

‘Fierce freedom’ speaks truth to power, even within the church

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The theology of too many churches fails to recognize the radically inclusive and countercultural ministry of Jesus, public theologian Jacqui Lewis said during a [teleconference](#) sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

“I am grieving as a Black person the impotence of our religiosity,” said Lewis, senior minister at Middle Collegiate Church in New York City and author of *Fierce Love*.

“I am grieving as a Black person how many white clergy colleagues say—sincerely—that they don’t believe Jesus was for justice. Really? How is that possible?”

Feeding the masses, freely offering healing, welcoming women and children, and treating a Samaritan as the “star” of one of his stories were inherently political acts counter to the prevailing culture, Lewis insisted.

Jesus “stood in solidarity” with the outcasts, the disenfranchised and the marginalized, and he called his disciples to follow the narrow way that leaves no room for privilege, she asserted.

“What would Jesus do in the context of fierce love and fierce freedom? How would he respond to queer people?” she asked, noting the “shocking” suicide rate among transgender teens.

‘Disruption of white supremacy’

“Fierce freedom” speaks truth to power, including religious power “that looks more like empire than the reign of God,” Lewis said.

Far too often, white supremacy and American Christianity are “interlaced,” she said.

“What if we make it an essential nature of the way that we do church, do faith...that we build in the disruption of white supremacy?” she asked.

White supremacy shackles all Americans “to fear, to inequality, to shame (and) to injustice,” Lewis said.

“White rage is what put the knee on George Floyd’s neck. White rage is what puts white supremacy on the necks of all people of color, all who are not normative,” said Lewis.

She expressed her frustration with the way the United States too often “treats Black grief as a threat and white rage almost as a sacrament.”

Lewis disputed the assertion offered in the immediate aftermath of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol: “This is not who we are.”

“Well, that’s not true. It is precisely who we are. We are a nation built on violence. We are a nation built on stolen land by stolen bodies,” she said. “We are a nation in which racism is so woven into the fabric of our democracy, it’s hard to pull them apart.”

‘We have not overcome ... We are not free’

Many of the same elected officials who approved Juneteenth as a federal

holiday voted to erode voting rights and support laws that contribute to making the incarceration rate and poverty rate for Black Americans exponentially higher than that of white Americans, she asserted.

“We have not overcome. We are not liberated. We are not free,” Lewis said.

Countering cries of “Black lives matter” with “all lives matter” or “blue lives matter” reflects the “gentle, soft white rage folding into the inability to just look straight at the church’s collusion in anti-Black racism,” Lewis said.

In both active and passive ways, churches collude with systemic racism and discrimination—and Lewis insisted white conservative evangelical churches are not the only ones.

“I think too many of us are afraid to name the way progressive Christianity and conservative Christianity are too often pitted against each other but not allied on disrupting racism,” she said.

She challenged religious leaders to a “fierce courage, so that telling the story of anti-racism from our pulpits and in our classrooms and in our small groups is rewarded.”

When Trayvon Martin was killed, Lewis recalled telling her church board it no longer was enough for Middle Collegiate Church simply to be multiethnic and multiracial.

“We needed to be anti-racist in everything we did—all the policies, all the procedures, all the programming, all the work,” she said.

In spite of the pandemic, Middle Collegiate Church grew significantly because people “gravitate” to truth—“the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” she said.