



# Shedding: A White Preacher Reflects on Systemic Racism

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**D**uring the lockdown phase of the global pandemic, when everyone was told to stay home, our family began a series of projects to keep ourselves from going crazy. One of them was building a shed. None of us has had experience building things; my husband and I are both professors, and my children, who are young adolescents, had barely even been interested in building with LEGOs. Nevertheless, we saw a need: more space. With all of us in a house where sound travels easily, we felt the need for space where we could drown out the sound of other family members' TV shows or video games or Zoom calls. We thought a usable shed where we could put a chair or a small desk would be the perfect solution.

We also had a lot of materials. My husband and I are both creative types, and when our old fence had to be replaced in the fall, we told the fence company: Leave the old wood! We'll make something with it! Again, remember we have no experience building. But we were convinced that all this old wood had potential.

We began constructing the shed in the spring. We put the old 4-by-4 wooden posts down as part of the foundation. Since none of the posts was long enough to span the size of the shed (we thought, The bigger the shed the better! We'll use this space to hang out in!), we had to buy special metal fasteners to connect the 4-by-4s end to end. For the cross-sections of the shed where we would put a floor,

*The terms white privilege and systemic racism can be tough ideas for congregations to process. This essay offers a new metaphor for understanding and communicating those ideas in preaching and teaching, with a particular emphasis on engaging white Christians around questions of racial justice.*

we attached the 4-by-4s to opposite ends and fastened their overlapping end pieces to one another. It did not look pretty, but it seemed secure enough. With a large rectangular foundation made of these pieced-together old wooden posts, we felt ready to build. Down came the plywood boards for the floor, then the walls were built and secured to the floor, a roof was put on top, and then the four sides were covered with plywood boards. Window spaces were cut to match the secondhand windows and door we had bought at the Habitat for Humanity Restore. This was going to be a great shed.

But when my daughter walked in, she noticed something: The floors were really bouncy. They did not feel secure. “I’m not going in there,” she informed us. The walls and roof had been built up, but the shed had a fault in its floor. She did not feel safe.

### FEELING UNSAFE

I think about our shed—how it looks on the outside like something we are proud of, yet there are members of our family who do not feel safe within its walls—as an apt metaphor for the situation our society continues to face. We are a nation of people who live in a society that was built with old materials—materials handed down to us from slaveholding “founding fathers”—and there are members of our family who do not feel safe.

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The spring of 2020 saw a number of deaths of black and brown men and women: people who were doing everyday things like going for a jog or sleeping in their beds. On February 23, 2020, Ahmaud Arbery went running in a neighborhood in southeastern Georgia. During that run, he was shot and killed by white men who blamed him for recent thefts. The three white men were not arrested until seventy-four days after the killing. Investigations by the *New York Times* showed that the delay between the day of the murder and the time those responsible were taken into custody reflects a larger pattern of cover-ups by the local police force.<sup>1</sup> The men who shot Ahmaud Arbery had connections with the local police, and they were convinced that he had stolen from them. They had seen Ahmaud Arbery walk onto a construction site and look around and then continue his jog. Video footage from a security camera across the street confirms this, and it also shows that he took nothing. Walking onto a construction site is not a felony in the state of Georgia. It does not condemn one to die.

When my son was a toddler and really into construction vehicles, my husband and I walked with him onto a construction site one day to look at the big

<sup>1</sup> Rick Rojas, Richard Fausset, and Serge F. Kovaleski, “Georgia Killing Puts Spotlight on a Police Force’s Troubled History,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/us/glynn-county-police-ahmaud-arbery.html>.

excavator up close. We did not know we were doing anything wrong; we were just interested in checking things out. The next time I drove by that site, fences had been erected around the entire lot, saying “No trespassing!”

I learned my lesson: people do not want you walking onto construction sites.

I look back on that experience and think: What if we had been black? What if we had not had a toddler with us? What if we had been followed afterward by white men in a truck who were carrying shotguns? But we were not. We were never harassed. That’s never my experience because I live as a white person in a society that assumes I am innocent and well-intentioned because of the color of my skin. I am accustomed to feeling safe in the spaces I walk through and visit. Such feelings of safety are a privilege of my white skin.

### NOT EVEN SAFE IN HER OWN BED

On the night of March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor was asleep in her bed in her own apartment. She woke up to the sounds of people coming into her home. Her boyfriend, a permitted gun-carrier, shot one of the intruders as they entered the apartment. The intruders shot rounds of gunfire into the home, hitting Breonna Taylor five times. Breonna Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old medical technician, was given no medical emergency attention by any of the officers who had just entered her home. She died there on the floor, in her own home.<sup>2</sup>

Police had assumed Breonna Taylor’s ex-boyfriend had drugs delivered to her home, so they were there to search the apartment for drugs. No drugs were found. Breonna Taylor died because police shot into her home in the process of conducting a search for drugs that were not there. As of this writing, the only officer charged in relation to this event was the one who shot ten rounds of gunfire through patio doors and windows that were covered in blinds, contrary to policy that requires officers to have a clear line of sight before shooting. But no officers were charged in the death of Breonna Taylor.

I think about the men I have dated. In high school, I briefly dated a young man who I knew had done drugs in the past, but he assured me he would not do them again. What if there were more to his story, and he actually was a drug dealer? What if my association with him made me a suspect too? What if police came looking in my home for drugs, simply because of my past relationship with him? But that scenario is too difficult for me to imagine. I could never imagine officers coming to my house in the middle of the night, using a battering ram to break down my door. I could never imagine what that might feel like, because police have never seen me as a suspect.

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Opiel Jr., Derrick Bryson Taylor, and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, “What We Know about Breonna Taylor’s Case and Death,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/breonna-taylor-police.html>.

Even though white people do drugs at rates comparable to those of people of color,<sup>3</sup> the arrest rate for people of color is higher than for white people, and people of color are more likely than white people to serve prison time for drug-related offenses. Researchers studying a ten-year span of arrest records from local police departments found that of persons arrested on alcohol- or drug-related charges, the outcomes were different depending on race. If you were white, you were much less likely to be convicted of the charges or to serve jail time than if you were an American Indian/Alaska Native, a black person, or Latino/a. The researchers stated, “Our results suggest that race/ethnicity is associated with outcomes in drug-related arrests and that overrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system cannot be attributed to greater use of drugs and alcohol in general.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, people of color are not doing drugs or using alcohol more than white people, but they are getting arrested, convicted, and put in prison at much higher rates than white persons for the same acts.

All of this is just for context. Breonna Taylor was not on drugs. She was not a drug dealer. She was not currently dating a drug dealer. There were no drugs found in her house. And yet. Police officers broke her front door with a battering ram, entered fully armed, and began shooting inside her house even before they could see inside. They shot Breonna Taylor, an emergency medical technician, the kind of good person who goes out to help people who are sick to get them help. They shot her five times and never attempted to give her any medical aid. In the police report later filed about the incident, officers wrote that the injuries were “none.”

Imagine if Breonna Taylor were your daughter, your sister, your friend. Wouldn't you be out in the streets right now yelling at the top of your lungs: “Justice for Breonna!”? Why did it take so long for the officers involved to be indicted? And why were none of them actually convicted, with the exception of the officer who fired his gun outside the house? His crime was “reckless endangerment,” because his bullets even shot through into neighboring apartments. But in the death of Breonna Taylor? Not one of the officers involved was convicted for her death.

## UNDERSTANDING WHITE PRIVILEGE

Because I am white, I have never feared that officers might come into my home in the middle of the night. Because I am white, I have never worried that I may be wrongfully suspected or arrested for a criminal offense. Because I am white, I have never spoken to my children about what to do if they get pulled over by the police,

<sup>3</sup> Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, “Results from the 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings,” NSDUH Series H-48, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4863 (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), 88, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUHresultsPDFWHTML2013/Web/NSDUHresults2013.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ricky Camplain et al., “Racial/Ethnic Differences in Drug- and Alcohol-Related Arrest Outcomes in a Southwest County from 2009 to 2018,” *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. S1 (January 1, 2020): S85-92, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305409>.

never fearing that they would be targeted or shot at, simply because of the color of their skin.

This is what is meant by the term *white privilege*. It is not a statement about my life being carefree. My family and I have dealt with plenty of challenges and hardships, and yet I also am aware that I am living a very privileged life. White privilege is a way of saying: “I recognize that the system was created for *me*, and for people like me, and that in order to assure white power in society, the system intentionally punishes people of color to remind them that they are not white.” To say I have white privilege is to acknowledge that whiteness has protected me from the tragedies that plague communities of color, tragedies inflicted by the system that continues to benefit me and people who look like me. And when I say “system,” I mean the policies and laws and programs that have benefited me and my family for generations.

To talk about white privilege is to acknowledge the benefits I receive from living in the United States as a white person and not as a person of color. My experiences in this country include growing up with a trust in law enforcement to protect me from “bad guys,” a belief in the idea of meritocracy—that hard work pays off in a good-paying job—and that success in school would lay the path toward living the middle-class dream of homeownership. These experiences and beliefs are based on a larger system that hid from me its unequal treatment of people of color. To understand this larger system, we need to better understand our history and its foundation.

## SHEDDING

When my husband went out to work on the shed, we created a new meaning for an old word: shedding. While typically the word *shedding* refers to the removal of hair or fur off an animal, we used “shedding” to describe what my husband went out to do in the backyard. And in shedding, my husband began to realize that he kept coming up against a challenge he could not overcome. The floor seemed too uneven and too unstable. Just as my daughter had indicated to us when she walked in and said she didn’t feel safe, the floor was also causing structural problems with the rest of the structure. Without a proper foundation, the walls of the shed were prone to lean, making it harder to square the window frames and door frame. But now that we had come so far in our process, what could we do?

I suggested we cut out the floor. Go ahead and remove the plywood there on top of the old 4-by-4s and re-lay fresh boards to fortify the structure. My husband was not thrilled. Cut out the floor? That seems too hard. Put in a new foundation? Not possible. We may as well just give up now and not finish the project.

But we did not want to give up on this project, and I believed we could improve the situation by cutting up the floor and putting in a new foundation. Reluctantly, my husband took out his circular saw and cut through the plywood floorboards, using a crowbar to pull up the nails that held the boards to the old beams underneath that served as our foundation. With another trip to the lumber

store, he brought back long 2-by-4s to stretch the width of the floor. He also bought cinder blocks to place into the ground under the beams so the beams would be supported every few feet. Turns out, we could create a new foundation after all.

## ONE NATION, UNDER GOD

Our country cannot change its history, but it is important that we learn that history to fully grasp how racism has impacted our society so deeply. And with so many of the benefits of white privilege still intact and negatively impacting communities of color, it is imperative that we replace the floorboards and rebuild our society on a new foundation.

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What are the elements of the foundation that we can seek to change? What are the floorboards we need to cut out and replace with fresh materials? I see four major beams running under the structure of this country: education, housing, employment, and the justice system. While these beams were not all laid at the same time or all at once, they are foundational to our society. Our government supports education of our children from kindergarten through the twelfth grade, and persons who are able to go on to college are more likely to get better-paying jobs. Housing became a big industry after World War II, when GIs returning from war were able to benefit from the newly created Federal Housing Authority's GI Bill, which underwrote loans with generous terms for new homebuyers to secure a mortgage. Homeownership is one of the foundational beams of the American dream. Employment is also one of the key beams in society, where people are assumed to be able to get ahead in life if only they work hard. Getting a good job is often the long-term goal of stressed-out teenagers applying to the best colleges and working for the best grades so they can secure their future with that ideal career. And finally, there is the justice system, protecting us from criminals and vandals, keeping our communities safe, and ensuring that we will have a fair trial if we are ever falsely accused of something we did not do. These are the beams of our society that we have been taught are fair to all and available to all. We are one nation, under God, and these components are our birthrights.

Except, under the God who sees all our actions and inactions, the God who knows the experiences of all God's children, we have not equally benefited from

these systems, as exposed in the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. In fact, the underlying beams that have supposedly strengthened our society were built with discriminatory intent, purposefully keeping out members of our society while safeguarding the interests of wealthy whites. The Supreme Court ruled to allow “separate but equal” schools, setting up a precedent for generations of children of color and poorer whites to be educated in underfunded and poorly staffed schools, steered away from college preparation, and prevented from enjoying the benefits of an education equal to that enjoyed by their wealthier white peers.

Schools continue to be funded in large part by property taxes, which leads to the inequity of housing between wealthier whites and the rest of society. When the FHA created its guidelines for underwriting mortgages, it wrote in the rules for “redlining” the neighborhoods they considered to be at higher risk of defaulting on their loans, which included neighborhoods of black families and immigrants from eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Black families with a returning veteran from World War II could not make use of the GI Bill accessed by their white counterparts, because blacks were denied mortgages as a result of the FHA guidelines. The segregation of the housing market continues to impact people of color by stripping them of the opportunities for appreciation and equity-building while allotting those same benefits to whites in predominantly white neighborhoods.

Employment discrimination made good jobs scarce for men and women of color. The hardest jobs have always gone to immigrants and people of color, and these jobs have not been rewarded with fair pay in spite of their difficult working conditions. People of color may work multiple jobs to put food on the table for their families, and still not have enough money to buy a home in a neighborhood that would give their children access to a better education. Schools—homes—jobs—all three of these beams are connected, and yet people of color have never been able to benefit from their support. They have instead been intentionally locked out of these social support systems.

This leads to the last beam. To say people of color have been “locked out” is literally true, since so many of them have been put away in prisons where they are behind bars and physically prevented from enjoying these benefits. The documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* tells the story of the Thirteenth Amendment, which declared the end of slavery but allowed for a little-known loophole: slaves could not be held “except as punishment for a crime.”<sup>6</sup> So from the beginning of the end of slavery, black people have been criminalized in order to reinstate the racial hierarchy. When freed blacks were charged for offenses as minor as loitering or vagrancy, they could be put into prison and put to work in cotton fields, laboring as “convicts for hire” though slavery was now supposedly outlawed. This criminalization has continued on through today, as people of color continue to suffer disproportionately the

<sup>5</sup> Terry Gross, “A Forgotten History of How the US Government Segregated America,” NPR, May 3, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america>.

<sup>6</sup> *13th*, directed by Ava DuVerney (Los Angeles: Kandoo Films, 2016).

insults and humiliations of false charges and accusations, the presumption of guilt until proven innocent.

So, what do we do with these materials we have inherited? These beams seem so intact and integral to our society's functioning, it seems like anarchy would reign if we tried to remove them from our nation's foundation. But what if we went in, opened up the floor, took a long look at the depth of the problem, and added additional supports with new materials, infusing the whole foundation with scaffolding that sought to address these inequalities, to make the floor safe and secure for everyone, not just for a few?

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What if we put the brightest minds in economics and education to work to figure out new ways to finance our public schools so that property values were not the only source of their funding? What if we put the top schools in the country to work on solving the problems of the housing crisis we face as housing prices soar and average incomes stagnate and fall for millions of families? What if the leaders of think tanks put their minds to work at reimagining the job market, creating new avenues for persons to work hard and earn a living doing jobs that benefit all members of society? And finally, what if our justice system put less money into tanks and military-style combat gear, and put more money into training officers to challenge their implicit biases and to build better relationships with communities of color? What if we put all our efforts into rebuilding this nation of ours from the ground up—supporting *all* our citizens with a foundation anchored in mutual respect and gratitude for the gifts each person brings? What kind of country might we be then?

Our brothers and sisters of color do not feel safe in this house we have built upon the foundation of white privilege. To create a safer society for *all* of us, we must do what we can to shed the rotten beams that we continue to rely upon. With the right tools and all of us working together, we can cut open the floor and bring in fresh materials and new ideas to build a new foundation that can support *all* members of our society, not just a few.

In congregations, there are people working in all areas of our society—some as teachers, some as administrators or politicians, others as members of law enforcement. Each person can make a difference: in their own places of employment, in their neighborhood schools and communities, and at the ballot box. Each of us can communicate with our elected officials. We must continue to speak out, long after the protests have ended, to ensure that proper attention is paid to racial inequity



and to resourcing the development of a new foundation. Keep up the work, and keep on calling attention to the needs of those in our society who continue to feel unsafe in their own homes. ⊕

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