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SPEAKERS

Josh Mangelson, Katie Langston, Vivian Jenkins Nelson

Josh Mangelson 00:15

Thanks for listening to another episode of Project Zion Podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts the restoration offers for today's world. We aim to feature a variety of guests with roots in the restoration tradition, from Community of Christ, and our friends from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The music has been provided by Ben Harrington, you can find his music at Mormon guitar.com.

Katie Langston 01:07

Hello, everyone, and welcome to another episode of the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Katie Langston, and I'm here with an absolute treat for you today. I'm sitting in the dining room of Vivian Jenkins Nelson, who is well, she'll introduce herself to you in a moment here, and we've just had some lovely tea and some muffins that have been beyond delicious. But in particular, Vivian has a remarkable story, in terms of her own faith journey. She's an anti-racism activist, a scholar has received the Presidential was the Presidential Volunteer Award from Barack Obama, and is a pillar of the community here in Minneapolis, Minnesota. And it's just a treat to have her with us today. So thank you so much for being here. Vivian.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 02:02

Thank you, Katie.

Katie Langston 02:03

Why don't you start by just sort of introducing yourself to us and telling us a little bit about, you know, kind of your you could talk a little bit about your credentials, and then we'll dive into the story?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 02:14

Oh, well, I think the most relevant credential I have is that I was born into the family that I was. Both my dad and mom were very active in the civil rights movement. I come out of a family of educators. So educators and social workers, My, I guess, most important shaper was being born in Selma, Alabama. And growing up as a child, at the height of segregation, and then having my dad be part of dismantling

that and active with Dr. King. And, I think probably my most transformative moment, was with him as he talked to me as one day when they were trying to get a whole lot of other planning done. But instead, he talked to me about what I was thinking and believing at that moment. And it really turned my life around.

Katie Langston 03:20

So back up and share just a little bit about you said you're you come from a family of educators and social workers grew up in Selma, Alabama, talk a little bit about maybe your upbringing, and your background and faith as well.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 03:35

So my dad was a Lutheran pastor, and educator. So he taught at Alabama Lutheran College, my mother was at the Academy, and my grandmother was with the college. And so we were living there. And dad's students came back from several wars, and they were instrumental in getting Dr. King in and so forth. And I remember very, very clearly the day that we left town, because the sheriff sent an escort out. [Wow]. And to threaten my dad, and we were right at the Pettus Bridge. I was in third grade. And he I'll never forget the words, "if you ever come back to town," he said, "We will lock you," no, he said, "We'll throw you up under the jail and throw away the key." [Oh my God.] And so, you know, that was a moment never to be forgotten, let me tell you. So, he took a call to a Lutheran Church in in Charlotte for a couple of years and then moved on to Omaha, Nebraska, where actually the same story repeated itself, where he was became president of the of the pastors, black pastors group, and they were doing demonstrations and all that kind of stuff and Dr. King came and worked with him. And, the moment that I was alluding to earlier was that he [Dr. King] came through to meet with my dad and some other leaders in that group. And we met him in the, in the office of the Director of the airport. And his life was being threatened, and so forth and so on. And I was the only young person there and I was in college, and my mother had told me to come. And this might be the last time I would see him, it turned out not to be. But in any event, I was really in a very radical mode, as was my younger brother, who was a Black Panther. And the long and short of it was that he was interested because I was the only kid there. And he came over and talk to me, and we never stopped talking. And they were supposed to be planning, he was in between planes. And, they were supposed to be planning stuff for Selma, and so forth, but he spent the whole time talking to me in the corner. And we talked about so many things. But one of the things was that he really understood my anger at that point, it was able to relate to that. And he also talked to me about the potential that was really in that room that had already happened, and the changes that have happened since I was a little girl. And so I remember telling him that he was leading the black people in the wrong direction. Really, he was gonna get us all killed. How did he respond to this? He kind of smiled. He didn't take the bait, but anyway, and then I told him that you know white people just didn't get it. And we were gonna have to take up arms and shoot them if necessary. [Wow.] And he didn't overreact to that either. But yeah, he did respond in a very respectful way about how he understood that I might feel that way. And that, you know, we'd lose the arms battle if it came to that. And but anyway, that wasn't a compelling reason, the real, the real compelling part was in his not only in the message, but the messenger, in this case, and there was a kind of deep, deep peace about him. That was quite striking. And I remember telling my mother afterwards, I was not gonna wash my hands. Both of mine, and his and talked about so many things. But anyway, so like I say, that was a pivotal moment. [Oh, I can imagine] just pivotal.

Katie Langston 07:48

What is it, you know, you said that he had just a peace about him, What do you think was at the bottom of that? And what did you take away from that that was so transformative for you?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 08:01

Well, it was a very, it wasn't the kind of, let me see how to say this, It wasn't the kind of peace that is very, like a lake kind of peace. [Yeah] It wasn't that kind of, you know, oil on the troubled waters kind of thing, but it was like a real centeredness in spite of all this stuff that was going on around him, and the threats and so forth. I know, he had to be afraid at times. But it seemed to be so authentic, and that he'd found his center in which the rest of all this did not shake or break or get him off track or unfocused. And I knew it was faith. I mean, there was no two ways about that. And, you know, he was very clear in what he had to say about his faith. And so I was always very taken by the fact that, you know, most people read this the way he spoke as kind of, it's the black minister's delivery. Well, yes and no. It was coming from a very deep place that I had seen off stage as well as on stage.

Katie Langston 09:22

That's a beautiful way to put it. Where were you at this point, when you had this encounter with Him in your faith journey? You said [oh, by that time] the daughter of a Lutheran minister

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 09:34

Oh, not just Lutheran, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

Katie Langston 09:36

Aha. Which for our listeners is the is a more conservative version.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 09:46

Yes, absolutely. And by the time I got to college, I had already in high school gone through a number of kind of impasses [Sure] with the faith and I didn't even come to the part about women being able to be part of the ministry. But it was more around really wondering whether or not God could really allow these terrible things to happen to people, and still be a just God. And you have to understand at that time, there were lynchings going on, like you couldn't believe, and children were being killed. I was profoundly upset by the murder of Emmett Till. [oh, yeah] He was just a couple years older than me. And my best friend was Jewish. And she wanted to go to Israel, and I wanted to go to the Holy Land. And so she and I had planned that we were going to go to Israel. And those plans were, of course, interrupted by college. But, more importantly, it gave me a chance to really reach back to the Old Testament. And the Old Testament was pretty clear about, you know, an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. Those are all things I resonated with. And it was less confusing than to me than the New Testament. And so I was beginning to sort of find a niche there. But then the next thing that really happened there was that I became more aware of what was going on with Palestinians. And so I went school with them. And, so that was a real eye opening, that was a different side of the conversation [right] put it that way. And, and at this time, I was finding myself moving more and more and to the agnostic [sure] place and finding that while I was not all altogether, sure that there was a heaven as we had been told, up there in the sky, and a hell down there, and, you know, down there, beneath ground, whatever. And as I

became more influenced in terms of things like evolution, and I was very interested in science. So there were digs all around us at college, and which I wanted to be part of, but I knew very well, that the earth was not made in a 24-hour span. That didn't make me friends [Right] and win and influence people in the Missouri Synod. So, you know, it was just kind of a pile up of all these kinds of things. Finally, I just said to myself, well, you know, I believe in something bigger than me. I don't know how all this works out. But I just can't, I just can't do that. I just can't line up there anymore. So time went on. And as things moved on in my life, I began to really have a hunger for theology. And, you know, I'm really rereading all that stuff. I was forced to read, Buber and Bonhoeffer, Hoffer and so forth. And, and I was very struck by the, by the fact that Bonhoeffer who you will have to explain to folks who he was, had been in the US and had been in the black church. In fact, it was in my aunt's church, [really?]. And so as a graduate student, and you know, and he was very clear that there was a role for Christians to really be proactive to be active. In fact, he was part of the group that tried to take out Hitler, you know, right, right. So explain a little bit about him.

Katie Langston 13:58

Well, I hope I'll do it justice I know, Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran German theologian and pastor, and who's very, very influential.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 14:15

He had been caught as part of the part of the group that tried to assassinate Hitler,

Katie Langston 14:21

And he was executed for that.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 14:22

Yeah, he was put into a camp and then killed after that, not long before the camps were, were saved really by the allies, and opened up and he had been very influenced by the black struggle in the United States.

Katie Langston 14:42

I remember for the class. The reason I know Vivian is because she taught a class here at Luther Seminary on dismantling racism in the church and in Christian education. And we read Cones The Cross and the Lynching Tree, which I would highly recommend to With everyone [Yes, absolutely.] It's a life changing read. It really is. And he talked about how how Bonhoeffer was very influenced by, by the black struggle, kind of to the per, you know, I don't know if this is the right word, but at the perplexment that's not the right word. [Pretty good. I'm gonna...] Making it up here ... of some of his white colleagues. Well, yes, at Purdue's at Union Union Theological Seminary, and in New York City. And, and so that's very interesting that that that sort of formed, you know, the bedrock of a lot of what he, what he did.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 15:42

Yeah, and what he went back when he went back to Germany, to do in Germany. But, or rather and, the most important thing for me and Buber, in fact, a, he was a poet, and he wrote many hymn verses, one of which I had at my wedding and people were perplexed. Is this one is it not, not, not a wedding

song? The words go, "once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide." And whether truth or falsehood are the evil side. And he talks about kings and so forth and so on holding sway, and the decisions that we have to make, it was it's really a powerful tool [that's beautiful] once to everyone and nation is the name of the hymn. [Okay, yeah. I'll look it up. Yeah.] So anyway, this may seem a conundrum that this was in the very early, early pre days, really, of the movement, and there are many strands of it. That's another thing that people need to understand. And so you know, the one strand existed in our household, the Black Panthers. And then the other strand of my dad and his non-violent protesting existed, and we were able to live peacefully in the same house. And in fact, dad was so, he was so cool. He ended up going out with my brother, talking up the Black Panthers Breakfast Program, really, the two of them would make talked together, which which perplexed people in the movement. [Oh, sure.] The Civil Rights Movement, why would he be in with this but more violent end of the movement. And I can remember, I Thanksgiving dinner once where we had guests and my brother was home and from college, and he put his revolver in the sideboard. And it was like, okay, that's the most normal thing ever. We just go on eating. Nobody ever said a word. [Right] Okay, fine. But that was also the kind of freedom that he allowed James to as well. And so I can remember too, my older brother, who was a music teacher in Denver, one of the poshier suburbs at the time. That when this made as it did make the press, you know, anything that ... My dad was the only black Lutheran pastor for miles and miles and miles, states and states. So, anything like that, like his son getting arrested that made the paper [right], and so my brother's I think it was his principal said to him, that he was relieving him of his teaching duties until my brother, younger brother was proved innocent. [Oh my gosh] Yeah. So he lost his job. And he would go every day and sit in jail with my brother. Oh, yeah. And dad would fly out occasionally, you know, just to keep his spirits up.

Katie Langston 19:10

What was it, I mean, we live in such a polarized time now, where it seems like, I mean, we were chatting about this a little bit, you know, even within a movement, you know, you kind of have Bernie supporters and Hillary supporters at each other's throats and it's like, you know, they're on the same team. [Yeah, yeah.] So what do you think it was that allowed your family and, you know, your your dad and your in your mom to be able to coexist with differences of opinion on really important things

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 19:46

In a really big one?

Katie Langston 19:49

Yeah. How did they How did they do that?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 19:51

You know, that's, that's a interesting question. I've never really quite thought about it. Looking back, they were always interested in things in the real world. And so, and they were willing to question things. And if they didn't agree with them, then they very quietly went on about doing things like we were forbidden to have Catholic and Jewish friends, [huh?] Oh, yeah, you couldn't do that. But they had Catholic and Jewish friends. So, you know, it was like,

Katie Langston 20:24

oh, in the Missouri Synod was, oh, yeah, you're not your family. Okay, I got it...

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 20:29

Well, and then that played out directly to folks like pastors, right? Oh, you see, so Right. And, for example, they had learned to stand up to the church. And and that took real guts to, I think they were people who were true believers. But they were also people who could question and still felt that they had a place inside of the church in order to take a stand, as Luther would say, yeah. And my dad was as conservative as they come, we were Nixonites to begin with. And so the whole idea that, that a paradigm, a way of thinking could be turned over, as you're questioning and questioning, I could see them questioning. [So they wrestled with that] We wrestled as well with things. And then and they were partners in that. So it wasn't like my mom didn't get her say, and dad made all the decisions or anything like that. But you'd hear those discussions going on, quite pointed discussions, about things that are happening in the church or not happening in the church. And so I saw them living out lives of real ethical and moral dimensions. They were connected to each other, and connected to us in a very strong way. And their vision and values were being developed as they, as they lived in the church, and so forth. And so on. And I, I saw that, heard that, and that was part of my, that was also part of the decision making I was I was making at the time as a kid to really kind of go my own way. [Right.] And I knew because they were struggling to that. They were less like other parents to say, I did it this way. You have to do it that way. Because their way was changing, [right] Yeah. And it was as King called it, The Zeitgeist. It was the, it was the time as it was, what was going on, it was happening. And, you know, my dad had read widely, of course, and he knew all about Gandhi and so on, and really felt that that way of life was closer to the Christian ideal, which is the non-violence and really helping the poor. Right. That was his call, that was Gandhi's call. [Absolutely.] So and so he, he was also, I would say, in his own way, a systematic theologian. And, and that definitely was what King was. Right. So [yeah.] So, you know, they resonated, you know, and even though people were at different locales, they were having the same experience. And so he was not alone.

Katie Langston 23:35

Got it. So ever alone. So I hear you say you're, you're in this environment where the entire paradigm of the entire society is, is shifting, and that causes changes in the way people relate to each other, relate to their own faith. It's really shaking things up a bit. Now, how you were how old were you when you met Dr. King?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 24:01

I was seven to 17.

Katie Langston 24:03

So you'd gone through a period of questioning, you'd gone through a period of agnostic agnosticism, and you're in a more radical place when you meet Dr. King, and you have this experience as transformative. Did you ... was it was that an impetus to kind of coming back to faith from a different angle, and talk a little bit about the putting it back together once you've kind of torn it all apart?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 24:28

Okay. So at that moment, I was very, very lucky to have a theology teacher at college who was also the campus pastor. And he had studied at Oxford and or was at Cambridge. I can't.

Katie Langston 24:45

Where were you going to school?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 24:46

I was going to school at Dana College, a small Lutheran Danish college on the on a hill in Blair, Nebraska,

Katie Langston 24:53

And one of the one of the few black Lutheran students, I'm guessing

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 25:00

Ah, oh, yeah. All right. There were two black students from America, there are more students from Africa. Sure. They're like three. And so my brother finished before me. And he and one of his best friend's matriculated and graduated. And then I came through when I was the first black woman to graduate. Wow. Yeah. And it's been 100 years now. So it was time. It was time. Yeah. Right. And then or pretty close to 100 at that time, but and then my brother came behind me, and then my cousin and so forth. But the thing that I was, I was going for and talking about that environment was that I was very lucky to have professors who had had traveled widely and studied in other countries and lived in other countries. And my theology professor was, and still is, he's still alive a John Donne scholar, my dad was, my dad was very fond of John Donne. And so I was able to have an advisor who I could meet with on a regular basis, as a campus pastor to work through these the this coming back to faith and so forth. And I insisted on going through confirmation again. So I did.

Katie Langston 26:34

And was that still with the Missouri Synod?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 26:38

No, this was an ALC School at this point. And then once again, we we were quite sure in the Missouri Synod that the ALC people were going to go to hell. [Right.] I can remember. And so the fact that my brother went off to an ALC school, the pastors in town that at the next pastors' texts study meeting, which my dad, of course, was the only person at the publishing house, of color, right, they all, they all prayed that my brother would go to hell going that ALC. Oh, yeah. And so we've come a long way. My dad used to say that the civil rights movement was the biggest Ecumenical Movement of the century. I do believe it's true. I do believe it's true.

Katie Langston 27:31

I've never thought of it in that terms. But that's,

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 27:33

Yep. They were marching together, people who never talked together. Russian Orthodox, Lutherans, Catholics, Jews, agnostics, atheists, all sorts of people who were arm in arm, willing to give their lives up for this cause.

Katie Langston 27:50

That really did change. A lot of things didn't it?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 27:54

Sure did. And that's one that gets very little play, and thought. But, all this was going on. And my dad was, was in the press all the time about this. And so here I am sitting on this little campus fighting this battle by myself and dad used to come up on the weekends. And we go in the we go out to the black cemetery, because it was quiet. Nobody ever bothered us. And we'd talk about everything, you know, any struggles I was having on campus racially, or, or, or even biblically, and things I was learning and so on and so on. So I had two very wonderful if you could call them pastoral coaches, who were always careful to let me be me as I was moving through this transformation. And I wanted to I was more exposed than at that point to theological writing. [Yeah.] And so it was very, Buber was a very important person for me with all those German verbs at the end of the sentence. But, and, and I was very, very taken by the existential movement. And Soren Kierkegaard was really came into view. And so it was really a time for really a lot of thinking and a lot of absorbing very deep and important principles about faith.

Katie Langston 29:36

And so and so where did you go from there? So you come back to faith in college and go through confirmation again.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 29:42

Yeah. And I joined the college congregation there. Okay. So then I went to work for the Women's Job Corps, and I was still in Omaha at that time. And friends from college who lived here said you know, come visit. So I came and in the process of being here for one longish visit, I went to worship at one of the ALC congregations in the housing projects, and I really liked it. And I got offered a job. Oh, cool. And then I got, one of the people who was on the church council I met then offered me a job at his center, in social work. And so then the next thing I knew I had another offer from an from another from another social worker agency. So [so it was all coming together.] It was all coming together. So Minneapolis. Three jobs. And so I chose the one and then made the move. And, and then I was, No, I've got the story backwards. I'm sorry. I. What happened was, No, I didn't go to that little church in the housing projects to begin with. I went to another larger church, which was on, was very close to where I found an apartment. And it was on a main drag. And it was a big pile of stone has people say, and it was ALC. And I, yes, this is the story. I went there one Sunday, I was stopped by an usher who said, who stood blocked my way and said you would be more comfortable at the that other Lutheran church down there? [Oh my gosh.] So I turned by heel, I'd never ever been refused entry to a Lutheran church. And it happened here. I was just, [that's terrible] beside myself. Of course, I jumped in my car, and I went down to the Lutheran church and found my home. Right? Yeah. Wow. Yeah. So it these kinds of experiences, if I hadn't been raised to feel that I am part of this church, I own a piece of this real estate, if you will. [Yeah.] I, I belong here. [Right.] I would have walked away from the Western Church. [Oh, for

sure.] Yeah. But I knew then that that person wasn't very Lutheran. [Right.] And I knew where Luther stood, and so places was really quite awful, right, sometimes. For the most part, (...). Pretty cool. But Lutheranism by that point, had become clear on its stand on race. So you know, it takes things filter down a lot. So it takes time to for them to, as we say, filtered down to the pews. Yes, it does. And our and I'm quite sure, very proud of I shouldn't say I'm quite sure, but I'm probably sure that my family had been Lutheran in this country longer than his. So you know what I'm saying? And so it's like, so who are you? I have a right to be here. [Absolutely.] And if I hadn't liked it, I wouldn't have stayed at the little church, I would have found another job to another one. [Right.] Yeah. I think one of the reasons that civil rights movement seems to have petered out, in a sense. Yeah, it was because it was successful. It made so many changes, it made behavior change. So people weren't going around saying the kind of racist stuff they used to say, right? And do. And, you know, and the legal changes had been very profound. And they had physically moved people around and children and, and as a result, this, the society, as you said earlier, was changing and changed in some of these ways. So, and by that time, the women's movement had taken off. And then the gay movement had taken hold. And those were all movements that got their energy, and a lot of their language off of the Civil Rights move. [That's right.] And so I was active in both those movements. Sure. And, you know, my husband and I, were, of a mind on all these things, really. And he at one point was the EOC Director for the state. [Oh, that's cool] very cool. And he is a white guy, he would go to companies, and they were just, oh, they thought that you know, Oh, finally, we can just say what we want to this guy. You know, he's one of us. In other words, and, and be very surprised when when they found out No, you wasn't one of them. In spite of the fact he wore Brooks Brothers underwear and shirts and all the rest of it. He was a walking advertisement for Brooks Brothers. So he looked like, he looked like the quintessential American privileged male. But his sense of fairness was really, in some ways deeper than mine. Especially in the women's movement. He was so clear on that. And he was very influential and supportive and me finding my voice as a feminist.

Katie Langston 35:22

Oh, that's wonderful. And did you meet him here?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 35:25

I met No, I met him in college.

Katie Langston 35:26

Oh, you met him in college? So you married and then and then moved?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 35:33

No. So no, he went to the men's Job Corps. I went to the women's job. So anyway, so we hooked back up together after we came after I came here. So we got married here. [Oh, that's wonderful.] Yeah, yeah. We had three pastors, my dad, and the two pastors at our church. Somebody said this marriage, you had better last? Yeah, it was pretty cool. Yeah. Yeah.

Katie Langston 36:05

Talk a little bit, you were saying, you were saying earlier about your experience being, you know, turned away from the church. At a certain point after the world changed, overt discrimination became kind of uncool. But yet, it still continues and more kind of hidden and insidious ways. We talked about that in

our class, we talked about microaggressions, and some of the more maybe the more hidden systems of oppression and racism that exist. Talk a bit about the work that you've done, and that you do, along those lines to combat what remains of, you know, systemic racism and, and how you've been involved in those efforts.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 36:59

You know, thank you for that question. That's been really my life's work, actually. And so I teach a lot, I do a lot of training, in education, in a lot of different arenas, and corporate, and health. Anywhere there is a chance to have real dialogue and real change. And so many people, until the Black Lives Matter movement arrived, and the technology that we have, remained wonderfully ignorant about the fact that there still is racism in this country. And you no the language of "post racial" into the vocabulary, which, if you really were kind of awake to, to what's going on in the society you knew it wasn't true. [Right?] And especially if you say, I said, in a class the other day, you were your vulnerability on your skin. As opposed to people finding out that you're gay. [right] Okay. Same difference, same end result. But if that's the case, then you're still subject to all of these microaggressions. And what is a microaggression? Well, it's any kind of small, that's why it's micro, sometimes hidden to the very person that's doing it. Really kind of racial insult and off-sult to individuals. There was a clerk at one of my favorite grocery stores. Who, I watched her for months before I did anything, who would routinely okay, checks of anybody white coming through. But then when somebody black came through, she had to have always evidence. You have to show all your ID. [Right, right.] And one day, I had kind of planned it really I sent my husband through. Or rather, he went through, I didn't send him through, he went through first, no problem, [right]. I went through, and she had stopped me and all this stuff. Now, I had been going to the store long before she was there, [right] from the day it opened, actually. And so I said, you know, I'm really troubled by this and so forth. And she said, I said, you know, and you let the person ahead, go ahead. And then there was a woman before him and well, but she comes here all the time. I know who she was. I said, I come here all the time. I don't know why you wouldn't know who I am. I stick out more than she does. And oh, she she wanted to play it right to the hilt, so No, she wasn't being racial. And anyway, she said racist [racialist]. So, another made up word. But I said you were no yeah, you are. And this is something you need to be aware of? Well, anyway, I went to talk to the manager who knew me, of course. And he was just not having any of it. Oh, no, one of our best clerks? Oh, no, I don't think she has it. And I wanted to say to him, and how would you know, right? You know, you look just like her. [right] You have not had to experience what I've had to experience and to experience it on a daily basis, or the kind of thing where you go to a shoe sale. Now, in the old days, they would have just one shoe out. And then the clerk would have to go back and get the mate. [Right] So people wouldn't just abscond with boxes of shoes. Okay, so I'm at my first shoe sale in Minnesota, and the clerk is just right behind me, right behind me. I can hardly turn without bumping into her. And I said, finally I turned to her and said, Is there a problem? Oh, no, no, can I help you? Can I help you? I said, When I need help, I'll ask you. And then she kept right on behind me. And finally, I turned to her and I said, I'm not going to steal one shoe. And she was oh, no, no, I didn't mean that. Well, you need to back off. You know, I'll let you know. She wasn't following anybody else like that you see. So later on. There was a...channel, I forget, I think it was channel four, yes, did an undercover thing on this very store, among others, and their whole focus on black people shoplifters. And so in the training that clerks were getting, they were being told to watch black people. [Wow]. Now this was carried to such an extreme that one of the biggest games in town was a an upscale dentist and his wife, who had to black

collaborators who would go into stores, everybody would be watching the black people and they would steal them blind. Yeah, they all went to jail. Anyway, so those are the kinds of small aggressions that wear away every day, and you're having to make decisions every day. Now is this little battle I fight or not? And that's why I'm saying that, you know, it helps to have a centering, if you will, [yes]. Otherwise, you'd be driven crazy fighting every battle and ...

Katie Langston 43:15

Or you wouldn't fight or you wouldn't worry why else and you'd kind of waste away? I imagine. I don't live that experience. But I can imagine how that might feel.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 43:25

Yeah, exactly. And it's very important that folks understand that there comes a point at which there is the one interaction which seems on the surface, a very mild event, that is the straw that breaks the camel's back, [right]. And then here you go, then into this place where all of this stuff has been stored, but you haven't reacted to it. You just kind of smushed it down. And then here you are, just find yourself just being a screaming meanie, you know, overreacting in effect to the straw, if you will. And so that's, that's a precarious way to live. And it also affects people's physical bodies, not to mention their emotional and spiritual bodies. [Absolutely]. But, you know, the fact that people live in this kind of tension, increases blood pressure, it increases diabetes, it increases all the kinds of things that lead to small weight babies and so forth. And in short, it's called trauma. It's a form of trauma. And then you have people say, Oh, no, things are so much better now. And you're going Oh, my God, and then if you tell them one of these, well, that's so little why are you going there, and not understanding the cumulative effect of this concept. And just living in tension, waiting for the shoe to drop. Is this going to be the or someone who says the racist does the racist thing to me? And then finally, on this very thing, technology has brought us to a different place, where we can now see things that could only be described before. And you only had one person's view of it, [right] Or say of it. And if you're the person who is the victim, you don't want to cry wolf too many times, because then nobody will believe you. [Right]. And that's what's been so amazing about these videos and such. Because it brought it smack to all of our faces. I mean, you know, you can't deny what you're looking at there. [Right]. And, and it's really horrific to watch a human die. I mean, you want to talk about trauma inducing, [right] And so when I see that little boy being shot to death, I'm thinking about, Oh, my God, how many other kids that I care about, that I know, are at risk, like that. And so we are not afforded the, when I say we, I talk about African American community, we grieve in concert for these children. You don't grieve just by yourself, you're not an entity, by yourself. Being a racial minority, and I don't love that word, but just in terms of numbers, [Sure] and being at risk means that you feel this in a different way than if there are so if you're in the majority, there's so many that you know, and you're in control, and so on and so on. But you, the community feels this collectively and grieves it collectively, and finding, excuse me, ways to do that people don't always have a way to do that. I mean, they've got to go about their regular lives, [right] and take that part in too, as well and worry about their kids and so forth. So technology has taken us to an entirely different place now.

Katie Langston 47:07

And that is fueling Black Lives Matter. And it's healing. I think, I think I think the discourse has become more mainstream now. [Absolutely.] I think just regular Joes and Janes [Yeah.] know terms like

microaggression. And they, I think, have a better sense of the theory of oppression and can see what's happening. And at the same time, that same technology allows us, I think, in some ways as well to turn a blind eye because we've become a culture of, of memes. You know, I wrote...

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 47:48

Say something about memes.

Katie Langston 47:49

Yeah, sure. I mean, I wrote a paper about this last semester in in one of my classes about how we used to be, you used to hear the criticism 30-second soundbite culture, and 30-second soundbite culture meant, you know, this idea that we're not getting in depth news or reporting or analysis. But instead, snippets are being picked out here and there. Well, we're, we're down 2-second meme culture. If 30-second soundbite culture, we're to a place where someone you know, has a picture and five words on it as you're flicking by on your phone in the bathroom. And so while I think while, the technology is, is a wonderful tool that that has helped stir a conversation on on a deeper level in some way, it also sort of kind of gets back to what you're talking about at the very beginning, it plays into this polarization that's occurred in our culture and can make it I can make it difficult to have...

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 48:58

A deeper conversation. Yes. Well, I just want to say one more thing about finding that there are congregations of people who are profoundly moved by both the altar and the street and, where serious work is being done. But we still have yet to you know, we're very good at writing checks. Right? And, and rather, what would have been called Radical causes. You could write a check to Black Lives Matter, but have you come to that place where you are spiritually looking at your own sin in this, in this matter? At the moment when, because you were afraid you didn't say anything? [Yep.] Or the moment when you went along with it and shouldn't have? Or the moment when you yourself were oppressed and said nothing? So we still have a ways to go on really taking the easy way out. And I don't mean easy way out, because these movements need help. They need money. They need, people need physical support, right? I don't mean it that way. But if that's where it stops, it's not far enough.

Katie Langston 50:26

It has to, it has to go kind of like the civil rights movement, fix the surface, yet below the surface, to the hearts of each person and to the heart, the beating heart of our culture, racism is still alive and well.

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 50:46

And you know, and you say to yourself, Okay, so, alright, you're a black person, so what's your role in this? Well, there are a number of ways as I've just mentioned, one of them is to be present. Okay. And and even if it is your struggle to be supportive. [yep.] And one of the things that I've come to really take on, personally, is that everyone has an oppressor in them. That's original sin. So I might be the pure victim in this setting. But where am I oppressing people in my life? Okay, is it in my family? Is it on the job? Am I an oppressive boss? You know, we all have to come to grips with that. And, you know, am I oppressing people because I'm more educated than them. Right. And, you know, and I had once had a student who was wrong all the time. Worked for me, it was wrong, just wrong wrong. You're constantly having to correct him about how the machines worked in the office, and so forth, and so on. And one

day, he wrote me a note that said, that I just had no idea how I was oppressing him. Like, oh my gosh, but anyway, I took it to heart, it really, it really struck me that I had to lighten up and find another way to be helpful to him. But if I left, your temptation is to just wipe something like that off your computer and email, but I left it on my left in my emails and visited occasionally, and just to be reminded that we all can and are oppressors. And I would say this too, I know that I get unlimited access to an audience, that the struggles that you go through, and I go through them yet, on a daily basis are only to me manageable if you have a disciplined prayer and theological input on a daily basis in which to struggle with some texts and have some, and read something on a daily basis, and I'm one of these people who, it helps me to calm down really, in a sense. And just be, just get centered before my day starts. Because there are so many things that happen in a day. And you know, before you go to bed, the world kind of changed. So it's good to be centered. And in a sense, I understand now as an adult, looking back, that Martin Luther King was a disciplined person. And that he really was faithful to a prayer life and a life of religious introspection.

Katie Langston 54:20

Any final words of wisdom you'd like to share?

Vivian Jenkins Nelson 54:24

Well, one of which is that on the one hand, we all are oppressors in some way. We all have been oppressed. And we share that with other people. Not in a way that compares my oppression to your oppression and my oppression is worse than yours and this and that, not in that way, but in the way of making human connection, that that I may not understand fully your oppression, but I acknowledge that it's your story, and it's your truth. And you're entitled to it. And I'm not entitled to question you about that, about the truth of it. And, you know, people might say, well, you know, people like yes, people lie. But you know what? Oftentimes we make them lie to us. I had a friend who did her doctoral dissertation online and why people lie. And one important part of that that I took away was that they can't get our attention. And so being fully present for other people in our lives is tough. It's tough in this busy world that we live in and with the national discourse gotten so hideously awry. We've got to right it. We've got to get back to listening to each other. Well, thank you very much. Thank you.

Katie Langston 55:53

Dr. Vivian Jenkins. Thanks for coming on Project Zion.

Josh Mangelson 56:30

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