



LATASHA  
MORRISON

BE THE  
BRIDGE

Pursuing God's Heart  
*for Racial Reconciliation*

Praise for  
*Be the Bridge*

“*Be the Bridge* catalyzes a truth-filled vision of courage and hope! Drawing from a deep well of spiritual practices, historical narratives, and personal experiences, Latasha Morrison engages readers on a critical journey toward God’s heart for humanity, one that promises to enlighten and unsettle us. With refreshing vulnerability and insight, this book unearths our racial brokenness and offers a communal salve of justice and restoration. It’s a timely resource for a world in need of healing.”

—JONATHAN ENG, justice advocate and campus pastor  
at Gateway Church, Austin

“When it comes to the intersection of race, privilege, justice, and the church, Tasha is without question my best teacher. *Be the Bridge* is *the* tool I wish to put in every set of hands. Put frankly, if we followed the path she writes about—the path of humility and repentance, courage and action—we would see the end of racism. It really is that simple. Tasha is one of the most important leaders in my generation.”

—JEN HATMAKER, *New York Times* best-selling author  
of *For the Love* and *Of Mess and Moxie*

“A must-read primer for anyone seeking to be a peacemaker rather than just a peacekeeper. For those wanting to understand and embody the deeply woven fabric of racial reconciliation and anti-racism work, this book will expose, educate, elucidate, and ultimately make you an intentionally conscientious neighbor.”

—DARRYL FORD, lead pastor of Ikon Community Church

“When I want to know how to do the hard work of reconciliation and peacemaking, Latasha Morrison is one of the first people I go to. She’s introduced me to a new way of thinking while bringing together people of different perspectives, opinions, and histories. When she calls us to be a bridge to connect people to people, her challenge is more powerful, because she’s already been the bridge that has gotten us this far.”

—REGGIE JOINER, founder and CEO of Orange

“Through *Be the Bridge*, Latasha Morrison offers a feast to the body of Christ. Vivid storytelling combines with sharp exegesis to draw readers onto the bridge of racial healing and justice.”

—LISA SHARON HARPER, president and founder of  
freedomroad.us and author of *The Very Good Gospel*

“I have known Latasha Morrison for more than a decade. Her commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and unity is unparalleled. Her extraordinary new book, *Be the Bridge*, is the blueprint the Christian church has been waiting for.”

—LEE ALLEN JENKINS, author, speaker, and senior pastor  
of Eagles Nest Church

“Tackling issues of race can seem daunting and overwhelming, but by providing us practical steps to engage, laced in grace, truth, and mutuality, Tasha Morrison meets us where we are and helps us become better-formed disciples of Jesus to pursue a more holistic vision of the good news for all people.”

—JENNY YANG, vice president of policy and advocacy  
at World Relief

“Tasha Morrison has been an encourager, a trustworthy friend, and a profound teacher to me over the past few years. Through this book, she can be that to you as well. Her words are full of truth and love, and they will cause you to stop and wrestle with your own biased ideas and perspectives that may otherwise go unchallenged. I’m adding this book to my ‘everyone who loves Jesus should read this’ list!”

—JAMIE IVEY, best-selling author of *If You Only Knew* and host of *The Happy Hour with Jamie Ivey* podcast

“*Be the Bridge* is essential reading for everyone. Responding to racism and racial division—in our schools, businesses, communities, politics, and, yes, even our churches—is something that we all desperately need to do. Our future depends on it. This phenomenal book is a message, a model, and a mentor for exploring how to pursue justice and racial unity in the light of the gospel. It has the potential to change your life and transform your community.”

—JO SAXTON, co-host of *Lead Stories* podcast and author of *The Dream of You*

“The practical lessons laid out in *Be the Bridge*, along with the personal and corporate action steps, can bring about the change needed to see true, lasting kingdom restoration. Latasha Morrison is a leader of integrity who lives out the values and principles she presents. In a beautiful blend of history and personal experience, she fills the pages with both the whys and hows surrounding racial reconciliation. I highly, highly recommend this book.”

—VIVIAN MABUNI, speaker and author of *Open Hands, Willing Heart*

“As an original member of her first, unofficial Be the Bridge group, I know that no one can build bridges like Tasha Morrison. But with this book as our guide, we can certainly learn how to witness humanity, love, and empathy in a whole different light.”

—JESSICA HONEGGER, founder and co-CEO of Noonday Collection

“There’s much talk about reconciliation, both in our larger culture and in the church. This is good, but if we’re not careful, we’ll end up with much more talking, analyzing, and self-righteous finger-pointing. Certainly, words matter but they seem empty without a deep commitment and embodiment. This is why I’m grateful for Latasha Morrison’s *Be the Bridge*, an incredibly timely and necessary book that’s pastoral, prophetic, and practical.”

—REV. EUGENE CHO, founder of One Day’s Wages

“Through her words and her life, Latasha Morrison exemplifies why we must face the hard truths of history in order to effect change in the present and build a better future. Allow Latasha’s words to challenge you, encourage you to question, and inspire you to be a bridge builder.”

—AMENA BROWN, author of *How to Fix a Broken Record* and host of *HER with Amena Brown* podcast

“Tasha Morrison has the remarkable ability to listen with compassion and cast vision about the preferred future. Her thoughtful, insightful, and practical book can help us make progress toward the multiethnic kingdom of God.”

—DR. ERIC BRYANT, campus pastor at Gateway Church, South Austin, and author of *Not Like Me*

LATASHA  
MORRISON

*Foreword by Daniel Hill*

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BRIDGE

Pursuing God's Heart  
*for Racial Reconciliation*

*Afterword by Jennie Allen*



WATERBROOK

## BE THE BRIDGE

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*To my parents,  
Gene Morrison and Brenda McDuffie Morrison,  
and to my grandparents.*



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## Foreword

A handful of historical eras have marked our country's long reckoning with race, and the age in which we find ourselves now appears destined to be remembered as another crucial turning point. Though a remnant desperately clutches to the fantasy of a "post-racial society," every credible indicator confirms a deep and entrenched fracture along racial lines. Pick any index—education, economics, health—and the results make starkly apparent our racially stratified society.

Making sense of this landscape is quite challenging, especially for people of faith. Jesus's final prayer was oriented around a vision for unity, and he commissioned his church to be the healing agent that brings the ministry of reconciliation into broken and fractured places in society. And yet an honest assessment raises more questions than answers. Is the church at large, and are we as individuals, currently making any contribution to healing the divisions? Or are we making things worse? Have we come to grips with our role in creating this divide, or are we stuck in a state of denial? The answers can easily leave us feeling lost, helpless, and hopeless.

For precisely this reason, I thank God for prophetic leaders like Latasha Morrison, who has committed her life to leading others with grace and patience through our challenging cultural landscape.

Latasha is not new to this conversation. She has gone on her own transformational journey to come to grips with the deep impact of white supremacy and has accepted the mantle from God to rise up against its evil forces and bear witness to Christ and his kingdom. Since emerging as a thought leader on race, Latasha has been inundated with requests for training, teaching, and ongoing support in standing up against racism. In response, she founded an organization called *Be the Bridge*, which has inspired and equipped thousands of people to pursue a distinctive and transformative response to racial division. Latasha has equipped want-to-be bridge builders in fostering and developing vision, skills, and heart for racial unity. She has built partnerships with existing organizations that are committed to diversity, racial justice, restoration, and reconciliation. Through it all, Latasha has continued to learn, grow, and refine her vision for how the church can effectively model true and meaningful reconciliation. This book, *Be the Bridge*, serves as her incredible and much-needed gift to all of us who want to more closely follow Christ's call to unity.

We live in a fragmented time when people of faith often avoid discussions about race and when those who meaningfully confront the challenges often ignore faith. Latasha refuses to be defined by that schism. It is her faith in Jesus Christ that has made her who she is, and it is her faith that sends her into the world as a reconciler. The way she grounds everything in her faith is one of the most attractive qualities of Latasha as a teacher and thought leader.

In reading this book, you will learn a lot about how you can move from good intentions to genuine heart transformation and

meaningful action. You will be pushed to take the work of reconciliation more seriously, and you will be inspired to join forces with a growing community of influencers who believe the gospel calls us to nothing less than a wholehearted commitment to truth and unity. But more than anything, you will see Jesus more clearly.

Savor the important words of each of these chapters. Let them challenge, nurture, and deepen your understanding of reconciliation. Come to see Christ and his kingdom with more vibrancy. And then take the next step to build a bridge.

—DANIEL HILL, pastor of River City Community  
Church and author of *White Awake*

# The Healing Balm

## Seeking and Extending Forgiveness

I grew up in an unsettled house, a place where screaming and slamming doors were common sounds. My mom and dad were always at it, at least when my mom was around. She was a disappearing act, there one minute and gone the next, usually without any explanation.

When I was thirteen, my parents separated, and three years later they divorced. Thirteen and sixteen—both critical ages in a young girl’s development. As hard as the separation was, the divorce was more difficult, and when it was finalized, a sense of deep loss set in. Like so many kids, I chose a side in my parents’ marital struggle: my dad’s side. I blamed my mom for how often she’d been gone, for the secrets I suspected she was keeping, and my once-happy demeanor gave way to anger and bitterness.

It didn’t take long for my mother’s boyfriend to move in. My dad still paid the mortgage and took care of us financially, which

made me even angrier with my mother. I imagined my dad out there working, alone, paying for our clothes and electric bill and water bill while we just went on with our lives. While my mother carried on with a new man. While everyone pretended everything was okay.

Except I wasn't too good at pretending.

I went to college to escape my family mess, happily sailing away from those difficult and disappointing years. As I grew into adulthood, I tried to talk to my mom about how the divorce had affected me and about how I felt, but whenever I brought it up, she'd get upset and cry. Each time, she'd tell me I couldn't understand, and our conversations ended as quickly as they'd started. Because I had no one else to talk to, I bottled up my feelings, stuffed them down, and grew more and more angry with her. That anger became a heavy weight, a burden I didn't feel I could crawl out from under.

What couldn't I see at the time? There are two sides to every story, including my parents' divorce.

During my sophomore year of college, I gave my life to Christ, and this was the saving grace for me. God helped me open up and talk about things without being so embarrassed and concerned about my mother's reaction. We pushed further into hard conversations, and I came to see that Mom's actions weren't all about my dad or me or even her secrets. Not really. There was something deeper, even if she couldn't articulate it.

Years later, my mom gave her life to Christ, was baptized, and got her life back on track. As she walked into her new life, she sought reconciliation with me and opened up about her marriage

and divorce. She opened up about the rest of her life too. During a long drive south, she shared stories from her childhood with me, how her father had his own secret life and how she, being the oldest, knew more than she wanted to about the things her father was doing. She resented her father for it, much the same way I had resented her.

“You know,” she said quietly, “when you’re young, you make mistakes and then you suffer the consequences. There’s no way around it. I’ve forgiven my dad for his mistakes.”

As I better understood my mom’s history with her father, as I saw the ways she had repeated similar mistakes, my heart softened toward her. All her acting out, all her secrets, were just ways to cope with the pain in her life. Although she never asked for my forgiveness—not directly—I forgave her anyway, and when I did, everything changed. Everything looked different. I remembered the ways she’d been there for me, the ways she’d tried to love me even while she felt unloved herself. I saw how she’d protected and stood up for me, even in her own detached way. I saw how she gave sacrificially of her possessions in an effort to ensure I had everything I needed. Although she’d made some mistakes, I could let those go. Forgiveness brought a new sort of freedom.

Ten years ago I had to walk through another journey of forgiveness, one that would take me two years to navigate. This time it wasn’t so easy to identify the one I needed to forgive. This time the pain was less individual and more institutional.

For ten years, I’d served on staff at a church. I’d sacrificed so much time and poured my heart and soul into the ministry as we grew from a congregation of seventy-five to one of more than six



thousand. Managing 250 volunteers as a part-time staff member, I invested my energy and extra time into the church instead of into my full-time job in the corporate world. I babysat the pastor's children, went on vacation with his family, and attended the children's soccer matches. There was no sacrifice I didn't make for the church—emotional, spiritual, financial.

What did I get in return? Pain.

Years in, I was asked to give more time and take a pay cut. As if that weren't enough, the leader violated every standard of trust you could imagine. My trust. His wife's trust. My friends' trust. The trust of the congregation. And in the wake of that betrayal, I did the only thing I knew to do: I walked away from the church.

Hurt, deep sorrow, anger—I felt it all. In that pain, bitterness burned. I didn't turn to forgiveness, though, at least not at first. I didn't try to break my downward spiral of anger. Instead, I nursed it, allowed it to grow to full-blown rage.

Every day I focused on the pain, replayed the betrayal I'd experienced, the conversations that had cut so deep. And as I stewed in it all, my pulse quickened. My breathing became shallow. I experienced chest pains every time I thought about the church. I tried to forget about everything that had happened, I tried to stuff my emotions, and I even tried to move on and push away the anger and sadness. I tried to do it without practicing forgiveness. After all, why should I extend forgiveness? The people who'd hurt me weren't coming to me to apologize. They weren't seeking reconciliation with me.

Why should I let them off the hook?

But my anxiety only grew worse, and my chest pains increased.

How would I get over this? That's when I decided I needed to be honest about my hurt and to process my pain with safe people.

I talked it out with my friends and a couple of counselors. They reminded me of the Psalms, reminded me it was okay to be angry and upset with those who'd harmed me and to cry out in anguish to God even before I moved into forgiveness. They affirmed my anger, my bitterness, and as they did, I felt seen, heard, and known. I couldn't stay in the anger, though. I knew that much.

I was familiar with all the scriptures about forgiveness, all Christ's commands, how he exhorted his followers to forgive "seventy times seven."<sup>1</sup> I remembered how Jesus said we'd be forgiven to the extent we forgive others.<sup>2</sup> I considered how he forgave the Roman soldiers who'd hung him on the cross even though they'd never asked for pardon.<sup>3</sup> I thought a lot about those scriptures, and as I did, I realized how weary I was of carrying all the hurt around. I was tired of the physical manifestations of my anger and bitterness. I wanted nothing more than to release all of it, and I knew that the only way to do it was to extend forgiveness, just as Christ had forgiven me. I had to forgive those who'd hurt me, even though they'd never asked for it.

And that's exactly what I did.

When I ran into a member of my former congregation, I spoke forgiveness under my breath.

When I felt a flash of anger rise out of the blue, I prayed for the strength to forgive.

When a friend asked about my experience at the church, when my stomach burned and I was tempted to lay into my former coworkers, I released the anger in forgiveness.

I practiced and practiced and practiced forgiveness, and as I did, my anger and resentment faded. Sorrow took its place. I was heartbroken for the blindness and unrepentance of my former pastor. I was sorrowful for those who refused to call him to account and repentance. My heart grieved for them, and I hoped they'd one day see the truth. In that grief, my complaints turned into prayers for them. In prayer, my pulse no longer quickened and my chest pains were gone. My bitterness had turned to compassion.

That's how I came to understand the surprising truth: forgiveness wasn't a gift to those who'd hurt me; it was a gift to myself.

## The Power of Forgiveness

When we've been hurt, when we've been battered, sometimes anger and bitterness give us a sense of control. But the truth is, our bitterness and anger often control us. They keep our perpetrators close at hand, keep the wrongs they've done to us in the front of our minds. In choosing bitterness and anger, we hand power back over to those who've harmed us. That's true whether we're discussing family pains, church pains, or the pains wrought by racism, classism, or sexism. How do we get free of that power?

Through the practice of forgiveness.

The first step in forgiveness is understanding just how much *we* need forgiveness extended to us, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>4</sup> There's good news, though. When Christ was nailed to the cross, he didn't experience just the pain of being betrayed by Judas or the pain of the nails driven into his hands by the Roman soldiers; he experienced the pain of all hu-

manity's sin. Your sin. My sin. As Peter wrote, "‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’"<sup>5</sup> And as he bore the weight of our sins, he cried out to God, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."<sup>6</sup> See? Christ extended forgiveness *to us*.

Understanding that we've been forgiven so much, shouldn't we extend forgiveness to others? C. S. Lewis wrote, "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."<sup>7</sup> In other words, we forgive because we ourselves have been forgiven.<sup>8</sup> Forgiving others is the most Christ-like act we can carry out. It is costly and painful, transformative and life giving.

Practicing forgiveness doesn't mean simply ignoring or glossing over the evil and injustice we've experienced. It also doesn't mean that we deny or spiritualize away feelings of anger or grief, the normal emotions of a wounded heart. In fact, Paul's teaching to the Ephesians seems to show the opposite. He wrote, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."<sup>9</sup> Take a close look at the passage and consider these questions:

*How can you get rid of rage until you've taken the time to feel it?*

*How can you get rid of anger unless you've made space to recognize it?*

*How can you forgive without first understanding the wrong and hurtful actions you're releasing the perpetrator from?*

See? Only when we've made space for our emotions, when we've honestly evaluated them, can we move into true Christlike forgiveness.

Bridge builders don't deny hurt. They experience it. Sit in it. Feel it. But they don't stay in that pain. They don't allow those who've wounded them to control them or constantly drive them back to anger and resentment. Instead, they allow that pain to continually push them into forgiveness.

Of course, learning to forgive in this way does not happen overnight. In fact, to forgive as Christ forgave, we'll need to receive the help and grace of God. But if we can learn this kind of forgiveness, our lives will reflect the truth spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."<sup>10</sup> It's this sort of permanent attitude that brings freedom. How do I know? I've experienced it. But don't just take my word for it. Consider the example set for us by Mother Emanuel AME Church.

## The Forgiveness of Mother Emanuel

On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof entered Mother Emanuel AME Church, a historically Black church in Charleston, South Carolina. He'd come to study the Bible, he said, and despite the fact that he was the only White person among the twelve Mother Emanuel members in attendance, the congregants welcomed him with open arms and without suspicion. Roof sat next to senior pastor and state senator Clementa Pinckney and asked questions. Toward the end of the study, he openly disagreed with the group members

about their interpretation of the scriptures, but they remained gracious. And then when the group bowed in a closing prayer, Roof stood, pulled a gun from his fanny pack, and started shooting.

Within just a few minutes, Roof killed nine attendees, all of whom were Black: Reverend Clementa Pinckney, Reverend Daniel Simmons Sr., Cynthia Hurd, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson, Tywanza Sanders, Reverend DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Susie Jackson, and Ethel Lance. Only three people survived: two because they played dead, one because Roof wanted her to tell the story.

When the shocking and horrific news first broke, many African Americans identified with those who were murdered. We grew up in traditional Black churches, where we attended mid-week Bible study and prayer meetings. We could have been in church ourselves that day, or we had family and friends who could have. It was an intensely personal attack, a hate crime directed at us and the heart of our community.

As I watched the coverage of the massacre, I considered how, historically, Mother Emanuel and the Black church at large had been such a refuge for African Americans. In a country where every other system—political, educational, economic, religious—was infected by white supremacy, the Black church gave us safe harbor. In White congregations, from the era of slavery through the decades of Jim Crow, we weren't allowed to sit in the same pews as White people, but at churches like Mother Emanuel—the oldest Black church in the American South—we could sit wherever we wanted. Throughout so much of our history, the Black church was the only place we could express the fullness of our

humanity. There we had dignity. There we were not called “boy” or “Negro” or even worse. There our men were called “Deacon” or “Brother” or “Pastor.” Black women were not viewed as second-class mammies but were called “Mother” or “Sister.” The Black church became the center of our culture and community, the place where the civil rights movement was born. Now our safe haven had been turned into a slaughterhouse.

My heart ached.

When the White Supremacist terrorist walked into Mother Emanuel, did he know of the significance of the church? Mother Emanuel was founded in 1816, quickly took up the mantle of justice, and remains a historic symbol of Black resistance to this day. The founder, Morris Brown, was one of the first ordained pastors for the AME denomination (the denomination my grandparents attended). Soon after its establishment, the church became the site for antislavery work, the home of abolitionists and the message of liberation, even while being situated deep in the South. The church was home to African American hero Denmark Vesey, who led a slave uprising in 1822. During that time, the church was destroyed, free Black people were deported, and other Black churches in the South became targets for White aggression. When Mother Emanuel was rebuilt after the Civil War (by one of Vesey’s surviving sons), the church carried on its legacy of resistance, Black liberation, and activism well into the twenty-first century.

Roof was apprehended the morning after the massacre, and during questioning he told investigators he almost hadn’t gone through with the killing because the people at the Bible study had been so kind. Ultimately, though, he executed his murderous plan

in hopes of igniting a race war. In the days following his arrest, he was linked to a website espousing white supremacy, and on that website, he was pictured wearing racist emblems and posing with the Confederate battle flag. In a jailhouse manifesto, Roof expounded openly on his white-supremacist views. He wrote that “Jews are undoubtedly our enemies, indeed our greatest enemy and obstacle in saving our [white] race”<sup>11</sup> and that “there is enough good white blood in the USA that we could survive and prosper even with a large non-White hispanic population.”<sup>12</sup> He admitted, “During the shooting, I said, ‘you blacks are killing White people on the streets everyday and raping White women everyday.’”<sup>13</sup> He wrote, “I do not regret what I did. I am not sorry. I have not shed a tear for the innocent people I killed.”<sup>14</sup>

Days after the murder, Roof was led to court for his arraignment. There family members and friends of those slaughtered were given an opportunity to face him. Like many around the country, I was shocked when I read what happened at the arraignment. County Magistrate James Gosnell Jr. opened the proceeding by indicating that though there were nine victims in the church, there were “victims on this young man’s side of the family. No one would have ever thrown them into the whirlwind of events that they have been thrown into.”<sup>15</sup> He added, “We must find it in our heart, at some point in time, not only to help those that are victims but to also help his family as well.”<sup>16</sup>

*Hub?*

Why would he shift the focus from those who were grieving the loss of their family members and friends (and the broader African American community) to Roof’s family? My heart sank. My



skin caught fire. Even there, on one of the darkest days in the Black community, we were supposed to recognize a murderer's friends and family members as equal victims?

*Not gonna happen.*

After his tone-deaf comments, Gosnell gave the floor to the family members of those killed at Mother Emanuel. I read on, hoping those victims had given the judge a piece of their mind. But that's not what happened.

Instead, Nadine Collier, whose mother was one of the nine church members killed, said, "I forgive you. You took something really precious away from me. I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. It hurts me, it hurts a lot of people but God forgive you and I forgive you."<sup>17</sup>

Anthony Thompson, family member of victim Myra Thompson, said, "I forgive you, and my family forgives you. We would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the one who matters the most, Christ, so he can change your ways no matter what happens to you."<sup>18</sup>

The sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor said, "I'm a work in progress, and I acknowledge that I am very angry. She taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hate so we have to forgive."<sup>19</sup>

The statements by the family members were bold and beautiful, a true example of the forgiveness of Christ.

Still, many in the Black community needed time to process their anger, to grieve. Many spoke out against the judge's opening remarks about Roof's family. Days later, the judge took to the air

and seemed to double down on his comments. “I set the tone of my court,” he said. “I’m a Charlestonian. Our community is hurt. . . . People have to reach out and tell them [the victims]: It’s good to grieve, it’s best to learn how to forgive.”<sup>20</sup>

*Really?*

Like many in the African American community, I was outraged. First, the judge had centered a mass-murderer’s story, and now he was asking the Charleston community (a Black community that had suffered years of injustice, no less) to move quickly to forgiveness. And though some of the family members extended forgiveness, for others it was too soon, too fresh. It felt like one more example of how majority culture calls for forgiveness in the midst of Black pain. That call to forgiveness from someone outside the Black community, along with the ongoing admonition to stop stirring up the past of our nation’s racist history, contained echoes of our past. Echoes of the days when slaves were not allowed to show any emotion when their children or spouses were sold. Echoes of the days when we were whipped for showing any hostility, rage, despair, or anguish.

The magistrate never apologized for his statements, even after being challenged by many people of all races in our country. Maybe he couldn’t see how painful and harmful his statements had been to the victims and to those listening. Maybe he couldn’t understand how true forgiveness, reparative forgiveness, can be experienced only when we first make space to feel the weight of grief, mourning, and lamentation and then, in the face of all of it, offer forgiveness. Maybe he couldn’t see that so many of us needed time.

Though the magistrate may have hoped to be a healing force

in the community, he misunderstood his place in the process. Not so with the families of those killed at Mother Emanuel. They appeared at the hearing by their own choice, on their own timeline, and didn't bend to the judge's request to center on White "victims." Instead, they stared Roof down. They were forthright and honest. They invited him into repentance, which he denied. And ultimately, some family members released Roof from the pain he'd caused them and led the racial healing efforts in Charleston. In this way, they showed the world the power of forgiveness.

The family members of those slain at Mother Emanuel demonstrated how forgiveness releases us from the control of anger and hatred. It releases us from the torment of our accusers and murderers. It's not easy, but it's the only way into healing and wholeness; it's also a process and not something that should be demanded.

## Extending and Receiving Bridge-Building Forgiveness

In our Be the Bridge groups, we hope to cultivate spaces of forgiveness. After all, we're asking members—people of all colors—to examine their complicity in racism, and if there's no room for forgiveness, we'll never get the sorts of honest confessions needed to create long-term healing and wholeness.

By the grace of God and through a great deal of practice, members of our Be the Bridge groups have willingly gone to great lengths to extend and receive forgiveness. And through that, many have been set free. Here are just a few examples.

Brooke Park confessed that she'd often been dismissive of the experiences of people of color and that she'd given "the system"—police, government officials, people in positions of power—the benefit of the doubt instead of assuming the best of the person who was victimized. She repented of using her white privilege to ignore things or opt out when witnessing the truth got tough. She confessed to the group and sought forgiveness for being silent in instances when she felt she should have spoken up. Did the other members of her group forgive her? Without hesitation.

Janna Jensen confessed that her ancestors dehumanized, kidnapped, murdered, tortured, raped, and lynched people of color. And though she hadn't participated in these atrocities directly, she'd learned to take a more communal view of sin. She confessed her family's racism, spoke it aloud, all while looking into the dark-brown eyes of my dear friends. She stated, "It was harder to say than I thought it would be, probably because I am still fighting the internalized individualism and 'innocence' of whiteness. But I needed to say it, and it was freeing. I was able to forgive myself and others through this process." There were tears. My sisters extended forgiveness to her even though the weight of her words was so heavy.

Corregan Brown shared with our online group the unfiltered truth about his own journey through forgiveness:

I'm working through and against surges of bitterness and unforgiveness when I realize the detail and the depth of the things that have been taken from my family and from my people. I'm trying to hold in tension, a desire for

justice, and a sense of releasing this for my health. I also have some guilt around going along to get along when I feel I should have confronted people more in the moment, especially when it comes to criticism of other races.

He extended forgiveness to those who'd hurt him and his family, and he asked for forgiveness for the times he could have spoken up but didn't. Corregan came to see that the freedom of forgiveness is experienced in both extending it and receiving it.

No matter where you are in the process of becoming a bridge builder, forgiveness is for you. Maybe you need to ask for forgiveness for your participation in racism or structural privilege. Maybe you need to confess to having stereotyped or hurt others, whether through overt acts or silent complicity. But as you move into that process of confession and seeking forgiveness, consider how you might do it without demanding forgiveness from those who've experienced so much of the pain of racism. So, for example, if you are White, consider talking first to other White people who will not gloss over your confession but will truly help you process your sin. When it's time to seek forgiveness from those you've harmed, give them time and space. Remember, forgiveness doesn't happen on your timeline.

Maybe you've experienced forgiveness and need to extend it to others. Maybe you need to let go of deep pain and resentment. And even though forgiveness may seem impossible or unbearable, consider the truth of Scripture: we are called to forgive others just as Christ forgave us.<sup>21</sup> Consider how Christ has given you grace and mercy and how he wants you to extend those gifts to others.

When I think back on my life, I'm hard pressed to come up with anything that has brought me more peace, freedom, and long-term joy than choosing forgiveness. When I forgave my mom, it changed not only my life but also many other lives in our family. When I was able to take a deep breath and begin extending forgiveness toward the church that wronged me, I felt a new sort of peace and compassion setting in. And when I watched the act of forgiveness at Mother Emanuel, I was humbled and somehow healed.


Forgiveness is a healing balm. It's the way to freedom, the way to peace. It's the way to build lasting bridges too. Give it a try. See if it isn't a healing balm for your own soul, your relationships, and your community.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

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1. Name a time or two that you refused to extend forgiveness to those who hadn't asked. What was your reasoning?
2. What are some ways that forgiveness has been demanded from the racially marginalized in our communities? List them and talk with a diverse group of friends about the short- and long-term effects of this expectation.
3. List three reasons forgiveness should never be demanded.

4. Do you believe forgiveness primarily benefits the person who has been harmed? Why or why not?
5. How do you know when you have forgiven someone for something?
6. Examine your life. What specific to racism, colorism, or other forms of prejudice and discrimination do you need to be forgiven for? Who might you need to call or visit and ask for forgiveness?
7. Now consider those you might need to forgive. Consider particularly those you might need to forgive for their participation in racism or structural privilege. Consider the Dylann Roofs of the world. Consider the Judge Gosnells of the world. Consider the well-meaning people who've been blind to structural privilege too, folks like Brooke Park. What would it look like for you to choose forgiveness?
8. Confession of sin by the perpetrators and forgiveness of sin by those who have been sinned against are both indispensable in the process of racial reconciliation. Discuss what you think would happen if either of these was lacking. What changes about the relational dynamic when both are present?



## A Prayer of Forgiveness

God, I thank you for your Word and everlasting love. Thank you for providing us a clear path to reconciliation, one that builds bridges, closes gaps, and showcases your plan for us all.

There is so much strife and conflict attempting to distract us from who you are, closing our minds and hardening our hearts against one another. I pray we are loosened from the chains of unforgiveness and that our hearts are softened toward one another so our journey forward together as your children will be victorious. Help us see your love in one another and strengthen our desire for community and oneness in you. Open our ears to listen to the stories of those around us so that we may better understand one another. Help us to release negative thoughts and ideas about others, even if there are past hurts, and to forgive.

Thank you for forgiving us and fiercely loving us even when we have chosen to turn our backs on you. It is only by your grace we are able to walk this path.

In your name, amen.

—APRIL THOMAS



# A Liturgy of Confession and Forgiveness

## Leader

Gracious Lord, we long to be made right in our standing with you, our relationships with one another, and our understanding of ourselves.

We need to view our sin and its effects through the same eyes as our Father.

We desire to have the posture of the Son toward our enemies and neighbors.

We want to have the power of the Spirit informing our thoughts about ourselves.

Gracious Lord, we desire to receive the remedy for the infection that has spread into our minds, our families, our churches, our society, and our government. We long for the healing and deliverance that are inaugurated through the supernatural release of confession.

Show us the way to freedom through the honest uncovering and affirmation of our sins. Help us to be moved by the pursuit of truth—truth in our deepest parts.

## Group

**Spirit, empower us in our confession.**

## Leader

Lord, we confess that we dwell in a nation built on the backs of the oppressed. Violence, bloodshed, and oppression are the means by which our nation has acquired wealth and dominance. We confess that a structure of racial oppression was formed at the beginning of our nation's history, a system that, instead of being eradicated, has been adjusted to be palatable with the changing times.

Gracious Lord, we confess that most often the church has played a role in establishing, cultivating, and protecting the foundations of the structural oppression that exists in our nation. We confess that the church has taken part in injustice and has often failed to protect your image bearers in its pursuit of political power and security. The body of Christ is meant to display your grace, compassion, and righteousness to the world, but our self-interest and comfort have taken priority over loving our neighbors. We have been willing to ignore the example and words of our Savior Jesus Christ in the pursuit of our own agendas.

## Group

**Spirit, empower us in our confession.**

## Leader

Lord, we confess as a church that we have modified the meaning of the gospel to justify our lack of effort to pursue justice for the oppressed. We have altered the nature of the gospel message in order to remain focused on our personal piety at the expense of caring for the needs of others. We confess we have created a gospel

that is manageable so as to avoid entering into the pain, struggle, and discomfort of bearing one another's burdens—and therefore we have failed to fulfill the law of Christ.

Gracious Lord, we confess we have been complacent in the very areas where you command us to labor. We have been lazy in our pursuit of right knowledge and action toward the things that reflect your heart. We have leaned back on the excuse of emotional fatigue as a way to avoid leaning into our call of bringing your image to bear in the brokenness.

**Group**

**Spirit, empower us in our confession.**

**Leader**

Father, forgive us.

**Group**

**Forgive us for how these sins—our sins—have contributed to the continued oppression of our fellow image bearers.**

**Forgive us for how our complacency and self-interest have prevented those in pain and suffering from receiving healing.**

**Forgive us for how our pursuit of security, safety, and power has prevented those in bondage from being released.**

**Forgive us for how our neglect of the true gospel of Jesus Christ has allowed a system of injustice to flourish and thrive.**

**Forgive us for failing in these things and not glorifying your name in all the earth.**

**Spirit, empower us in our confession.**

## Leader

Gracious Lord, may our confession lay the groundwork for us to have reformed minds and to begin believing rightly. May our confession enable us to have a posture toward you, toward one another, and toward ourselves that models the one who sets the captives free, Jesus Christ. May our confessions be catalysts in the pursuit of renewal as we joyfully labor to bring your kingdom to bear for all—for the oppressed and the oppressor.

## Group

**May our confession pave the way to freedom.**

**May our confession bring about healing.**

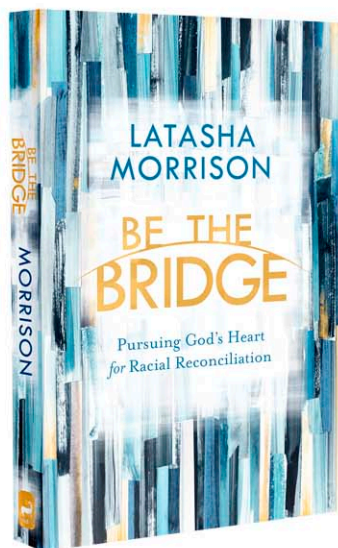
**May our confession unleash deliverance.**

**Spirit, empower us in our confession. Spirit, please show us the way.**

*This liturgy was written by Jennifer Botzet.*

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