Purlie Victorious: **Take Me to Church and Address the Reality of Racism**
Micah 6:8, Luke 10:25-37
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The Holy One has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Luke 10:25-37

At the Music Box Theatre on Broadway, the house lights fade and a recording of director Kenny Leon's voice welcomes the audience to the show. But this announcement does more than ask people to turn off our cell phones. Leon lets people know that this production is the first major revival of Ossie Davis's "Purlie Victorious" since its 1961 Broadway run. Then Leon asks us to "lean in": He tells us that this play is built on both humor and rage and that we should sit forward, get ready, and open ourselves up to both.

Humor. Rage. Hope. Despair. It requires an open spirit. All of this embodied in Davis's protagonist and his audaciously satirical and funny firecracker of a play. The lead character, Rev. Purlie Victorious, is a "man consumed with that divine impatience without which nothing truly good, or truly bad, or even truly ridiculous, is ever accomplished in this world." The audience must be ready. The current production is just about as sharp as satire gets. And I think it invites us in this time in our country and culture to explore deeper themes of injustice, history of slavery, racism, white privilege, white supremacy, and who is our neighbor. And it looks at what a church that might be an example of the Beloved Community.

Set in the Jim Crow South of the late ’50s, the play follows the story of a magnetic aspiring preacher, Rev. Purlie Victorious Judson. Purlie has just blown back through the doors of his childhood home in Georgia with a cunning plan. He’s wants to buy the town’s old church, Big Bethel, step into the pulpit, and liberate his friends and neighbors from the tyranny of Ol’ Cap’n Cotchipee, the linen-wearing, whip-wielding landowner in the big white house up the hill who has essentially re-enslaved the local sharecroppers through debt and who lives according to the credo “God is still a white man.”

Crucial to Purlie’s scheme are his brother, Gitlow; his sister-in-law, Missy; and especially the young protégée he has taken under his wing, Lutiebelle Gussie Mae Jenkins. Plucked from a junior choir in Alabama and spirited back to Georgia, Lutiebelle is the key to Purlie’s whole enterprise. She’s supposed to impersonate his dead cousin Bee, for whom Ol’ Cap’n is holding a $500 inheritance in trust. “Freedom, Missy, that’s what Big Bethel means,” Purlie rhapsodizes in the face of his sister-in-law’s hesitation. “For you, me, and Gitlow. And we can buy it for $500, Missy. Freedom! You want it, or don’t you?”

Ossie Davis originated the role of Purlie himself in 1961, alongside his talented wife, Ruby Dee, as the hopeful, seemingly hapless Lutiebelle. The ceaseless bravado of both roles isn’t just impressive; it’s radical, and it’s moving. When the industry was still casting Black actors as maids and bellhops, Davis crafted an extraordinary pair of characters for himself, his partner, and teams of actors to come.

There is the captain’s son Charlie Cotchipee, the well-meaning kid Ol’ Cap’n acknowledges with chagrin as “my boy, my own lily-white, Anglo-Saxon, semi-Confederate son,” who has somehow managed to hold on to a conscience. He stands up for the humanity and rights of the black people who work in his father’s cotton fields. And he knows the law – integration is the law.

The play employs satire. Good satire has to sting, and the show’s laughter never lets us off the hook. And one of the ways it invites us to laugh is at Purlie Victorious who is a trickster. It is a trickster story. The character of Purlie is hardly ever still, darting and dancing across the stage, a man ablaze with vision — a man we’re delighted to believe when he insists,
“I ain’t never in all my life told a lie I didn’t mean to make come true, some day!”
“Some of the best pretending in the world is done in front of white folks.”
“If it’s one thing I am foolproof in, it’s white folks’ psychology.”

He is like a trickster that shows up in various folktales, myth and stories. When Ossie Davis wrote the play, he came under much criticism, including from many of the leaders in the Black community. *Not a time for humor. Civil rights movement was serious business*. And yet, Davis knew the power of revolutionary laughter. It can be disarming and transformative.

Courage has many faces, and a revolution takes all sorts. When Purlie says he has never told a lie he didn’t mean to make come true, he isn’t just cracking wise. He is opening a door. One

researcher commented on this type of character - “Trickster isn’t a run-of-the-mill liar and thief. When he lies and steals, it [is] to disturb the established categories of truth and property and, by so doing, open the road to possible new worlds.”

The trickster openly questions, disrupts or mocks authority and causes mischief. Often the trickster serves as a transformer and culture hero who creates order out of chaos.

What if we see Jesus as a sacred trickster? Tricksters are revolutionary figures that challenge the natural order. They poke holes in what everyone takes for granted and fight systems that oppress. They work within a given religious or political system, but they wrestle with it, challenge it and transform it. In Jesus, we see a trickster figure, one who respects the beliefs and traditions of real people, yet also questions them, challenges them and subverts them for the sake of political and religious transformation.

Tricksters move between life and death, in an in-between space. Purlie Victorious goes about this dangerous plan knowing he could be killed. And one point, it is not clear if he will survive.

Jesus is described in many ways on the edges. After baptism, he goes out into the desert (to deal with a real trickster/tempter) in between Jericho, the city of sin and death, and Jerusalem, the city of spirit and life… This same space will be the setting for our parable story about the Good Samaritan, who picks up the half-dead sojourner, and offers help and life.

Our passage from Luke is an example of the trickster subverting the status quo. Jesus supplements the greatest commandment with a description of a second commandment that is just like the first, namely to love one’s neighbor. Here we see that Jesus respects the common belief of the day—the existence of God and the need to love God—but also ruptures it by saying that one knows one loves God when one loves one’s neighbors.

What if the parable of the Good Samaritan was to invite people to rethink who is righteous and trustworthy? Jesus takes people’s expectations and turns them on its head. Surprise and shock them. Jesus as rabbi and teacher and mystic who eats with the people at the bottom of the society’s ladder, who embraces children, who touches and heals those who were considered unclean. And tells a story where a Samaritan, an enemy of the religious Jewish people, was the hero and acted like a neighbor.

The cultural context was a culture of purity. It had a long history. Jesus the teacher, the rabbi, the trickster, prophet confronts people with their blindness, their way of looking at the world – clean and unclean, worthy and unworthy, who is on top and who is below in the kingdom of God. This is wounding their souls. Love God and love your neighbor.

Closing Wendell Berry is a farmer and poet in Kentucky. Some years ago, he wrote that the hidden wound of American life is racism. The European settlers came and pushed away the

people who were living here. Workers were imported and enslaved from Africa. Berry says he can trace both branches of his family tree back to slave owners. It has shaped who he is, even 150 years after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, or more than 50 years after the Civil Rights movement. Here is what he says:

> If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge it or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society.[1]

And what is he talking about? I believe he is talking about the wound of believing you are superior. It's the belief that the color of skin makes you better than somebody else. And this same notion of superiority is extended to anybody who claims the upper hand: men against women, rich against poor, one group of people against another group. If we believe that some are inherently better than others, we have ceased to regard one another as neighbors. That is a denial from the primal words of Genesis, that every person is created in the image of God. (2)

And if we deny our equality, we create ways to put others down, to deny them of the same opportunities, to degrade them as something less than what God created them to be. And the wound never heals, even when the only thing our neighbors want is a place at the table.

Over 61 years ago, Dr. King stood at the Lincoln Monument. And in his rich baritone voice, he intoned the words that guided him as a Christian and as a preacher:

- I have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."
  All people are create equal.
- I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.
- I have a dream that one day…little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.[3]

Dr. King received that dream from biblical witness, from a deep faith, from Jesus the Christ, the same one who did not restrict his healing work to those who looked like him. Jesus comes with the healing power of God – ready to release those who are afflicted in body or soul, ready to heal those who believe they are better or worse than their neighbors.

When the Bible speaks of justice, we are directed to connect our love of God to active love of neighbor. They cannot be separated, for the neighbor – the stranger – the other person – is

made in the image of God, just like us. She or he is worthy of the same respect as any of us. Justice is the practice of living that out.

Church and theater have some similarities. In both, we gather for a shared public ritual with aspects of emotional and spiritual significance. *Purlie Victorious* makes us lean in, makes us laugh, touches our hearts, and makes us think about that truth – heart and mind. Who shaped our beliefs? Did we have to unlearn generational prejudice, racism, bias?

In the title role, Leslie Odom Jr. gives glimpses of both the lost little boy inside and the disconsolate anger that racism kindled in that boy. Purlie embodies the trickster, the prophet and the preacher. He offers a concluding eulogy for the racism toward black people. In the play, Ossie Davis dissected the absurdity of the social and racial structures of this world, and America in particular, and the legacy of slavery in this country. As we reflect on this play in 2024, it is an invitation again, what we are called to do as followers of Jesus and as citizens become anti-racists.

May we commit to the work of loving our neighbor, standing against hate, speaking up, working against systemic racism, knowing it is for the sake of the healing the wounds of our hearts, the healing of the church, and the transformation of the world. Amen.

1) Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (San Francisco: Counterpoint Press, 2010) 4.
2) Rev. William G. Carter, "A Place at the Table," Saturday, January 17, 2015
https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2015/01/a-place-at-table.html
3) Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 219.

Review by Sara Holdren in Vulture
https://www.vulture.com/2024/06/theater-review-purlie-victorious-leslie-odom-jr-kara-young-ossie-davis.html