

2022



The Reverend

Adriene Thorne

The Riverside Church
Senior Minister Candidate



Letter from the Senior Minister Search Committee

Dear Members of The Riverside Church,

With grace-filled joy, we present to you the candidate for Senior Minister, The Reverend Adriene Thorne. We are pleased to recommend Rev. Thorne as our final candidate to be considered by the congregation. All church members are invited to brunch and an informal gathering to meet her on Saturday, July 16, from 9:00 a.m. to noon in South Hall. On Sunday, July 17, all are invited to join us for worship when the candidate will preach, and members are invited to stay for a special meeting immediately following the service.

We express our gratitude to you for the trust you placed in us. We have felt your support from the very first, since the congregational meeting when you elected us on March 14, 2021. You have prayed alongside us, and we are grateful for all that you invested in this time of discernment.

We are grateful to our Regional Executive Minister of the American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York, The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Dudley, and to our New York Conference Minister of the United Church of Christ, The Rev. David Gaewski, who worked closely with us throughout the search and call process. We have been grateful to The Rev. Michael Livingston for his excellent leadership as Interim Senior Minister.

We extend thanks to all for joining us in this holy calling. Your vision, honesty, and insight during our Listening Tour from June through October 2021 were fundamental to our process of discerning who we are and who God is calling us to become as the body of Christ. During our fall retreat we broke bread, prayed, and walked a labyrinth as we prepared to gather and summarize all that we heard. We created our church profile (found at www.trcnyc.org/candidateinfo) and presented it last December to members of the Commissions and Church Council in preparation for our posting this past Martin Luther King Jr. Day. We listed the position with our denominational bodies, on the church website, and in journals, and shared it with our local networks. We prayerfully reviewed ministerial profiles, resumes, letters of interest, statements of faith, theological reflections, sermons, writing samples, and confidential letters of recommendation. We arranged for a select number of initial and follow-up interviews, hosted three neutral pulpits, and called references. All the while we had in view the three core competencies identified during the Listening Tour and named in our church profile:

Pastoral Care. Our senior minister will profess a strong, abiding, and articulate faith in Jesus Christ. They will embody dynamic humility and integrity as a servant-leader, and exhibit clear and ever-present gifts in pastoral care.

Leadership. Our senior minister will embody grace and leadership in managing challenges and interpersonal tensions, and must be skilled in conflict resolution. Our senior minister will demonstrate institutional leadership savvy, including skills for strategic planning and implementation, and a commitment to cultivating good relationships with clergy, staff, lay leaders, and the congregation.

Preaching. Our senior minister will deliver theologically rich sermons grounded in scripture, expressing joy and humor and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, which includes the gospel of justice and freedom.

We invite you to review the enclosed information about The Reverend Adriene Thorne and to submit any questions you may have for her by completing this form at www.trcnyc.org/questionsforthecandidate by noon on Friday, July 15. We will gather your questions for a period of Q&A during our brunch with the candidate on Saturday, July 16. We look forward to seeing you then, as well as at the worship service and congregational meeting on Sunday, July 17.

We are blessed to be members of this faith community. With the Spirit of God guiding us, we will be blessed with a pastor to lead us in worship, fellowship, and service to Jesus Christ.

Grace and Peace,

Senior Minister Search Committee

Emily Anderson, Hylda Clarke, Alexa Donaphin, Karissa Garner, Lisa Hinds, Annie Meredith, Lee Sartain, David Vaughn, Andrea C. White, Beth Wynne-St. Louis, and Mark Yim

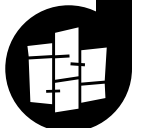


The Reverend Adriene Thorne

The Reverend Adriene Thorne has served The First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn since 2016. Beginning in 2008 she spent eight years at Middle Collegiate Church in a variety of ministerial roles, concluding her service there as Executive Minister. With neighborhood partners, she co-founded the award-winning Brooklyn Heights Community Fridge in 2021 which won the Nextdoor Love Your Neighborhood Award, was featured at the Nextdoor initial public offering at the New York Stock Exchange, and highlighted in *Real Simple* magazine. Adriene completed post-graduate studies in pastoral care and counseling at The Blanton-Peale Institute and is a certified life coach and disaster chaplain. Adriene received her Master of Divinity degree from The Pacific School of Religion where she earned the Koinonia Award, the school's highest honor given to those who strengthened the seminary through outstanding contributions of spirit, insight, and intellect.

When she's feeling open, though, Adriene will tell you that she's learned more about God from nature, art, and her child than from any classroom or book. Adriene's background in the performing arts includes credits with The Dance Theatre of Harlem, The Metropolitan Opera, and the world-famous Radio City Rockettes, among others. When she's not parenting, pastoring, creating, or mentoring, Adriene is probably SCUBA diving a coral reef, on the squash court, or in the dance studio, fantasizing about what is newly possible.

Adriene's Christian practice and leadership are grounded in an appreciation for imperfection that attempts to embody robust vulnerability. She leads with an understanding that even the resurrected Christ came back in a flawed body—what hopeful news for us! Adriene believes that everyone brings gifts to the table and that we teach one another. She is grateful for the wisdom found in collaborative leadership and delights in anyone who tries to listen well. Stepping back to step forward, Adriene has learned the tremendous power of silence and stillness for her own leadership joy.



Letter from the Candidate

4

God's peace, Riverside Church community,

It is my great pleasure to greet you in the joy of the Lord and to begin what I imagine will be an ongoing process of getting to know one another.

My call to an embodied ministry of care runs through The Riverside Church. Though never a member, I came to understand my call to ministry partially in the crucible of Riverside's legacy, which is both personal and universal for me. I mentored girls as part of the Save Our Selves (SOS) program, attended a young adult house building trip in Tijuana, Mexico, danced in worship, and filled up weekly on the life-giving words of countless preachers, speakers, and teachers. Riverside helped me believe in and live big dreams and come to know an even bigger God.

Architect Robert A. M. Stern described Riverside Church as the culmination of a "craving for a tall cathedral among people of everyday tall ideas." Whether worshiping or volunteering, countless people leave Riverside Church feeling tall and possible and connected to something bigger than themselves. Over decades, that truth has never changed. The walls of the sanctuary drip with the sermonic arabesques of preachers from Fosdick to Forbes. The faithful prayers of thousands make the sanctuary air heavy with their fragrance, and when the world breaks and life hurts, folks hope Riverside Church will show up ready to lead and act.

One threat to Riverside's ministry is the existential threat that every church faces now—lack of belief and falling membership. While these realities threaten, they are also opportunity. Communities of faith are no longer the sanctioned center that we once were, but as people of faith we must model the new thing God is doing that others may not perceive. I believe Riverside could lead, guide, and shape a new dream for the church born out of its desire and plan to heal itself. Healing is what the world longs for, now more than ever, and what more invitational witness to Christ could we extend than to begin a healing at home that overflows into our city and beyond?

The endowment and connection to John D. Rockefeller Jr. are additional threat and opportunity for Riverside. The perception of being a monied church often overrides the exceptional work of generations; this I know from serving churches with similar perceptions, but Riverside has a story to share beyond its walls that communicates its commitment to be a place where "[p]ower is shared, peace prevails, love is law, grace is poured out, the margins become the center, the earth is cherished, humanity thrives." Threat becomes blessing!

There is an ethical laziness with big endowments and grandiose architecture, but experience tells me that people support grand stories they feel a part of, stories like the gospel told and lived. While still an emerging artist, I began my own tithing journey at a monied church because of their grand story—a story I wanted to make my own. Storytelling, while important, is not the whole story. Strengthened, personal relationships with church members also strengthens generosity. I believe that care, at the heart and center of who Riverside is, will grow a culture of generosity in all the ways we imagine the word. Threat becomes blessing!

The two greatest opportunities of any house of worship are the power to convene and the power of holy imagination. Riverside has these powers in abundance. The power to convene authorizes us to call the city together, to call the people to attention, to call all God's children to their better selves. Most importantly, in the Riverside tradition, is the power to convene not only the dignitaries and superstars but the ordinary, everyday people—the community activists, local organizers, and neighbors who know what needs doing to improve their piece of the world.



Letter from the Candidate

All our convening is for naught, however, without the power of holy imagination that invites us to begin with the end in our hearts. What is it that we imagine Riverside and Riversiders can do and be?! Riverside is a religious center and community icon described by *The New York Times* in 2008 as “a stronghold of activism and political debate... influential on the nation’s religious and political landscapes.” Not only is this who Riverside is, but also what the world is hungry for—thoughtful, progressive, Christianity that throws wide the church doors and sets tables for all the people, period. And not only does Riverside welcome people in, Riverside also takes God’s lavishly loving message to the streets, listening to those on the margins who have a wealth of resources to share. Living beyond ourselves will demand repeatedly that we inhabit a holy imagination.

Riverside will need holy imagination to continue developing its creative capacity to become...to become neighborhood partners with institutions in the surrounding area who will help us leave God’s fingerprints all over our city, to become sensitive to the pairing of art and justice and how that pairing speaks God’s good news to people of faith and people of no faith, to become healers and repairers of the breach both inside and outside the church walls.

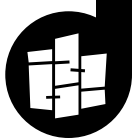
The power to convene and the power of holy imagination open Riverside up to a faithful new chapter in its history, and I look forward to partnering with you on the way. Embodied pastoral care is who I am. After twenty years as a performing artist, I went to seminary to assemble the pieces of a life committed to the church and to healing. I knew connecting the arts and religion and the body would restore and transform hurt people, and I have spent over twenty years putting my life’s work to just such use in all areas of ministry—preaching as pastoral care, social action as pastoral care, fellowship as pastoral care. If it happens in the life of the church, I have turned it towards healing. A colleague once told me, “When you preach, you do care for three hundred-fifty people at one time.” #BestComplimentEver

Dynamic preachers, outstanding public theologians, and charismatic personalities have led Riverside Church from its inception. But all faith communities need a pastor. A servant-leader who will sit with the people in the pews and the people by the side of the road—literally. A pastor who creates spaces where all feel loved and fed. A pastor whose leadership nourishes staff, members, neighbors, and themselves. The ethos of the entire church must be care. I bring that. I bring that for such a time as this. I bring that with the passion and precision of a high-kicking Rockette (which I was in a former life!). I bring that, and I look forward to adding my gifts to those I believe exist in the Riverside community in abundance. Sending you my prayers as you do the faithful work of healing ministry that God has called us to.

Wishing you God’s peace and looking forward to seeing you soon,



The Reverend Adriene Thorne



Statement of Faith

I believe in the Triune God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer who is simultaneously particular and one. God is a God of compassion and justice. God is sovereign. The triune God loves creatively, relationally, and vulnerably within God's own self and the good creation. The Creator God made humankind in the divine likeness and gifted us with the good creation and the responsibility to love and care for it.

I believe in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One, who came to be God with us and for us. Our Redeemer embodied God's grace in an earthly witness and lavish love that led to his death and resurrection for our salvation. The cross attests to God's unfailing love for creatures. I believe God's gift of grace, in Jesus Christ, is available to all.

I believe God, the Sustainer, participates in God's ongoing divine activity in the world. The Spirit unites us with Jesus and remains with us constantly to redeem and restore us to Christ. The Spirit is our advocate, our comfort, and our guide, bringing us into full relationship with the Creator and Christ.

I am a Christian who affirms the triune God, while simultaneously acting in the world with theological imagination. Theological imagination means, for me, an attempt to name the un-nameable and speak the unspeakable God in the many ways at my disposal. These ways include worship, witness, and service.

I believe Holy Scripture is the word of God, which witnesses to God's self-revelation. I hold, too, an awareness of scripture as a tool misused to oppress and abuse God's children and the earth. I believe that God continues to speak, in this book that we love, a word that is living, breathing, and always new.

I believe the sacraments of the church, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, are signs of the real presence and power of Christ in the Church. They bolster our tottering faith, that might otherwise fall, and connect us with Christ and Christ's people. They seal God's promises within us and activate and motivate our will. These gifts of the Spirit are ours by grace through faith alone.

I believe in the church of Jesus Christ and in God's plan for the kingdom, healed and whole, on earth as it is in heaven.

I believe prayer is a powerful force. In the act of prayer, we seek God, and God finds us. Prayer, a response to the Spirit, grows out of the depth of our lives and calls us to active participation in God's work in the world.

I believe God transforms the broken places in us and in the good creation while we are doing the work we were commanded to do—to love God and to love one another as we love ourselves.

To God be the Glory.



The Reverend Adriene Thorne

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Adriene.Thorne.Minister/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/AdrieneThorne>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/revadriene/>

7

CREATIVE VISIONARY AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEADER

Innovative, inspirational, and energetic spiritual leader with proven track record of formulating vision and strategy based on God's leading. Committed to working collaboratively with church leadership, membership, and civic leaders to ensure a faithful witness to the call of Jesus Christ in the life of all people. Background includes fifteen years as a national and international performing artist with significant experience in dance education, embodied prayer, and creative team building.

Areas of Expertise and Spiritual Gifts

Preacher • Worship Leader • Pastoral Care Giver • Artist • Effective Communicator • Strategic Planner
Culturally Proficient • Entrepreneurial • Spiritually Mature • Collaborator • Organizationally Flexible and Agile
Interpersonally Engaged • Counselor • Technologically Savvy • Sacred Space Designer • Writer • Coach

Relevant Experience

**SENIOR MINISTER • FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BROOKLYN
BROOKLYN, NY**

July 2016-Present

- Oversee, with the church elders, the overall ministry, program, and business operations of the church.
- Plan, guide, and lead creative and joyful worship that makes space for our community's great diversities.
- Collaborate with the lay governing body to implement all ministry goals and objectives of the church while inviting and cultivating member participation and leadership.
- Ensure that all church policies, procedures, and budgeting are consistent with the church's vision and mission.
- Supervise and manage a staff of seven.
- Collaborate with the finance committee in the yearly budget process and management of the budget.
- Serve as public face of the church in the larger community. Represent the church in various community and civic organizations, denominational committees, other organizations, as well as in written and televised press.
- Partnering with the launch of new digital ministry incubating at the church. Won seed grant from the PC(USA).
- Co-president of the Brooklyn Heights Interfaith Clergy Association.
- Member of Mayor Eric Adams' clergy advisory team.

Key Accomplishments

- **Community Partnership:** Led the formation, during Covid lockdown, of the now award-winning Brooklyn Heights Community Fridge. Featured on NY1, Pix11, and News12. Global winner of the Nextdoor Love Your Neighborhood Award. Brooklyn Heights Blog most impactful person 2021. Featured in *Real Simple* Magazine.
- **Congregational Connection:** In a time of staff transition, saw to the deepening of relationships within the community using dinners at home, one-on-one meetings, and neighborhood dance parties.
- **Interfaith Collaboration:** Continue to maintain the church's relationship with multiple houses of worship begun over thirty years ago, including an annual 9/11 commemoration and joint MLK Jr. worship celebration. Especially vital given the political divides and the increasing hate and violence in the United States.
- **LGBTQIA+ Leadership:** While the church session has welcomed women and men to serve as ruling elders for decades, in 2022 we ordained the first trans elder in the 200-year history of our congregation.



The Reverend Adriene Thorne

EXECUTIVE MINISTER • MIDDLE COLLEGIATE CHURCH
NEW YORK, NY

June 2008-May 2016

- Served as Executive Minister of this 1000+ member church while simultaneously serving as Minister for Care during multi-year clergy search. Was the primary minister responsible for pastoral care throughout my tenure.
- Senior Minister in Charge when Senior Minister was away.
- Oversaw the overall ministry, program, and business operations of the church.
- In collaboration with the Senior Minister and consistory worked to implement all ministry goals and objectives of the church while inviting member participation.
- Welcomed and oriented 50 new members in first year on staff.
- Ensured all church policies and procedures were consistent with the church's vision and mission.
- Direct supervisor for Associate and Assistant Ministers, Property Manager, and indirectly managed staff reporting to these positions.
- Collaborated with the Senior Minister in the yearly budget process and management of the budget.
- Advised church board on issues of member care and concern, building maintenance, and various building policies and procedures.
- Served on committees as requested by the Senior Minister and represented the church in various community organizations, denominational committees and other organizations as well as in the written and televised press.

Key Accomplishments

- **Congregational Care:** In a time of staff transition, simultaneously performed the roles of Executive Minister and Minister for Care, which included coordinating deacons, elders, members, and clergy team for care of 1000+ members. Operated as lead clergy on death and dying, trauma and grief, hospital and home visits, pastoral care and counseling for members as well as those in the larger community requesting support or referrals. Senior Minister in Charge when Senior Minister was away.
- **Comprehensive Construction Project Oversight:** Partnered with various contractors, engineers, architects, and vendors to close out a three-year, multi-million-dollar renovation of the church house and upgrade of the sanctuary sound system. Coordinated and moved 20-person staff from temporary office space to the newly renovated space. Contracted new vendors and hired new staff.
- **Cut Costs and Raised Revenue:** Worked collaboratively with church facilities and finance teams to end or renegotiate contracts system-wide resulting in thousands of dollars in savings. Raised nearly \$80,000 in rental revenue the first year back in the new space.
- **Interfaith Collaboration:** Helped found and continued to maintain church's relationship with multiple houses of worship begun in 2008, including an annual evening of music and recitation. Especially vital given the political climate and increasing Islamophobia in the United States.

LECTURER IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION • UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
NEW YORK, NY

January 2014-2016

- Offered creative approach to prayer for Master of Art and Master of Divinity students seeking to experience the divine in the space of their own bodies.
- Guided students in an embodied approach to prayer that inspires commitment to life-long movement.

Key Accomplishments

- **Student Retreat Leader:** My offering at a student retreat caught the eye of the Dean of Students who insisted the seminary community needed what I was sharing—an embodied approach to spiritual formation.

Previous positions include Interim Director of Worship at the Pacific School of Religion, Camp Director at St. Thomas Reformed Church, Chaplain at Children's National Medical Center, Rockette at Radio City Music Hall, and Soloist with Dance Theatre of Harlem's Workshop Ensemble.



The Reverend Adriene Thorne

Education and Other Credentials

Somatic Abolitionism Training Program with Resmaa Menakem 2021 – Present

Somatic Abolitionism is living, embodied antiracist practice and culture building—a way of being in the world.

Master of Divinity (Pastoral Care and Art & Religion Focus)

Pacific School of Religion

Ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament – Presbyterian Church (USA)

Bachelor of Arts (Cultural Studies with Creative Writing Focus)

State University of New York – Empire State College

Certificate of Completion

Blanton-Peale Institute – Advanced Pastoral Care and Counseling

Certificate of Completion

New York Disaster Interfaith Services – Disaster Chaplain Certification

Certificate of Completion

Reformed Church in America – Level I Coach Certification

Certificate of Completion

THRIVENYC

Mental Health First Aid

Certificate of Completion

Dance Theatre of Harlem Professional Training Program

Honors – Awards – Service

Brooklyn Heights Association – 2022

Community Service Award

Brooklyn Eagle Newspaper – 2022

Brooklyn Pillars Recognition

Brooklyn Pillars are members of clergy serving in Brooklyn that have been instrumental to their community.

Sustainable Solutions for Sacred Sites Grant 2022

Awarded to help congregations do more with their real estate than they currently imagine, and develop an understanding of the many adaptive reuse options available.

Nextdoor Global Love Your Neighborhood Award 2021

Brooklyn Heights Community Fridge

Recognized at Nextdoor initial public offering on Wall Street and invited to ring opening bell.

Most Impactful People – Brooklyn Heights 2021

Brooklyn Heights Blog

Recognized for dreaming up Brooklyn Heights Community Fridge and enlisting neighbors to help make it reality.

Mayor Eric Adams Clergy Advisory Team 2021 – Present

Clergy Member

Calvin Vital Worship Grant 2020

Grant intended to stimulate thoughtful and energetic work that will result in worship that exhibits renewed creativity, theological integrity, and relevance.

Odyssey Impact 2020 – Present

Board Member

Odyssey Impact drives social change through innovative storytelling and media, connecting faith and secular communities. Powerful stories can connect communities and catalyze social justice.



Sermon

There's No "I" in Partner • Philippians 1:1-18

Video: <https://first-presbyterian-church-of-brooklyn.sermoncloud.com/#> (May 22, 2022 at the 44:50 mark)

Grace to you, church. Following the violence of this past week, in Buffalo, NY, in Dallas, TX, and in Laguna Woods, CA at a sister Presbyterian church, may God grant you grace. Let's pray:

The prophet Jeremiah, said, "From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush." God... there is no peace. Not in our spirits, not in our country, not in your world. We need a word from you. We need a grace-filled word, and our prayer this morning is that you would come through. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I wrote and rewrote today's sermon more times than I can count, and then I tossed it in the garbage. Here's the thing, church, we are in a state of emergency... and truth be told, we always have been... since 1619 in this country and arguably longer than that depending on which historian you follow.

This is going to be a brief, but difficult sermon and I encourage you to breathe deeply throughout, to stay present—don't check out—and to place your hands on your body where you need support (my neck gets super tight when I talk about this and my heart aches so you'll see my hands there). We need a hard sermon today because not enough of us are awake to the emergency plaguing all of us.

Paul wrote in his letter this morning: "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with *knowledge* and *full insight* to help you to determine what really matters..."

Life matters, church. We are still in the Easter season, the season of new life, and life matters. The lives of the ten people targeted and murdered in Buffalo because of their black skin, they matter. The Asian business owners, targeted and shot in Dallas because of their Asian bodies, they matter. The Taiwanese church, a sister Presbyterian church that nests at a church in Laguna Woods, CA... the pastor of that church was at my conference... shot up last Sunday because their politics did not match up with that of the Taiwanese gunman, their lives matter. Life matters, church.

I walked out of here last Sunday to catch a plane to a church conference, and I felt blindsided when I arrived on the property in North Carolina. While I knew about the indigenous land theft, that the magnificent conference center in the Black Mountains of North Carolina sat on the ancestral lands of the Cherokee, Yuchi, and Catawba nations, I didn't know Martin Luther King Jr. had spoken there but couldn't stay there. I didn't know the facility had been used as an internment camp for Japanese Americans during WWII. It was the eastern most internment camp in the country. All this information was shared in a list of announcements for the day... and so when I gathered with my colleagues for lunch, Japanese American, Korean American, Chinese American, South East Asian, African American, Indigenous, LatinX colleagues... there was anger and there were tears.

And Paul writes, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with *knowledge* and *full insight* to help you to determine what really matters..."

Life matters, church. The way we handle one another's bodies and the stories of those bodies...that matters. No one wants the misuse and abuse of their people relegated to a list of announcements, but this goes to show how inept and frightened we are to talk about what really matters.

Next month marks seven years since a gunman traveled to another black community, in the south, sat in Bible study with the people of Mother Emmanuel Baptist Church for hours and then... murdered them. Keep breathing... Next month marks six years since a gunman showed up at the Pulse Nightclub and opened fire on black and brown, queer bodies, murdering 49 children of God. Keep breathing... These lives, these people matter.

And this is my prayer, Paul wrote, that your love may overflow more and more with *knowledge* and *full insight* to help you to determine what really matters...

Some of you will not like that I'm about to talk about white body supremacy again this morning, but I must talk about what really matters even if you don't like it. It's part of my job. Even if it makes you uncomfortable.



Sermon

11

Because what I don't like, what makes me uncomfortable and should make us all uncomfortable, is a world in which people who look like me and my child are murdered shopping for groceries, and we don't talk about it at church. What I don't like is the assumption and the demand that some of God's people expect to be comfortable while others of us carry discomfort in our bodies every minute of every day. This matters, church.

We are all caught up in a system, in a world that seeks to separate us from one another, and while it's lovely that we gather in an inclusive and diverse community on Sundays, it's not enough! Take a deep breath. Don't check out.

I want you to agree that this is true:

All bodies are inherently good. Regardless of cultural background, regardless of color of skin, all bodies... your body, my body... are good. Please don't hear me attacking you because you are a particular color. All bodies are good. Please don't come up to me after the sermon and say I made you feel bad. All bodies are good. I hope we can agree about that.

And I don't need to tell you, thinking people, that this country, at its founding, church, deformed the goodness of all bodies. Yes? With regard to race and culture, this country centered white-skinned bodies and saw every other body in relationship to whiteness. That does not make white bodies bad. But it is the truth of this country. And sure, you can sit there and think about gender and class and all the other isms but the Buffalo shooter went after Black people. The Atlanta spa shooter went after Asian people. The white body, at the founding of this country was supreme and it remains supreme. It doesn't make the body bad; it makes the system evil. And that is the definition of white body supremacy. And even in my African descended ecosystem, whiter looking Black people, like me, are supreme. This definition is not an attack on anyone here, it's not an attack on individual white folk, but it is an acknowledgment of a system that we live in. As people of faith, as followers of Jesus, we cannot call ourselves justice-loving people if we cannot acknowledge the fundamental truth that white bodies matter more. Take a deep breath... my heart's pounding.

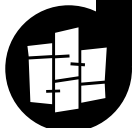
What we are doing this morning is naming what matters, in order this morning to build our resilience in a world that is killing all of us in different ways. What I am talking about doesn't just affect Black, Indigenous, and people of color. It affects white people too. This world is killing all of us... in different ways. The supremacy of white bodies, the centering of whiteness harms ALL BODIES. Because white bodies matter more, whiteness tracks with better education, better housing, longer life, more lucrative employment, assumptions of intelligence, generational wealth, expectations of safety and comfort, a rush to protect and to comfort... I could go on and on but suffice to say that all of us live in a world that centers whiteness, and that centering harms us all.

Take a deep breath. I can't hear you guys breathing. I hope you're not holding your breath. Whooooo. Maybe you need to shake a little and discharge some of that energy. I just want to remind you that you may be uncomfortable. You may be angry or crying... but I promise you, you will not die.

Every president until Obama was white. And the fact that I can name all of these, the fact that we can name all of these... this is the problem! Every Supreme Court justice until Thurgood Marshall, white. Every pastor of this church until Paul Smith, white. And when Blackness shows up, when LatinXness, or Asian-ness shows up we know what happens. You must be twice as good. In the case of Ketanji Brown Jackson, in the mouth of Lisa Murkowski, you must be exceptional... and I would just ask you, who else on the Supreme Court would you call exceptional?! And even then, your chances at success are slim. Surely the deck was stacked to help you get here. Surely, you're only here by luck. Surely, as was the case when I was a Rockette at Radio City Music Hall, surely, I had taken someone else's job. Because the white Rockette was meant to be there, and I could only possibly be there because I was taking something that didn't belong to me. I had no right... to be there! Take a deep breath.

And this is my prayer, Paul wrote, that your love may overflow more and more with *knowledge* and *full insight* to help you to determine what really matters...

Race matters, church. And it matters that we talk about it. Do something about it. Center it in all our actions and conversations. Otherwise, we're just playing at following Jesus. We're just playing at justice.



Sermon

In the same way that white body supremacy is about a system, so is Paul's understanding of partnership in the gospel. Paul, in this letter, is addressing a system, a collection of people he calls partners...partners in the gospel. In the Greek we call this collection of partners a KOINONIA. Koinonia, in this sense, literally means partnership, but partnership like this, it is a partnership in an economic sense and Laura Rittenhouse will understand this in a real way... because these people have a share, they have stock, they have an investment riding on something, they have skin in the game. They are committed, invested, and the currency, the valuable item, is God's good news story. And that gospel is a story about loving God and loving people with everything you've got. It's a story of justice. It's a story that centers the brutal murder of Jesus who lived in an Afro-Asiatic context. It is a story about power and domination and a God who makes humility powerful and love powerful and truth-telling powerful not for just the oppressed but for the oppressor as well. It's a life and death and life story and its ours and it matters.

The community Paul writes to is invested in maturing their seeds. They're invested in ripe relationship. They're invested in growing up. And this is Paul's reason to hope. And there's perhaps not a lot to hope for for some of us in this world right now but this is Paul's reason for hope... and catch this... it's not the people, just like when we talk about white body supremacy, it's not the individual people who are the source of hope... it's the community. Professor Katherine A. Shaner said, "It is not our trust, our belief, our faith that creates the relationship and thus the advancement of this koinonia. Rather it is the partnership, the koinonia, that Paul says gives him confidence." Paul says it this way, "I am *confident* of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about *all of you*, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace..."

As we got the news last weekend about the evil, racially motivated, pre-meditated shooting in Buffalo, it was more than our individual trust, belief, or faith could hold. The church shooting in California, the probability that the shootings at several Asian owned businesses in Dallas, TX are the work of one lone gunman targeting Asian people, it is more than we can hold alone. Gun violence, racial hatred, political divides have us, like Paul, imprisoned, church. This moment, with Covid deaths passing one million in the USA, this moment is more than our individual trust, belief, or faith can hold. So, we take some strength from Paul's letter that suggests we alone are *never* enough in a moment like this. We need the koinonia partnership. And the history video this morning was an amazing set-up, because we are imprisoned still... two hundred years later, by sorrow, grief, white body supremacy, political malice, and the ease with which we spew all that animosity on one another. We need partnership, not singularity. We need to be reminded that we are invested in a valuable story, a gospel story, that helps the edges hold when gunfire... would rip us apart. To be a partner in the gospel is to be in community.

There is no "I" in partner, and that is the most important realization to have in this moment, because bondage makes us want to pull in and pull away. You may be thinking right now, "I really don't like that, Pastor." Don't pull in. Don't pull away. Some of you will focus on the fact that this sermon made you feel bad rather than focus on the families whose loved ones are dead because of the color of their skin. Think about that! Reflect on that. Pray about that. Journal about that. Take that to therapy. To prayer. I'm not the problem. This sermon is not the problem. And after you've done all that, take a deep breath and come back to church because you are invested, I hope, in the value of the gospel. And this investment in the gospel is a joint venture. I can't do it without you, and you can't do it without me. There are no Lone Rangers in the gospel... not even Jesus.

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons... that's how the letter opens. To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Brooklyn, with the bishops and deacons... that's how the story opens for us today. What does a saint look like?

I pray for you and for me a commitment to the partnership, a commitment to the power that sees us through challenging times. It can be tempting to pull in and pull away from Christian community, but I believe the saints in your lives would say keep with it... not just because this story that we are invested in is valuable but because we simply cannot hold this world, with all its weight, by ourselves. Take a deep breath, church. Amen.

The Reverend Adriene Thorne

The Riverside Church Senior Minister Candidate

