



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lillian Daniel: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is Raphael Warnock, Senior pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, the spiritual home of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rev. Warnock will talk about what he calls “radical religion.”

Lillian Daniel: We also welcome back our friend, Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. He’ll reflect on peace in our ongoing series on the “Fruits of the Spirit.”

Lydia Talbot: And we begin with a profile of Brenda Russell, a Chicago corporate attorney and niece of civil rights leader, Ralph Abernathy. As a child growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, she remembers her uncle’s friend, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, and the profound influence her uncle and Dr. King had on her life. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Brenda Russell: I was born in a little town called Demopolis, Alabama, which is about twenty miles north of Selma. Alabama was the segregated south. We moved into a white neighborhood. Going to school with white children, they were as clueless about me as I was about them. My mother taught in school. She taught in black schools. My father worked for a NASA subcontractor. He had finished law school in Ohio, Western Reserve. He moved back home and, of course, was not able to practice law there.

Civil rights was very personal for my family. He was Uncle Ralph. He wasn’t Rev. Dr. Ralph David Abernathy, best friend of Martin Luther King. I remember waking up one night—a stomachache or whatever—and Dr. King picking me up and putting me on his knee and just his calmness. Uncle Ralph was a pastor. He taught me how important it is to remember who was supporting you. They are the people who have nothing to give, but who look to you to make the inroads where they can’t go.

I decided to go into corporate law, into the corporate side, business side of things. Part of what Dr. King and others wanted was to get us to a place where we were wholly a part of society, where we were not on the sidelines. What they had envisioned was an opportunity for me to give back in a way that made a difference economically. For me to empower people to be able to hire people, to give them satisfaction in the course of building their own lives.

[OK, let's start with a word of prayer.] My faith is fully a part of who I am so in a corporate environment or in any environment, I'm acknowledging everyone as being important and critical to the process. Knowing that I am watched by God is the best lesson I could take from my spiritual journey. In terms of the work that we do, particularly work in a corporation, it's that you be who God calls you to be and be where you are. You don't get up and leave because it's tough. It's always tough somewhere. The faith that God calls us to have he supplies, he under girds. You don't have to have all of the answers. You don't have to be perfect everyday. You have to just get up and keep your heart open and try. That's, I think, the call on a person in a business.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: Brenda Russell is a member of The First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple, where she's active in several ministries. Our deep thanks for sharing her story.

Now, let me tell you about our speaker. The Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock is a native of Savannah, Georgia and preached his first sermon at the age of eleven. Following graduation from Morehouse College and Union Theological Seminary, he served at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City. In 2005 he was named pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. It's the church where the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. served for 44 years, and was the spiritual home of his son, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Rev. Warnock is a passionate advocate for justice and peace. His work has earned him the honor of being named by Ebony magazine as one of "Thirty Leaders of the Future." We're so delighted to have Raphael Warnock with us today on "30 Good Minutes" with a message he calls "Radical Religion." Welcome, Dr. Warnock.

MESSAGE

Raphael Warnock: Thank you so much. It's very good to be here with you.

Under the clandestine cloak of night, a strange and shadowy figure, mentioned only in the Gospel of John, comes looking for Jesus. Make no mistake about it, it is a scandalous scene. For Nicodemus is a highly credentialed religious leader. He is a minted doctor of the law. On the other hand, Jesus is a radical young rabbi turned rabble-rouser. Moreover, he hails from what can be best characterized as a Palestinian ghetto called Nazareth. According to the scripture, from there, the folk said, "no good thing had ever come," But still, it is Nicodemus who comes to Jesus. But when he comes, he comes at night.

He comes at night because it is a scandalous scene. Henry Ossawa Tanner, the great African American artist, captured it well in his portrait of 1899. With artistic imagination and biblical insight, Tanner portrays this gospel scene. Under the canopy of a moonlit sky and surrounded by a panoramic view of the countryside, way up on a Palestinian rooftop, above and away from his friends and colleagues, Nicodemus, the old cleric with a flowing white beard—the very picture of wisdom itself—comes seeking counsel from this young rabbi turned rabble rouser.

He represents the religion of the establishment and the status quo and from that viewpoint he comes making his religious claims. I hear him say: "Rabbi, we know who you are. You are a

teacher come from God. For no one can do the things that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Jesus hears the flattering remark and cuts right through it. He does not really respond to Nicodemus but raises the conversation to yet another level. As I read the text, I believe he actually interrupts Nicodemus and says in effect: “Look brother, you cannot see the kingdom of God unless you start all over. You have to be born from above. You have to be born anew. Dare I say it? You have to be born again!”

I submit to you that this is one of the most radical statements in the entire New Testament. It is radical religion. It is radical in the Latin sense of the word, literally “to get at the root of a thing.” Radical: it is no mere cosmetic maneuver, but to correct the thing at its foundation and origin.

Perhaps it does not feel radical to us in the church because this statement, “You must be born again,” is a statement that the church has preached to the world. We have pointed our fingers to the world and we have said, “You must be born again.” Why? Because we erroneously imagine—we church folk—that we represent Jesus, and the world is Nicodemus. Or we imagine that Jesus is the Christian, and Nicodemus is a Jew, although Jesus lived and died a Jew. Or perhaps in our minds Jesus is the religious person and Nicodemus is the sinner. But if we look at this text, this of all texts ought to make religious folk uncomfortable. *We* are Nicodemus! For Nicodemus is clearly the religious person with all of the right credentials. Nicodemus is the religious veteran who represents the institutional religion of the establishment. And it is Jesus the revolutionary, Jesus the radical, Jesus the religious heretic, who stands on the margins of our religious comfort zone and says to those who have it all figured out, “You must be born again!”

If you would see the kingdom of God, if you would discern what God is up to in the world, then you need to open yourself up to radical renewal. You have to be born again! If you would give yourself over to the one who came preaching good news to the poor, you have to be willing to be evangelized by the critical insights of the poor, those who live on the margins. You have to hear those who have been hurt. You have to internalize the insights of those who have only known insults! In fact, I think of Jesus in this regard. He once met a Canaanite woman who needed her daughter to be healed and Jesus utters the orthodoxy of his day. He says to the woman, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and give it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, but even the dogs desire the crumbs that fall from the master’s table!” I submit to you that as Jesus talked to the woman, he learned lessons that you can only learn when you’re talking to the mother of sick child. Jesus was born again that day as she helped him to grow in wisdom and in stature!

You see, good religion always comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Good religion has a way of turning you upside down in order to turn you right side up. Good religion is radical religion and radical religion is what we need. Not just any religion, we need radical religion. We need good religion.

I remember in the small churches where I grew up down in Savannah, Georgia, steeped in the African American faith tradition, they used to sing the song entitled: “Have You got Good Religion?” The response was, “Certainly, Lord!” And because they were so serious about it, they’d ask again: “Have you got good religion?” The response was, “Certainly, Lord!” “Have

you got good religion?" The response: "Certainly, Lord! Certainly, certainly, Lord" I did not understand why they asked that question with such pathos and with such power. Now I think I understand it better. They asked that question because they were steeped in the African American faith tradition. They understood that just because you are religious doesn't mean that you know how to treat everybody. And so they'd ask: "Do you love everybody?" And the response was, "Certainly Lord! Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!"

The African American slaves, like Nicodemus, came to Jesus by night in search of good religion. They came because they understood that the same folk who pray with you will prey on you. They understood that some of the same folk who always had Jesus on their lips have hatred and bigotry in their hearts. They understood that the same folk who say, "Praise the Lord!" in our history were also the first to say, "Pass the ammunition!" In fact, some of the worst sins committed against God and the most egregious crimes perpetrated against humanity have been done in the name of religion.

Bad religion sent 6 million Jews through Hitler's Holocaust. Bad religion captured Africans and packed them as human cargo on slave ships, one was named "Jesus." Bad religion worships the flag and burns the cross. Bad religion inspires fundamentalists of every kind: Islamic, Jewish and Christian.

Bad religion executed Dietrich Bonhoeffer; assassinated Martin Luther King, Jr.; murdered Medgar Evers; silenced Fannie Lou Hamer; killed Viola Luizzo; incarcerated Nelson Mandela; attacked the prophets and crucified Jesus!

And so, I want good religion. I want radical religion! Everyday of my life I want to be born again so that I can see anew what God is up to in the world and in this moment. I want be used as an instrument of God's glory. For Alfred Lord Tennyson had it right. He said, "Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be; they are but broken lights of thee; and thou, O Lord, art more than they." God is bigger than our systems, bigger than our categories. Oh, yes she is!

And so I want good religion. I want the religion of Moses who went to tell Pharaoh to let my people go.

I want the religion of David who dared stand up against the hegemonic giants in our world. I want good religion. I want the religion of Esther who said: "If I perish, I perish; I'm going to see the King."

I want the religion of the Apostles. There were only a handful of them but the record says that, "These are they who have turned the world upside down."

I want the religion of John exiled in a prison on Patmos. He dared to see a new heaven and a new earth.

I want the religion of Martin Luther King, Jr. who said that, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

I want the religion of Fannie Lou Hamer, a Mississippi sharecropper who said to the nation in 1968, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

I want the religion of Ida B. Wells Barnett, a black woman who looked her sexist male preachers in the eye and said, “I do not see why I need your endorsement...I have done what you would not do if you could... and I have done what you could not do if you would.”

I want the religion of Jesus who dared to say, “You must be born again.” I hear him ask Nicodemus, I hear him ask us, “Have you got good religion?”

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you’d like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Raphael Warnock, we’ll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let’s talk with Dr. Warnock. We are turned upside down by your incredibly inspirational message on radical religion! Another word could be “authentic” religion.

Raphael Warnock: I would agree. Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me here!

Lydia Talbot: It’s an honor. What you’re really talking about is the cost of discipleship as Bonhoeffer would have us see it.

Raphael Warnock: That’s right. I’m glad you mentioned that because a lot of people who were students of Bonhoeffer may have read the book, “The Cost of Discipleship.” Very often that’s a book placed more in the category of devotional literature, pietistic reflections; and, indeed, it is that, but even then as he talks about the cost of discipleship, he is reflecting very much on what is going on in Germany and this emergence of the disaster that Hitler will come to represent.

Lillian Daniel: Nobody starts out wanting to bad religion, but your distinction is so well done. There is wonderful book by the historian Charles Marsh called, “God’s Long Summer.”

Raphael Warnock: Yes.

Lillian Daniel: In which—you’re familiar with it—he interviews figures in the civil rights movement about their theology and what they believe the Bible says, but including some of the worst segregationists. They go through these theological back flips to make what they’re doing fit with Scripture. How do we slip into that kind of sloppy thinking of bad religion?

Raphael Warnock: Sure. I think that religion clearly does not occur in a historical vacuum. We are creatures of history and sociology. So I think it behooves all of us, wherever we sit, to always stay in a continuous and authentic conversation with folk who are on the margins. That’s part of the point that I was trying to make as I talked about Jesus and the Canaanite woman. Part of what keeps us honest, with respect to whatever privilege we have whether it be racial privilege or gender privilege, is to talk to folk who are on the receiving end of the violence that society perpetrates. The Latin American theologians talked about our need to be evangelized by the

poor. They talked about the hermeneutical option of the poor, simply meaning that when you're on the margins of the society you can see things that the rest of us the society perhaps cannot see. I think that that's why the black church, for example, has been so much a part of the critical conscience of America. It is the church that has always said that slavery and Christianity were incompatible. It's because of where the folk sat and what they saw.

Lydia Talbot: And you remind us to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. Bonhoeffer talked about his resistance movement during Nazi Germany from the perspective of those below: the reviled, the oppressed, the poor, those who suffer essentially. You did your Masters thesis on Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Raphael Warnock: Right. Comparing his ministry to that of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lydia Talbot: What do you think...where would they point today? What is their message today as we look at our wounded world?

Raphael Warnock: Where do we start? There are so many issues that they certainly would be focused on. Let me say that as Bonhoeffer talked about looking at the events of world history from below, that when he was a student at Union Seminary in New York he taught Sunday school at Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, where I also served as an Associate Pastor. I'd like to think that he was inspired by the spirituals, which he later taught to his students when he went back to Germany and in some sense that provided the content of his understanding of the view from below. But I think he and Martin Luther King, Jr. would be very, very focused on a number of issues that confront our world today. I think they would be clearly very concerned about the kind of empire building—and that is really what it is—that drove us into Iraq.

Lydia Talbot: You were against the war in Iraq?

Raphael Warnock: Yes. I was against that invasion before it started.

Lydia Talbot: And you spoke at a peace vigil.

Raphael Warnock: I was never convinced. War certainly ought to always be a last resort, but I was always opposed to that war and spoke at the National Cathedral a while ago on those issues as they were talking about the surge.

Lillian Daniel: In that image of listening to people who you normally wouldn't hear from, like the Canaanite woman, has there been a time in your own life when you listened to somebody in that kind of a relationship and had your mind changed around this question of good and bad religion? Have you found yourself called to account?

Raphael Warnock: Constantly. I mean it's an ongoing kind of critical conversation that I'm arguing ought to always take place in the heart and in the head of an authentic believer. Many of my colleagues, for example, women colleagues in ministry have deepened my sensitivity to this ongoing scandal of sexism in the church. I was always aware of it to some degree because my mother is a pastor and my sister is a pastor. But there were ways in which I was not aware of

certain slights and the ecclesiastical glass ceiling and the scandal of denying half of our humanity access to whatever gifts they would provide. I mean, that's one example as I deal with children, the poor, with our gay and lesbian sisters and brothers. I think that that's a very serious issue that the church will wrestle with in the years to come. And whatever side we come down on, I think we really need to talk to those sisters and brothers.

Lydia Talbot: Our time is up unfortunately. Thank you for your authentic message and keeping the living legacy of Ebenezer Baptist Church alive!

Raphael Warnock: Thank you.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: We turn now to our friend Otis Moss III, a frequent visitor to “30 Good Minutes” and pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Otis has a strong connection to our speaker, Raphael Warnock, and Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, because his father, Otis Moss, Jr. was co-pastor there in the early 1970s with Martin Luther King, Sr. Otis continues our series on the “Fruits of the Spirit” with this reflection on “Peace,”

REFLECTION

Otis Moss: The kind of peace that God demands God's people to demonstrate is peace that surpasses all understanding. This idea is made lucidly clear in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King was experiencing the pressure and the stress of leading the freedom movement, the Civil Rights movement. His family had been threatened, his house had been bombed, and he was at his kitchen table one day. It was late in the night and he was praying. Praying, raising the question, “Why me? I have the weight of an entire country upon my shoulders.” It is in this moment that he literally felt the spirit of God rest upon him and he felt that, literally, everything was going to be all right. With the pressure of death threats, people attempting to destroy his family and the movement, he felt peace that surpassed all understanding. When we have this kind of connection to God, God will rest God's hand upon us and we will have peace.

CLOSING

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Otis, and our thanks again to Raphael Warnock, Brenda Russell, and you for being with us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I'm Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I'm Lillian Daniel. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and an extensive collection of other messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may peace be with you in the week ahead.