Kimberly Jackson '06: Chaplain, the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center in Atlanta

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Kimberly Jackson ’06
Chaplain, the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center in Atlanta
BY BRENDAN TAPLEY

Brown in Ferguson; Freddie Gray in Baltimore; Sandra Bland in Texas—not to mention the Charleston church shooting. You went to Ferguson. What isn’t the media understanding about these incidents?

KJ: One thing I didn’t understand was how deeply hurt and angry black people in Ferguson were, facing regular police brutality, mistreatment, and abuse. I listened to them talk about the smaller incidents of police pulling them over for no reason, yelling at them, calling them names. I listened to the mothers. Suddenly, this was a much larger thing.

White people have said they are surprised by these incidents, but black people often say they aren’t.

KJ: Well, some black people are. I certainly am. One of the things we don’t talk about is class, and as a middle-class African-American woman I don’t live in a neighborhood where the police are terrorizing me at all. So, it was shocking for me.

People made much of a post-racial world when Barack Obama was elected president. Did we misinterpret that moment?

KJ: Absolutely. Yes, it was incredibly significant, and you can go back and look at all the images of black people pouring out on the streets and weeping with joy and astonishment that this even happened. But we never went back and evaluated why we were so astonished. I’d like to suggest that the reason we were was because we knew this was not a post-racial country. We knew racism was very alive, very real. And so it was extraordinarily shocking that Barack Obama was elected. Also, I think people kind of closed their ears to hearing

Over the last year, there have been a number of racially charged incidents with white police—Eric Garner in New York; Michael...
Would you say his election actually tapped a greater anxiety in white America about power?

KJ: I think white America was perhaps intimidated or concerned about their place and future in the establishment. There are instances of some white people doubling down and making it clear that they are the true people of power. They did a lot to demonize Obama and make his job incredibly difficult. Racism was certainly a part of that.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been criticized for rejecting the role of the church, in particular what they charge as its "passive respectability politics"—peaceful protest, turning the other cheek, etc. As an activist in both arenas, what's your view?

KJ: I would push back a little on this—that the BLM movement is disassociated from the church. Some of that old establishment of the black church has rightfully been criticized for its pandering to respectability politics. But there are a number of black clergy who have stood by side by side with Black Lives Matter activists. We listen a lot more. There's a mutual respect. The clergy can enter into certain spaces that the Black Lives Matter leaders can't, and we understand it to be a mutual relationship we're working toward.

Do you agree with BLM that there is a need to rebuild the black liberation movement?

KJ: My elders would say that the black liberation movement never stopped, so they would not agree that it needs to be rebuilt, simply that it needs to be continued. It has to have new strategies and tactics.

Do you have a sense of the new strategies?

KJ: One of the obvious new differences is that you've got a whole other class—poor and working-class black people—stepping up and demanding their rights. With that comes different rhetoric.

You provide campus ministry to Clark Atlanta, Morehouse, Morris Brown, and Spelman colleges.

KJ: My call to ministry came out of a lot of conversations I had while I was at Furman. So, I very much understand that college is an opportunity for young adults to begin to discern whether ministry might be a place for them.

There's been a great deal of debate at colleges lately about whether freedom of speech should also mean the freedom to possibly offend. Have you experienced that in your higher education work?

KJ: I work in an all-black context, so this conversation doesn't happen around race as much as it does about sexuality. The question becomes: Does a student have the right to tell a person who is gay that they are condemned to hell? I sit in this place of asking the question: Are there ways we can talk about this so it's...
Around the Lake | Q&A

What don’t people know about Furman, but should?

SEMSOPRANO: That students are not simply taught facts but how to reason.

JGRUES: It’s a wonderful institution for veterans. Served 2006–2015, now a full-time student.

MEREDITH DANGEL: People think it’s still so conservative and Baptist-oriented. Not true. I was introduced to so many different viewpoints and walks of life.

JEFF O’SHIELDS: Furman has an excellent financial aid office. Prospective students should never allow tuition cost to “score” them.

CHRISTY ALLEN: I may be a little biased, but we have phenomenal libraries.

FRAN SEVIER BROWN: After your kids graduate, you miss FU almost as much as they do.

ELEAINIE HERRSCHED: Oh my gosh, I felt the same! Almost as sad on the way home from graduation as from freshman drop-off.

GINGER MAYBERRY: Our son has received tremendous support and encouragement from his professors. They have gone above and beyond in assisting him in and out of the classroom.

KATY MUHLHAUSEN: Beautiful, safe campus... and easy to get involved in activities and clubs.

→ not you personally condemning a person to hell?

How do you handle that?

KJ: It’s a really difficult nuance, and the reality is feelings are still hurt. We’ve gotten to a place [historically] that certain things are just not tolerated. The “n” word is not going to be printed in Furman’s newspaper. That’s about protecting people who have had the word used against them. There are times when the referee comes in and says, yes, you have a freedom of speech, but we have a higher responsibility of loving and caring for all the people in our community. I want to protect the people who have been the oppressed group, but without honest dialogue, we don’t get to a place where people understand where each other comes from.

Do you think politically correct speech achieves the opposite of its intent—meaning it censors or makes difficult conversations less honest?

KJ: When we start talking about race, these are deeply personal issues. It’s hard for people to have these conversations without feeling personally implicated. It’s asking a lot of people who have experienced hurt and oppression to be vulnerable to talk about that honestly, especially in spaces where they’re not sure they’re going to be heard or respected.

How do you do it then?

KJ: I’m teaching this class on race with a congregation that is 75 percent white and 25 percent people of color. I walk into the room and I say to them, here’s one of my own stories of experiencing something that was hurtful. I’m being carefully vulnerable with my own story and that helps open up some honest dialogue.

There’s a powerful sermon you gave in which you describe how even Jesus occasionally ignored those who wanted his intervention. You propose that we may not be aware of what needs our intervention because it’s not visible to us. How do we make the invisible visible when it doesn’t affect us personally?

KJ: Harvey Milk, the gay activist, told people who were gay, hey, you gotta come out of the closet. Everybody come out now and make your parents look you in the face. Make your colleagues—make the nation—see you. And change happen. Storytelling—that’s where things are being made visible.

That’s interesting—

KJ: All of us breathe in this polluted air. So, all of us are caught up in this system of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Even I as a black person have found myself saying something that was inappropriate to, or about, a black person.

“ALL OF US BREATHE THIS POLLUTED AIR. EVEN I AS A BLACK PERSON HAVE FOUND MYSELF SAYING SOMETHING THAT WAS INAPPROPRIATE TO, OR ABOUT, A BLACK PERSON.”