bibledefenceofsl00inpric), 6th Edition, 1853. (Same year as Solomon Northup’s “12 Years a Slave.”)

Director Steve McQueen’s film, based on the book of the same name by Solomon Northup (the book may be read at docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html), gives quite a different picture of a free Black person than the two ministers responsible for the above quoted book that justifies slavery. In 1841, Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is a well-dressed married man whose skills include building, engineering and playing the fiddle. He lives with his wife and children in an elegant frame house in Saratoga, New York, where leading white citizens hold him in high esteem (which will prove very important years later).

Lured by two smooth-talking tricksters to Washington, D.C., with the promise of a handsomely rewarding job playing his fiddle in a circus, he is treated to a dinner at which the pair keep replenishing his wine glass. He wakes the next morning manacled and chained in a slave-holding cell. When he protests that he is a free man, the attendant beats him into silence, declaring that he is an escaped enslaved person from Georgia.

A fellow prisoner warns him not to reveal that he can read and write if he wants to survive, to which Solomon replies, “I don’t want to survive; I want to live!” However, he will soon learn that if he is to live, he must first survive, and that that task is not easy, with beatings and death occurring all around. He and his fellow captives, some of whom actually are captured runaways, are taken by steamboat to New Orleans, where slave trader Theophilus Freeman (Paul Giamatti) inspects them and displays them as if they were cattle. He dismisses Solomon’s claim to his own name, telling him that he now is “Pratt.” Inviting his customers to partake of refreshments as they look over his merchandise, he praises one for his strength and Eliza (Adepero Oduye), a young mother, for her looks. Her young son and even younger daughter cling to her shirt.

The purchase of the enslaved people is accompanied by a Black fiddler playing discreetly. All is calm and orderly, with planter William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch) buying Pratt and Eliza. Eliza begs Ford to buy her remaining child when the other is bought by a different planter, but Ford says that the price is too high, whereupon Eliza shrieks loudly, disrupting the proceedings. When Ford brings his new purchases home, his wife and house servants stand by the steps of the spacious white mansion, looking on as the enslaved people are unloaded from the wagon, Eliza still sobbing. The wife evinces a note of distaste when her husband tells her that Eliza's children were sold to others, but then she says to the weeping mother, "Your children will soon be forgotten."

"... and this is the circumstance of separating the families of slaves, by their being sometimes sold to other masters. On this subject, abolitionists argue the same as they would were the case their own, imagining that Negro parents feel such a circumstance as acutely, and as sentimentally, as white families would under similar circumstances. But this is a mistake, we believe, and does not apply to the Negro's case, as it would to that of the whites on account of a want of the higher intellectual faculties of the mind of the Blacks. On occasions of severe bereavement, the feelings of Negro parents seem to be of shorter duration" Ibid, p. 382

Life on the plantation is harsh, and Eliza does not forget her children, weeks afterward still sobbing and moaning during waking hours. The Overseer (Dickie Gravois) and his Field Boss, John Tibbeats (Paul Dano), are cruel, warning the newcomers about whippings meted out as punishment for infringements of any rule. The enslaved people are put to work cutting down trees and bringing the stripped trunks to the plantation's sawmill. Tibbeats takes a special disliking for Pratt when the latter suggests that it would be a lot quicker to tie the tree trunks together for rafts and pole them along the canal rather than haul them overland through the brush to the mill. Tibbeats scornfully turns down the suggestion, but the open-minded Ford tells Pratt to give it a try and is delighted when Pratt proves to be right.

Tibbeats, upset by this, criticizes and taunts Pratt until the latter resists, struggling against his oppressor, beating the smaller white man to the ground and whipping him. Tibbeats runs off, returning with two burly men who start to hang the enslaved person from a tree. The Overseer rushes in just in time to drive off the three, but he leaves Pratt strung up, barely able to keep himself from strangulation by supporting his body on tiptoe in the mud. The day drags on with Pratt struggling to stay up on his toes. Sadly, the mistress sees this but does nothing, and all the enslaved people but one go about their chores as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. The exception is an enslaved female who hurriedly gives Pratt a drink of water before running off. When Ford returns home that night, he cuts the rope and brings the prostrate mud-caked Pratt into the mansion, laying him on a blanket.

Pratt's fortunes sink even lower when Ford comes upon hard times and Pratt is sold to the vicious Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender), who has any field hand falling short of picking the daily allotment of cotton whipped.

"Here the well-being of the slave is a matter of deep interest to the master. Like the venerable Patriarchs of olden time, they delight to administer to the wants and happiness of those whom God has committed to their hands. If the slave is sick, a physician administers to his wants; if hungry or naked, he has but to look to his master who provides what is necessary without any care on the part of the slave. No constable or sheriff dogs his steps, for he is out of debt and free from all responsibility, save that of good and blessed behavior." Ibid, p. 417

Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o) always picks two or three times as much cotton as the other hands, but a word of praise is her only reward. She bonds with Pratt, though he is reluctant to have sex with her. Epps isn't, however. He is frequently sneaking out and raping her right in the crude cabin where the men lie in their bunks pretending not to be awake. Thus, everyone is aware of this, including Mary (Sarah Paulson), Epps' jealous wife. Patsey pleads with Pratt to drown her, but he refuses. He tells the girl he is worried about their souls, but she responds that God is a god of mercy and would not condemn him, because his killing her would be an act of mercy.

As events unfold, both Patsey and Pratt receive further degradation and whippings. These scenes are very difficult to watch, with the raw wounds on their backs (and of many others' as well) revealed in all their gruesomeness by the camera. One of the degradations is Epps' rousing them from their sleep and forcing them to come into his mansion to perform a dance to a tune played by Pratt, while he and sometimes guests look on with amusement. Pratt sinks into

the same slough of despond engulfing Patsey, especially after one of the enslaved people dies from his mistreatment. We see Pratt standing with his fellow enslaved people by the side of the pitiful little plot set aside for dead enslaved people. The others are singing “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” but Pratt stands silently for what seems like a long time. In a medium and then a close shot of his face we can see by the glacial change of his expression, his spirit slowly being lifted up by the song. First, he just mouths the words. Then we can hear his voice starting to blend with the others. By the time he is singing with enthusiasm, his earlier expressionless face has been transfigured into one of hope. His dream of returning to his family is reborn. We can see the return of his earlier determination, not just to survive, but to live.

“In the bosom of a Negro man, the idea of liberty, freedom and independence does not give rise to the same sensations, hopes, and expectations, that it does in the bosom of the whites. To the mind of a slave, or even of a free Black man, with but small exception, the idea of liberty is but the idea of a holyday, in which they are to be let loose from all restraint or control; they are to play, work, or sleep, as may suit their inclination, following out to the utmost, the perfect indulgence of indolence, stupidity, and the animal passions.” Ibid, pp. 387–388

A couple of times we expect Pratt to run away in order to achieve his dream of liberty, especially when sent into town on an errand for supplies. He does leave the well-trod trail through the woods but is soon stopped by a party of whites about to hang some captured runaways. The whites no doubt constitute one of the patrols ubiquitous throughout the South, empowered to run down and capture any enslaved person trying to escape to the North. Explaining his errand, Pratt heads to town. His eventual return to freedom is more prosaic, brought about through the good graces of an itinerant Canadian carpenter, Samuel Bass (Brad Pitt), a rare man who dares to express to Epps his disdain for slavery. As Pratt works alongside the unorthodox white man, his protective reserve begins to dissolve — earlier another white man to whom he had revealed his desire for freedom had betrayed him — and he bares his soul, telling his incredible story. What happens next will warm your heart, though this will be tempered by the realization that those left behind by Solomon will secure no such justice for themselves.

McQueen’s film is important in that most Americans have been raised on the false view of the South engendered in the masterfully made “Gone with the Wind,” in which the only blow struck against an enslaved person was Scarlett’s slapping the overly excitable house enslaved person, Prissy, in order to calm her down. This, and most films (including Westerns in which the hero is often a former rebel soldier) depicting the South, show it as a land of cultivated people dedicated to a lost cause and victimized by rapacious Yankees after the War Between the States. “12 Years a Slave” rips the cover off the phrase “The Southern Way of Life” to reveal the brute force upon which it was built.

<https://archive.org/details/bibledefenceofsl00inpric>

For Reflection/Discussion

Note: There are spoilers in the following questions.

1. How is Solomon’s induction into slavery different from that of those in the South in the 1840s? How might his having once been free made his experience even more bitter than most?
2. When he says that he wants to do more than survive, what do you think he means? How can such an attitude make a difference in one’s life? For instance, do you know someone who sees life as getting by (or surviving), and if so, how are they different from others you know who have a sense of mission or are, to use a now popular term, “purpose-driven”?
3. What do you know of American society in the antebellum era? What was the general opinion in regard to slavery then throughout the country? How popular were the abolitionists — in the North as well as the South? Who are the abolitionists whose names you can recall?
4. What do the excerpts from “Bible Defense of Slavery” reveal about whites’ view of “Africans” back then?
5. Why do you think Solomon is advised not to reveal that he can read and write?
6. Why does Field Boss John Tibbeats hate Solomon so much? What does the enslaved person’s idea about get-

ting the logs to the mill do to Tibeats' assumption of his superiority over the Black man — and his standing with Ford?

7. Epps is like many plantation owners who raped enslaved people. Why do you think they did this? Because of the de-sexing of Southern white women: What were white women being taught during that time, the beginning of what would come to be called the Victoria Era, about male and female sexuality and the proper role of the wife?
8. What is behind Patsey's pleading with Pratt to drown her? Compare this to the story of Margaret Garner, the enslaved person who, with her husband and four children, ran away from her Richwood, Kentucky, owner, only to be overtaken the next day in Cincinnati. As the whites broke into the house, she killed her infant daughter, rather than see her returned to a life of sexual depredation such as she had known. (This incident is the basis of Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved," and the movie made from it.)
9. If you have seen "Gone with the Wind," compare the two films in the way they show enslaved people and slavery. How was "Gone with the Wind" typical of the way the South was romanticized for the hundred years following the Civil War? The Yankees might have won the war, but who actually won the peace that followed, after the withdrawal of Federal troops from the South in 1876?
10. What is it that almost causes Pratt to give in to despair? What is happening following the burial of the enslaved person? How does this show the importance of the Negro Spirituals? Also, for Pratt, of the importance of being in community with others who have not given up their dreams and dignity? A good exercise for groups would be to examine the lyrics of several Negro Spirituals. Which ones inspired them to hold onto their sense of dignity and self-worth? Which might have been a coded message?
11. How do we see in the film the development among enslaved people of lying as necessary for their well-being? This necessity continued down through much of the Civil Rights era, with many Southern whites convinced that Negroes were content with the status quo because they always answered that everything was fine when asked by a white person.
12. What do you think of the Canadian carpenter Samuel Bass (Brad Pitt)? Although he does not preach the abolitionist line — how could he earn a living in the South if he did? — how is he a subversive presence on the plantation? To learn more about Abolitionism, see the extensive Wikipedia article by that title at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism>.
13. Here is the ending of the book "12 Years a Slave," on which the film is based:
"My narrative is at an end. I have no comments to make upon the subject of Slavery. Those who read this book may form their own opinions of the "peculiar institution." What it may be in other States, I do not profess to know; what it is in the region of Red River, is truly and faithfully delineated in these pages. This is no fiction, no exaggeration. If I have failed in anything, it has been in presenting to the reader too prominently the bright side of the picture. I doubt not hundreds have been as unfortunate as myself; that hundreds of free citizens have been kidnapped and sold into slavery and are at this moment wearing out their lives on plantations in Texas and Louisiana. But I forbear. Chastened and subdued in spirit by the sufferings I have borne, and thankful to that good Being through whose mercy I have been restored to happiness and liberty, I hope henceforward to lead an upright though lowly life, and rest at last in the church yard where my father sleeps."

What have you learned about slavery and "the Southern way of life" in this film? How does it differ from the way slavery is depicted in "Gone with the Wind" and other older films? How do you think slavery still affects us?

Session Three

“If Beale Street Could Talk” (2018)

Content ratings (1–10): Violence 2; Language 4; Sex 3/Nudity 1.

Ah, you are beautiful, my love;
ah, you are beautiful;
your eyes are doves.

Song of Solomon 1:15

If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter ...

Ecclesiastes 5:8a

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Ephesians 6:12 (KJV)

Based on James Baldwin’s acclaimed 1974 novel of the same name, Barry Jenkins’ film is a paean to love set in a society permeated by ugly prejudice and injustice. In the opening shot, we see Tish Rivers (Kiki Layne) and Alonzo “Fonny” Hunt (Stephan James) strolling in a Manhattan park at the edge of the Hudson River. They hold hands. As they pause to kiss, the camera comes in for a close-up. “You ready for this?” she asks. “I’ve never been more ready for anything my whole life,” he answers. But actually, neither are ready for the terrible weight of a racist society that is about to descend upon them.

The scene switches to Tish visiting her lover in jail, with their story told by her voiceover and a series of flashbacks between the present and the past. Fonny, an aspiring sculptor, is wrongfully jailed for the rape of a Puerto Rican woman who is manipulated by racist white cop Officer Bell (Ed Skrein) with a grudge against the Black man. Even though Fonny has a solid alibi, and it should be plain that he could not possibly have crossed Manhattan within the time frame of the crime, the prosecutor insists on taking the easy route and prosecuting the man in custody rather than looking for the real perpetrator.

We see the lovers having sex and seeking a loft to live in. Their search is fruitless because of their race, until a kind-hearted Jewish owner agrees to rent to them. During one of her jail visits Tish reveals that she is pregnant, her anxiety relieved when Fonny reacts in gladness. At home she is equally anxious when she tells her mother, Sharon (Regina King), about the coming baby. The older woman is shocked but accepting. So is her father, Joseph (Colman Domingo), and her older sister, Ernestine (Teyonah Parris). They invite Fonny’s family over to share the good news — his ultra-pious mother, Mrs. Hunt (Aunjanue Ellis), her jovial husband, Frank (Michael Beach), and their two daughters. Mrs. Hunt is extremely upset because all along she has believed that her son was too good for the less-educated Tish. She curses Tish, exclaiming that the baby was born in sin and therefore will shrivel up. Her husband, Frank, glad for the news, is so upset that he hits his wife so hard that she falls down. Sharon quickly takes charge, sending off Joseph and Frank to go out and drink together, while she gives Mrs. Hunt a piece of her mind as she kicks her and her daughters out of the apartment.

The troubling but tender love story is juxtaposed with the cruel reality of society’s white racism, becoming a major example of what author James Baldwin asserted in his numerous nonfiction writings. In Raul Peck’s marvelous documentary “I Am Not Your Negro,” based on an uncompleted film project of Baldwin’s, the author declares:

“There are days — and this is one of them — when you wonder what your role is in this country and what our future is in it. How precisely are you going to reconcile yourself to your situation here and how you are going to communicate to the vast, heedless, unthinking, cruel white majority that you are here. I’m terrified at the moral apathy, the death of the heart, which is happening in my country. These people have deluded themselves for so long that they really don’t think I am human. And I base this on their conduct, not on what they say. And this means that they have become in

1. cmalliance.org/life/the-church-with-the-rusty-steeple/

themselves moral monsters.” (from the companion book “I Am Not Your Negro,” p. 38)

Though written almost 45 years ago, Baldwin’s novel in which a racist cop, backed by a corrupt prosecutor willing to sweep aside the facts, is able to disrupt the life of a Black man, is as relevant as the news today.

Not that all whites in the story are hostile toward Black people. We have already mentioned the benevolent Jewish landlord. There also is the store owner who comes to Fonny’s aid during the incident in which Officer Bell is trying to arrest him. A white thug had made lewd remarks and gestures toward Trish, and Fonny had chased the guy from the store into the street when the cop arrived and assumed that the Black man was in the wrong. Calling him “Boy,” the cop would have jailed Fonny for pushing back had not the store owner come out to stop him, telling the cop that she knows the couple and that everything Fonny was claiming was true. The cop grudgingly gives up his prey, but ominously warns him about the future.

Another white man, non-villainous, is Hayward (Finn Wittrock), Fonny’s lawyer striving to secure his release. The accuser, a Puerto Rican-born immigrant named Victoria Rogers (Emily Rios), was pressured by Officer Bell to pick Fonny out of the line-up as her assailant. The lawyer feels stymied because Victoria suddenly has left town, presumably returning to Puerto Rico, and Fonny’s only other witness, aside from Trish, is old friend Daniel (Brian Tyree Henry). He is unavailable because he has been arrested, and the prosecutor will not allow the lawyer to access him. How to hunt down the witness, when the family has no money for a trip to Puerto Rico? The system seems stacked against Fonny and Trish. All of these obstacles add up to a 20th-century version of what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote that he “struggled against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.”

The family works at two levels to raise money for legal expenses and a trip to confront the runaway witness. Tish, thanks to her good looks, secures a job behind the perfume counter at a large department store. She is probably the only African American employee out front. Her work experience is not pleasant: Most customers, all white women, ignore her, and the occasional white man who stops to smell a sample creeps her out by the way he holds her hand and gazes at her. The two fathers, Frank and Joseph, work on a loading dock. They kick back at the system by stealing some of the merchandise and selling it. Thus, Sharon is able to fly to Puerto Rico and find Victoria, but their confrontation proves to be the nadir of the story. Two victims of the system facing each other, each with their desperate reasons for their actions.

This is a film in which many things that affect the characters take place off camera. We never see what happens to Fonny in the jail. However, we are told indirectly in the flashback in which he and Tish have invited his good friend Daniel into their downtown apartment/studio. Daniel had been arrested on false charges and spent two years in prison. Released over three months ago, he is still trying to recover from his ordeal. “When you’re in there, they can do with you whatever they want. Yeah, I mean, what-ever they want,” Daniel says, adding that now he understands why Malcolm X called white men the devil. “Some of the things I’ve seen ... I’ll be dreaming about it until the day I die.” Daniel’s inner terror is palpable by his posture and anguished look. Later Tish sees a blood clot in Fonny’s eye. We need no more to let us know of the pain and terror that he too has suffered — and this, not in a Southern prison, but in one in the supposedly enlightened North.

The film ends somewhat on a positive note years after it begins. Tish, accompanied by their young son, visits Fonny in prison where the three are able to share a makeshift meal together. A positive ending, but not a just one because of what Fonny had been required to do in order to escape a much longer prison sentence. The “principalities and powers” are white: the cop, the prosecutor (whom we never see), the entire legal system, Baldwin asserts, are not interested in justice, but in order, in preserving the status quo of white domination. Again, I think of Baldwin’s words in “I Am Not Your Negro”: “To look around the United States today is enough to make prophets and angels weep. This is not the land of the free; it is only very unwillingly and sporadically the home of the brave” (p. 97).

Justice does not triumph, but love does. We do not know what the future holds for Tish and Fonny, but we are left with the feeling, with the hope, that their love will enable them to put the sordid issues of the present behind them — though the ending with a series of black and white photographs of Black people under stress also show that the road ahead will not be easy.



Reflection/Discussion

1. What irony do you see in Fonny's answer to Tish, "I've never been more ready for anything my whole life"? What did she mean, and what is it that descends upon them?
2. How are they the almost-ideal young couple with a bright future ahead of them?
3. How did you feel when Officer Bell confronted Fonny outside the store? Although all racists are potentially dangerous, what in addition makes racist policing especially dangerous? If it were possible, do you think candidates for a police force should be tested as to how they might use their power or authority and their attitude toward minorities?
4. In a flashback, what does the couple's friend Daniel say about his incarceration? How does this prove to be a harbinger for Fonny, though we are never actually shown what happens to him in prison?
5. What do you think of Daniel's mention of Malcolm X's statement that "white men are devils"?
6. How do we see that Sharon Rivers as a mother is an agent of grace? What do you think of her words of encouragement, "Love brought you here? If you trusted love this far, trust it all the way." How is this something you might expect to hear at church?
7. When Sharon tracks down the witness Victoria in Puerto Rico, how is it obvious that Victoria is also a victim of the system? Indeed, might not she have fled because of some threat or warning from Officer Bell? (Wouldn't you think a state official concerned for truth and wary of ruining the life of a young man would have done this?)
8. What does the scene of Tish as the perfume lady at a department store contribute to the story? How do various people react to her (or ignore her)? How does this show another aspect of institutional racism?
9. What does Fonny apparently do off-camera that results in what we see at the end? What does the scene of the three together show about Tish and her mother's advice concerning love? Not a triumphal ending, maybe, but a hopeful one? Or does the addition of the black and white photos of Black people being arrested shown with the end credits suggest outrage more than the latter? How does racism hover over the characters like a storm about to break?

Session Four

“Selma” (2014)

Content ratings (0–10): Violence 6; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 2.

For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones. The righteous shall be kept safe forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

Psalm 37:28

When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to evildoers.

Proverbs 21:15

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:24

In the struggle for a free India, Gandhi’s famous March to the Sea in defiance of the British is a historical highlight. Not to be outdone, America has the Gandhi-inspired Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Selma March, a shorter march than Gandhi’s, but as it turned out, far, far more dangerous. We have two films that depict those brave leaders and marchers, Richard Attenborough’s splendid “Gandhi” and Ava DuVernay’s “Selma.” Although the depiction of President Lyndon B. Johnson in the first half of the film is flawed, the film is still the finest and most nuanced film depiction of King, and, important to note, also of those around him.

The film begins in Norway in December 1964 when King (David Oyelowo) is dressing in formal attire for the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. As Coretta (Carmen Ejogo) helps him with the unfamiliar tie, he expresses his discomfort at living amid such luxury while so many of their people back home are living in poverty. After a brief snatch of his acceptance speech, about equality and justice, before the assembled dignitaries the camera cuts to a group of Black children dressed in their Sunday best. As they come down the stairs by a stained-glass window, we suddenly realize that what we are about to witness took place at Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church. Sure enough, a powerful explosion destroys a section of the church, the scene ending with a view of one of the twisted bodies of the four girls killed in the blast. This incident actually took place over a year earlier, on Sept. 15, 1963, but the juxtaposition serves well to show the contrast of the two worlds in which Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King moved in during their tormented lives. The film then focuses upon Black hospice nurse and activist Annie Lee Cooper (Oprah Winfrey, who also served as a producer). She is attempting to register to vote. The ordeal that the arrogant registrar puts her through — not being able to find fault with the application itself, he demands that she recite the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, and when she does, flawlessly, he still turns her down — gives the audience a good example of what Black people attempting to register to vote went through. As King explains later, without the right to vote, not only can Black people not choose their government representatives, but they cannot serve on juries, thus prolonging the day when all-white juries refuse justice to Black defendants.

DuVernay explores the events and the people surrounding what actually were three Selma marches — the first, led by the Rev. Hosea Williams and John Lewis on March 7, 1965, onto the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the day becoming known as “Bloody Sunday” because of the vicious beatings by the police; the second led by King on March 9, known as “Turnaround Tuesday,” due to King stopping and then turning the marchers around; and the third, completed march from March 21 to the 25th, when, in Montgomery on the steps of the state capitol building, King gave his speech that climaxes the film, “How Long, Not Long.”

The film readily acknowledges the conflict between King’s well-established Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and its offshoot the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “Snick”). African Americans in Selma had been trying to register to vote since the late 1950s, forming the Dallas County Voters League

(DCVL). SNCC workers began working with the DCVL in early 1963 but had succeeded only in getting jailed or beaten up. In the film we see King, in response to the DCVL's invitation, talking with them and SNCC leaders and workers including Lewis, the latter who regard him as invading their turf. The young SNCC leaders are still smarting that King did not just fail to support their Freedom Rides but tried to dissuade them.

King's SCLC has had a bad time in Albany, Georgia, with its "Albany Movement." The astute police chief Laurie Pritchett had pursued a policy of mass arrests but no beatings, just the opposite of Bull Connor in Birmingham, who used dogs, fire hoses and clubs against demonstrators. As a result, the SCLC's movement won few tangible results, but because no atrocities meant little publicity in the North. The Albany Movement was generally regarded as a defeat for the SCLC. Thus, King asks the Selma leaders, "Is your sheriff Bull Connor or is he Laurie Pritchett?" When they respond that their Sheriff Jim Clark is a Bull Connor, King and his aides know they have come to the right place. Eventually Lewis is won over, becoming a close associate of King.

The scene with Coretta and Martin listening to the tape that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover (Dylan Baker) has sent them to discredit the man whom he has labeled "the most dangerous man in America" is beautifully staged. A bit of humor is injected when King says that the sexual panting and groaning on the tape is not his, and she replies, "I know ... I know what you sound like." But then she goes on to say that she is no fool, that she wants to know if he loves any of the other women. He assures her that he loves only her, and they embrace. This is a strained marriage, but not a broken one. In another scene, she reassures her husband when he expresses his self-doubts, and the fatigue with living with "the constant closeness of death."

In another intimate scene in a car at night, King shares his self-doubts with Lewis. By now totally in tune with his former adversary, the future Congressman reassures King by telling him that it was because he had heard King speak that he had decided to join the group on the Freedom Rides. He quotes for him Matthew 6:27. Then, too, there is the moment late at night when the troubled mind of the leader will not allow him to sleep. He calls up Mahalia Jackson (Ledisi Young), and the great singer soothes his soul with a song.

All this time, King and his associates are under constant surveillance, as we see when many sequences are introduced by brief FBI field reports typed onto the screen, a technique that helps us know where and when the depicted event is taking place. One of the film's flaws is the suggestion in a scene showing Hoover and Johnson talking in the Oval Office, that the president initiated the surveillance and the production of the tape, when in reality the conservative director, offended by what he regarded as King's radical tactics, had started keeping King under close scrutiny for years during the Kennedy administration. Hoover was not only opposed to King's politics but regarded him as a "political and moral degenerate."

The film is appropriately titled because it does not attempt to tell the life of King but to focus on a pivotal moment in U.S. history. The filmmakers wisely show us through a series of cameo performances that the movement was not a one-man affair, but a team effort with many members playing important roles. Along with Lewis, we see Williams (Wendell Pierce); the Rev. Ralph Abernathy (Colman Domingo, playing King's best friend); the Rev. C.T. Vivian (Vorey Reynolds); Andrew Young (Andre' Holland); James Forman (Trai Byers); Jimmy Lee Jackson (Keith Stanfield), the young Black activist murdered by police while protecting his mother (the killer cop escaped justice for 40 years!); and a Civil Rights organizer too often overlooked because a woman had a hard time rising to prominence in that patriarchal age, Diane Nash (Tessa Thompson), about whom an entire movie should be made. Veteran actor Martin Sheen plays Judge Johnson, then the only Southern judge sympathetic to Black people, whose decision against the State of Georgia allows the March to go on legally. Even Malcolm X (Nigel Thatch) enters the picture, coming to Selma to speak at Brown Chapel as a sign of solidarity, and telling the worried Coretta that he wants to show whites that they had best support King and his nonviolence, lest Black people turn to those who do not believe in a nonviolent approach to racism.

There are of course, the villains, Gov. George Wallace (Tim Roth), not at all sorry that he is on "the wrong side of history," and the maliciously bigoted Hoover. Which brings us to the portrayal of President Johnson. In 1964, after pushing through Congress the Civil Rights Act, the president was reluctant to follow this up with a bill specifically targeting the vast network of Southern laws and regulations preventing Black people from being able to register to

vote. As shown in the film, he was concerned with both his War on Poverty and the War in Vietnam, the latter of which would cripple the former because of the draining of its funds to support the war. However, by the time of the Selma March, the president had come around to King's point of view that the nation needed to see the vicious result of Southern opposition. And the Johnson in the last half of the film is in sync with King. In the Oval Office, he dresses down Gov. Wallace, telling him he ought not to be "on the wrong side of history." And in the re-enactment of the last part of the president's televised speech announcing the introduction of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (which he had ordered drafted months before), we hear the concluding words, "and we shall overcome!"

The film is well summed up by these words from poet James Weldon Johnson's song "Lift Every Voice and Sing," often called the "Negro National Anthem":

"We have come, over a way that which tears has been watered
We have come, treading out path through the blood of the slaughtered
Out of the gloomy past, till now we stand at last,
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast."

See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lift_Every_Voice_and_Sing

The film does not use this hymn nor any of the familiar Civil Rights songs on its soundtrack, but it does employ the wonderful anthem written expressly for this film by John Legend and Common, "Glory." This engaging rap-anthem shows the relevance of the 50-year-old events:

"Justice for all just ain't specific enough
One son died, his spirit is revisitin' us
Truant livin' livin' in us, resistance is us
That's why Rosa sat on the bus
That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up."

Despite what the majority of the Supreme Court thought when they struck down key portions of Johnson's Voting Rights Act, Legend and Common declare:

"Now the war is not over,
Victory isn't won
And we'll fight on to the finish"

The two understand the biblical parallel with the long struggle against racism:

"Selma's now for every man, woman and child
Even Jesus got his crown in front of a crowd
They marched with the torch, we gon' run with it now"

Even Dr. King's tactic of nonviolence is affirmed, with an interesting insight concerning the music of the Movement:

"Enemy is lethal, a king became regal
Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle
The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful
We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through"

The anthem also recognizes what the filmmakers have asserted, that the Movement was not just centered on Dr. King:

"No one can win the war individually
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's energy
Welcome to the story we call victory
Comin' of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory"

See lyricsonetop.com/john-legend-songs/glory-feat-common-lyrics.html

For Reflection/Discussion

1. How did the two opening scenes affect you — the juxtaposition of Dr. and Mrs. King preparing for the Nobel assembly and the dynamiting and killing of the four Black girls at church? Although the second event took place earlier, why do you think the filmmaker juxtaposed them?
2. What do you think of the way that King is depicted, including his sexual promiscuity (though admitted briefly)? What does this reveal about the burdens that Coretta Scott King bore? (As if the constant threat of attack on her husband, herself and their children were not enough!) Had she reacted in anger and left her husband, how would this have affected his leadership, and thus the movement itself? Isn't this what J. Edgar Hoover intended?
3. Did you pick up the names of some of the women who also risked their lives? How are they often “the forgotten ones” of the Movement, save of course, Rosa Parks? Google their names — Diane Nash, Amelia Boynton, Annie Lee Cooper — for more facts about their eventful lives.
4. Which of the following men associated with King are you familiar with? Google their names: Ralph Abernathy, James Bevel, James Foreman, Fred Gray, John Lewis, Bayard Rustin, C.T. Vivian and Andrew Young. Were you surprised that Malcolm X came to Selma — or that the two, though with opposing philosophies, were not mortal enemies?
5. How do we see the Civil Rights Movement was more than just King (something that the press often does not acknowledge)?
6. What do you think of the treatment given to President Johnson? What did King do in succeeding years that led to a total break between the two? The TV film “King” has a good depiction of King’s speech “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” at Riverside Church.
7. Southern opponents constantly accused King of stirring up trouble. How is this partially true, shown in his sermon preached in the Selma church? Why was this tactic used? Did the northern press report on the daily oppression of Black people by white people in power?
8. If you have seen the film “Gandhi,” note two factors influential on King — Gandhi’s belief in the power of nonviolence, and his use of the press to publicize the plight of the people and the ruthlessness of the agents of the government in opposing them.
9. How did the nation respond to the televised beatings of the Black marchers? See any irony in the fact that two of the three people killed were white? For more information on Jimmy Lee Jackson, Viola Liuzzo and James Reeb, turn to Google. They deserve to be remembered!
10. How does “Glory,” the song from the soundtrack, add to the impact of the film? What are the meanings of “Glory”? What is “the war” mentioned in the song? How does the song link the past to the present?
11. How do we see that in the '60s, racism was more open among members of police departments? If you have read James Baldwin and other Black writers, did they report that the police departments of New York or other northern cities were any better?
12. What do you think the long string of police killings of Black people reveal about racism in police departments today? How is the situation in your community?

Session Five

“Do the Right Thing” (1989)

Content ratings (1–10): Violence 2; Language 0; Sex/Nudity 1.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8

Spike Lee’s now classic film “Do the Right Thing” is such a prophetic (and controversial) film that it merits attention even today, not just for its historic significance — the third in Lee’s oeuvre, it catapulted him to international fame — but because it so clearly foretold the future of interracial relationships in America. Its climax focuses upon the death of a Black youth at the hands of a zealous white cop, a tragedy that has been repeated over and over since then.

Lee begins the soundtrack just ahead of the title. We hear the strains of James Weldon Johnson’s anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” But after just one verse it is replaced by the driving beat of Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” a call to resist the white racist system that dominates society. Throughout the rest of the extensive front credits we see a video of Rosie Perez dancing to the song in front of the facades of decrepit buildings on a street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant district of Brooklyn. As she gyrates through a series of dance moves, her costume changes back and forth from miniskirt and tights to that of a female boxer. Later Rosie will appear in the less sexy/seductive role of Tina, Mookie’s (Spike Lee) long-suffering girlfriend.

The story, which will unfold over one eventful torrid summer day, begins at 8 a.m. with Samuel L. Jackson’s fast-talking radio jockey Mister Señor Love Daddy summoning his listeners to get out of bed. It will be the hottest day of the year, he announces, as he looks out onto the street from his storefront studio, Station W(e)L(ove)R(adio). “The color of the day is black to absorb some of those rays!”

Other characters are quickly introduced. Still prone in his bed is Ossie Davis, called Da Mayor. Even though he is addicted to Miller’s High Life, Da Mayor presides over the street with a benevolence befitting a wealthy benefactor. It is he who will give the film its title, telling the pizza deliverer Mookie, “Do the right thing,” advice that Mookie shrugs off. Sitting on the side of his bed counting his savings, Mookie wears the jersey of his idol, Chicago Bulls player Michael Jordan. When he turns and plays with the lips of a sleeping woman, we might think she is his girlfriend. Instead, she turns out to be his sister Jade (Joie Lee, Spike’s real sister), who is allowing him to board with her temporarily — and who apparently has been responsible for his present job, one that we soon see he does not take seriously.

Arriving in the neighborhood in a swank Cadillac is Sal Frangione (Danny Aiello), owner of Sal’s Famous Pizzeria. With him are his two sons, Pino (John Turturro) and Vito (Richard Edson). When the neighborhood changed from Italian people to Black people, they moved to Bensonhurst, but Sal feels a loyalty to his customers, saying how he has seen them grow up eating his food. Vito has become friends with Mookie, who is the pizzeria’s delivery man, but Pino hates the neighborhood, its people and Mookie in particular. He is trying to convince his father to sell the place. The brothers begin the day arguing about who should carry out Sal’s order to sweep up the debris in front of the store. When Mookie arrives (late as usual), he also refuses to sweep, replying that his job is to deliver pizzas, not to clean up. It will be Da Mayor, coming in to earn some beer money, who will carry out Sal’s order, much to the disgust of Pino.

Other characters include:

- Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), a burly athletic-looking Black man walking the street with his giant boom-box blasting out “You got to fight the power, fight the power, fight the powers that be.” (Spike Lee says in his commentary that the anthem is used 26 times!) Even fellow Black people tell him to turn down the

sound, but the one objecting the most is Sal, ordering him to turn the sound off when Raheem comes in to buy a slice of pizza.

- Looking out her window is Mother Sister (Ruby Dee), one who knows everybody's business and who keeps benevolent watch over the children playing in the streets. She is especially judgmental toward Da Mayor and his constant drinking, but will mellow when the old man later turns out to be a hero.
- Smiley (Roger Guenveur Smith), a mentally disabled man with a bad stutter, tries to sell copies of the famous picture depicting the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X smiling together. That picture is the last image seen in the film.
- Buggin Out (Giancarlo Esposito), a young man full of anger, will become the catalyst for the riot at the film's climax. He is upset that Sal's "Wall of Fame" includes only famous Italian Americans. The latter refuses to add any Black celebrities, telling him to get his own store. Buggin Out tries to get the neighborhood to boycott Sal, but everyone loves Sal's pizza too much to pay him any attention.
- Sitting in front of a bright red brick wall beneath a shade umbrella are three men who act as a chorus by offering comments on everyone and everything, ML (Paul Benjamin), Coconut Sid (Frankie Faison) and Sweet Dick Willie (Robin Harris). They are especially upset by the Koreans who have opened up the grocery store across the street from Sal. However, while one spews out his hatred and envy of the prosperous Koreans, another points out his laziness that has made him a spectator and not a doer.
- The Korean Sonny (Stephen Park) and his wife work long hours at the neighborhood's only grocery store. They are well-aware of the hostility of most of their customers, despite the fact that they too have been considered as outsiders by whites. Only Sal gives them a friendly greeting at the beginning of the day when he gets out of his car.
- Last of all is Tina (Rosie Perez), Mookie's neglected Puerto Rican girlfriend and the mother of his infant son, Hector. She berates him for not coming by very often and for his lack of ambition and interest in their child, almost reaching a breaking point when he continues to offer excuses for not spending much time with them.

Lee injects lots of small incidents that bring the neighborhood alive for viewers. Children laughing and playing in the spray of illegally opened fire hydrants. Girls effortlessly executing the intricate steps of a jumping rope game. A younger woman sitting behind Mother Sister on the front steps as she brushes out the older woman's hair. A group sits on another stoop opening cans of beer to beat the heat. Teenagers angering a white driver by spraying his trophy convertible with fire hydrant water. A white bicyclist accidentally besmirching the Air Jordans of Buggin Out and narrowly escaping a beating by the angry Black man's friends. Two cops in a car drive by, exchanging hateful stares with the three idlers. Da Mayor negotiates with a boy to go buy him a beer, and then is verbally assaulted by some teenagers who show him no respect.

The filmmaker also shows the ugly prejudice that infects everyone. Several denizens yell out a stream of racial epithets that incorporate virtually every insult they can think of — targeted are Black people, white people, Jewish people, Italian people and Korean people. Tempers, already shortened due to the extreme heat, explode at the end of the day when Buggin Out and Radio Raheem return to Sal's and demand pizza slices at closing time. Raheem, refusing to turn down his boombox, pushes Sal to his breaking point. Yelling out a string of racial slurs, Sal picks up his baseball bat and bashes to pieces the offending boom box. The two Black men attack the Italian man, and soon, with Sal's two sons defending him amid a pile of bodies, the parlor is a chaos of struggling men, with bystanders drawn by the noise. The brawl spills out onto the sidewalk, where more and more people rush up. Then the police arrive with their billy clubs, arrest Buggin Out and try to subdue Raheem. Attempting to bring the large Black youth to the ground, one cop clings to him from behind, his billy club choking off the boy's air. A fellow cop cries out twice in protest, "Gary, that's enough!" But by the time that the cop lets up, Raheem has stopped breathing.

The onlookers are so enraged that they start to move on the cops. Mookie goes across the street for a trash can and diverts their attention by throwing it through Sal's window. (According to Lee, diversion is not his intention. Instead, it is seeing his friend die before his eyes that causes him to want to destroy his employer's shop. Nonetheless, the mob does turn from Sal and the cops and direct their fury against the shop.) They rush into the pizzeria, destroying everything they can grab. Finished with trashing Sal's, they are about to attack the Korean store as well, but its owner Sonny, with just his broom as a defense, pleads, "I no white! I Black! You, me, same! We same!" This gets through; the mob sparing his shop. In the scene closely following this, be sure to catch what Smiley does when he enters the burnt-out pizzeria and confronts what remains of Sal's "Wall of Fame."

The next day, there is a touch of reconciliation that concludes the film, but certainly no warm fuzzy ending.

It is fascinating how skillfully Lee holds up opposites throughout the film.

- The film starts off with the stately "Negro National Anthem" and switches to Public Enemy's protest song.
- There is the theme of responsibility and irresponsibility, both his sister and girlfriend accusing Mookie of the latter, as does Mother Sister regard Da Mayor. Indeed, it is the women who think ahead to the future, while the men seek their own immediate pleasures.
- There are the two brothers, Pino hating Mookie and other Black people, and Vito befriending Mookie.
- Radio Raheem wears steel knuckles, one reading "Hate," and the other "Love." In a symbolic sequence, he shows Mookie how he believes that Love wins over Hate.
- Smiley's photo of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X will conclude the film, right after two quotations from these leaders.
- King's quotation is about violence never being justified, and Malcolm X's is that violence is "intelligent" when used in self-defense.

Thus, this film raises questions well worth exploring.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What has happened in the neighborhood since Sal opened his pizza shop? Where did he live then, and why did he move?
2. Discuss the various characters. Who especially displays concern for neighbors and thus is concerned for the welfare of the neighborhood?

Mookie	Tina	Da Mayor	Mother Sister
Smiley	Buggin Out	The Three Wise (cracking) Men	Sonny and wife
Sal Frangione	The cops	Brothers Vito and Pino Frangione	
3. What is Public Enemy saying in "Fight the Power"? You can read the lyrics at genius.com/Public-emy-fight-the-power-lyrics. For the group's take on our history of racism, especially see the third verse, wherein cultural icons Elvis Presley and John Wayne are brushed aside, the song declaring, "Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps." Who might be some of the heroes ignored by postal authorities? What has the Postal Service done in correcting the omission of Black faces on its stamps? For what might be a pleasant surprise, click on Black Faces on US Stamps.
4. What do you think is "the Power" in the song? How might this be similar to the principalities that the apostle Paul wrote about in Ephesians 6:12 (KJV)? How is racism entwined not just in police and sheriff departments, but

in prosecutors, judges and juries, in government officials, laws, politics and media?

5. There are several pairs in the film. What is the meaning of the following?
 - a. Radio Raheem's steel knuckles spelling out "Love" and "Hate."
 - b. The two photographs, one of Malcolm X and the other of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
6. Who expresses racism and other forms of prejudice?
7. What do the policemen seem to think of the people in the neighborhood?
8. What do you think of the running controversy between Sal and Buggin Out over the wall photos? How does each make a good point(s)? But is there any communication between the two? That is, does either show any willingness to listen to the other and try to understand his viewpoint? Why is this necessary?
9. How might Mookie's act during the riot have saved the lives of the cops?
10. Do you think Mookie or Sal learned anything from the riot, and if so, what?
11. How does Sal seem like most whites, oblivious of his racism? He might object to such a charge by saying, "But I sell my pizzas to Black people every day," but why is this no better a defense than liberals who deny their racial bias by saying, "Why, some of my best friends are Black people!"?



Session Six

“The Hate U Give” (2018)

Content ratings (1–10): Violence 5; Language 3; Sex/Nudity 2.

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!
Amos 5:24 (NIV)

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
John 1:5 (NIV)

But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.
1 John 2:11 (NIV)

Working from Audrey Wells’ script, which is adapted from Angie Thomas’ bestselling 2017 novel, director George Tillman Jr. crafted an inspiring film that both gets to the heart of #BlackLivesMatter and celebrates the love and strength to be gained from a cohesive family, regardless of race.

As in the novel, 16-year-old Starr Carter (Amandla Stenberg) narrates the story, informing us that there are two Starrs living in two different worlds. There’s “the Williamson Starr,” who on weekdays lives for seven hours at the white high school she attends. And then there’s the Starr living in ghettoized Garden Heights with her nurse mother Lisa (Regina Hall), reformed ex-con father Maverick (Russell Hornsby), older (by a year) half-brother Seven (Lamar Johnson), and little brother Sekani (TJ Wright). Seven has a sister, Kenya (Dominique Fishback), but she has stayed with her mother in an attempt to protect her from her father, King (Anthony Mackie), who is the head of the local drug gang. Maverick, once a member, has broken free by keeping quiet when he was arrested and doing the three years jail time that his boss should have done. By striking a deal with King to keep quiet, Maverick has been able to buy the grocery store from the sympathetic white man who had employed and taken a shine to him.

Starr was given her name by her father because she and her two brothers were the light in his dark sky. It was their births that motivated him to abandon his more lucrative career of drug dealing. At the beginning of the film we see a younger Starr and Seven, the latter named because seven is a “perfect” number, being given “the Talk” concerning the time sure to come when a white policeman will pull them over. They are always to place their hands on the dashboard, Maverick tells them, make no sudden moves, and always do exactly as the cop says. He also makes them memorize the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panthers and on occasion makes them recite a point. It is not the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s picture displayed on a wall of the Carter residence, but Black Muslim leader Malcolm X, with his insistence on Black pride and resistance to white racist oppression.

Starr’s mother has sent her and her half-brother to the posh white prep school because “the local high school is a place you go to get drunk, high, pregnant or killed.” This is part of Lisa’s conflict with husband Maverick, she wanting to move the whole family out of the dangerous neighborhood, whereas he does not want to abandon but to transform it. At Williamson High School, Starr is whiter than her classmates. They enjoy their pseudo hood talk and rap-star dress, whereas she eschews any slang that might fit into the stereotypes her friends have of Black people. She has two best friends, Hailey (Sabrina Carpenter) and Maya (Megan Lawless) — and a white boyfriend, Chris (KJ Apa), whom she never invites home to meet her parents.

Starr never feels comfortable in either world. At her school, she is but one of three or four African Americans, and in Garden Heights she has lost touch with her childhood friends. When her half-sister Kenya talks her into going to a wild party, Starr encounters her childhood best friend, Khalil (Algee Smith). As they renew their acquaintance, a fight

and then shots break out. Running outside, she accepts Khalil's offer to drive her home. In his car he plays a Tupac song, and when she chides him that it's out of date, he assures her that the dead rapper is very current, his explanation contributing to the film's title. "Listen," Khalil says, "The hate U — the letter U — Give Little Infants F---s Everybody." He adds, "T-H-U-G L-I-F-E, meaning what society gives us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out. Get it?" She does.

A cop flashes blue lights behind them, and Khalil pulls over. Starr recalls her father's "the talk," hoping her friend will offer no resistance, but he questions why he was pulled over, and is told to exit the car and stand with his hand visible while the cop runs a check on his license. Starr is apprehensive when Khalil moves to see how she is, and when he reaches for his black comb, the cop, without any warning, shoots the young man. She is horrified as Khalil dies in her arms.

A storm erupts in the Black community, a repetition of so many that have broken out all over the nation following the killing of Black people. The officer's story is that that he thought Khalil was going for a gun. Starr is a minor, so her name is not given out in the press releases. No one at her school or neighborhood knows she is the sole witness to the shooting. In regard to her testimony before the cops and possibly a grand jury, she is torn between her mother's desire for her safety and her father's rage that the shooting be declared what it is, a murder of a Black person by a white cop. Equipped by her father's talk years before, Starr had observed the details of the stop, memorizing the officer's badge number so that she refers to him as Officer One-Fifteen.

Also caught up in the conflict is Starr's Uncle Carlos (Common), a Black cop who helps her widen her perspective, to take in the pressure that any cop is under when he makes a traffic stop at night. He is with Starr and her mother when the girl is interrogated at police headquarters and feels the pressure to go along from his fellow white cops. Though not a friend, he knows the officer, and tells his niece that "It's complicated." She disagrees.

At school, Starr is often dismayed by comments made by her white friends, especially on the day that they decide to walk out of school in protest to the shooting — not because of the injustice but merely as an excuse to escape their classes and tests. As she struggles with her decision of whether to become involved, she meets April Ofrah (Issa Rae), a Black activist working to expose the racism of the police department. Although her mother will at first see April as a threat, the activist's compassion and concern for her daughter as a person, and not just as a prop for her cause, will have a profound influence on the teenager.

The film is filled with interchanges, some funny because of the cluelessness of the white people, and others enraging, especially when, after her identity is made public, Starr has to deal with a police investigator's focusing upon Khalil's drug dealing rather than the cop who killed him. She correctly perceives that by tearing down Khalil's reputation they can deflect attention from the killing — as this is confirmed by the way a journalist interviews her and by the eventual failure of the grand jury to indict the cop — indeed for much of the public the cop is made out to be the victim! Starr gains great insight as the days go by. The conversation she has with her father about *why* Khalil was driven to sell drugs leads her to a deeper understanding of society's systematic racism ensnaring so many young Black people in its tentacles. Though she breaks with one of her Williamson girlfriends, too obtuse to perceive her white privilege, she maintains her relationship with Chris, despite her father's displeasure when he learns about it. However, she has to set Chris in his place when he, like so many naïve liberals, says that he does not "see color" when relating to people. She reacts against this statement because her dad has instilled in her so much of Huey Newton's Black pride, telling her boyfriend that if he does not see the Black in her, "You don't see *me!*" Chris must learn that our color is important in the makeup of our identity and our perceived place in society.

The crowd-pleasing way that the film wraps up the complicated, conflicted matters at the end flies in the face of the reality of most white cop-kills-Black-man incidents, so we must see this as a harbinger of better times. Starr certainly stands as a symbol of the emergence of youth as advocates for justice. Thus, the film tells the story of a teenager who joins with the ancient prophet in declaring, "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" As the last line in the film reminds us, Starr is indeed a light in the darkness.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. Describe the main characters: Starr Carter Lisa Carter Maverick Carter Seven Carter Uncle Carlos Khalil Kenya King April Ofrah Chris Maya Hailey
2. Double-consciousness *is a concept in social philosophy referring to a source of inward “twoness” experienced by African-Americans* because of their racialized oppression and disvaluation in a white-dominated society. How is Starr different in her “two worlds”? Though it could be argued that most teens act differently in their two worlds — that of their peers and around their parents/relatives — how is this especially different for Starr? At the beginning of the film, what is the subject of Maverick’s talk with his children? Do you think white fathers hold similar talks with their kids? Why or why not?
3. How is fear a chief factor in the film? How does it overcome “Officer 115’s” training and judgment? Note how similar his reaction is to that of the policeman who drove up to a young Black boy “armed” with a toy gun and almost immediately shot the boy. Police killings are only the most dramatic examples of pervasive police violence across the United States. While police kill about 1,100 people each year, a large disproportion of them being Black people, they also engage in massive applications of lower-level violence, ranging from dog bites and the use of “less lethal” weapons like tasers to aggressive, harassing and unnecessary stops and searches.
4. What pressures is Uncle Carlos under — from his police colleagues, his family and the Black community?
5. Maverick and his wife are in conflict about moving out of Garden Heights or staying. List the reasons each have for moving or staying. How are both justified?
6. The novel better shows the contrast between Maverick and Mr. Lewis, owner of the Black barbershop next door. The latter displays a picture of King and is upset that his neighbor looks up to another Black leader instead. Who is that? Also, did you notice the other picture on the wall of Maverick’s home? Along with Malcolm, what kind of a portrait of Jesus is on display?
7. Huey Newton and the Black Panthers were once demonized by the government and press (indeed, many historians believe that the FBI raid on his apartment resulting in his death was a government execution!). How are they regarded today? What do you think of the seventh point of the Panthers’ Ten Points: “We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people”? To see all ten points, go to en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten-Point_Program. These were written in 1966 and released in 1967. What does this reveal about the progress of racial justice in our society?
8. Who is the other Black leader that Maverick looks up to? (Also highly regarded by Spike Lee in “Do the Right Thing.”) What do you think of Malcolm X’s dictum about racial independence needing to be achieved by “any means necessary”?
9. Going back to the barber Mr. Lewis, another good film to bring in and compare is “Barbershop,” set in Chicago’s volatile South Side. Calvin, who has recently inherited the shop from his father (who was dedicated to the area), is like Starr’s mother, Lisa, eager to move to a safer, more desirable area.
10. How often have you heard a white person, like Chris, say “I don’t see color”? This is an attempt to be tolerant, but what does it fail to consider? What do you think of Starr’s response? By overlooking her Blackness, and the unique experiences it gives her, can Chris really be of much help to her?
11. Compare Starr’s friends, Maya and Hailey. Does Hailey have even a clue that she is privileged because of their whiteness? How does an old phrase as “free, white and 21” reflect the privilege of being born white? Are you or other members of your group aware of the advantages and challenges of being born a different race? To help see this, on a large piece of newsprint or board and ask the group to identify privileges inherent to those born Caucasian. Then discuss what challenges those born in a marginalized and demonized racist system face. How do they

teach their children to maneuver in a world of white people and expectations? What different values do Black families uphold?

12. Discuss the insight into the corrosive power of hate in the following: “Listen,” Khalil says, “The hate U — the letter U — Give Little Infants F---s Everybody.” He adds, “T-H-U-G L-I-F-E. meaning what society gives us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out. Get it?”
13. Along with Huey Newton, Maverick prefers Malcolm X to barber Mr. Lewis’s hero, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And in “Do the Right Thing,” Spike Lee holds up both figures as offering ways toward achieving equality and justice. What are the strong points of each; that is, how have each contributed positively to those working for a better world?

Conclusion

Some time should be allowed in this final session to wrap up the series and to ask, “Where do we go from here?” This session could be extended, or maybe even an additional meeting agreed upon. Being aware of racism is an important step, but members should be made to see that it is just the beginning.

The Black Lives Matter demonstrations or other such gatherings can be strengthened by your presence. Your church or club can be encouraged to take an active part in local affairs. Racism is a huge problem, but it is one that can be faced and fought so that the “someday” so many sang about in “We Shall Overcome” will at last be realized.

The author Dr. Edward McNulty is a Presbyterian minister who for many years was the film reviewer for *Presbyterians Today*. Three of his 14 books are published by Westminster/John Knox Press: “Praying the Movies I & II” and “FAITH and FILM.” There are many more of his reviews of films dealing with racism and social justice issues at visualparables.org.

Edited by Denise Anderson, Co-Moderator of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Coordinator for Racial and Intercultural Justice.



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Presbyterian Mission

100 Witherspoon St. | Louisville, KY 40202
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