

# “You Will Know Them by Their Fruits”

## Worship suggestions for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

*These sermon and ritual suggestions are designed for marking the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on March 21. This day falls in Lent—a season of reflecting on the suffering of Jesus. Each person is invited into self-discernment on how racism impacts us individually and communally, and to consider concrete ways to end the violence and be delivered from the evil of racism.*

### Sermon Starter: A Story of Maya Angelou

*To accompany the reading of Matthew 7:7–20 (“You will know them by their fruits”)*

As a [story by Kenny Wiley on UU World](#) recounts, the renowned poet Maya Angelou had planned a big birthday party in Harlem for herself, inviting many of the day’s Black intellectuals. She was to turn 40 on April 4, 1968. Instead, Martin Luther King’s assassination that same day sent her into a depression that lasted for weeks. Angelou writes in her book *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* that it was fellow writer James Baldwin who helped her out of it—with laughter and the wisdom of the ancestors. Baldwin told her that’s how they had survived slavery, by putting survival into their poems and songs, their dancing and folk tales, their cooking and laughter. “We knew, if we wanted to survive, we had better lift our own spirits,” he told her.

Maya Angelou’s story is tragic and painful. Yet her story is also full of resistance and solidarity in hope. Her story is personal, yet her story is political. Racism is like that. It hits you like someone who cannot get out of bed. It makes you depressed. But you are not alone in that. You have friends who can take you out of bed, like Maya Angelou who had James Baldwin. Jesus says in Matthew, “Search, and you will find; knock, the door will be opened for you” (7:7).

Look around your church. Is there anyone among you who are like Maya Angelou? Are you James Baldwin? Or are we acting like “false prophets [wearing] sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15)?

Think of the Matthew parable in the context of the way of we worship. What hymns are we singing, for example? Are they all White compositions? Are they all a few hundred year old hymns? Take stock of whose voices and works you are using. What are the racial, gender, and other identities of those participating in worship? This work is essential for eliminating racism.

Who speaks and who takes the leadership in worship? Are they mostly White people? Then acknowledge it, publicly. Showing awareness of White privilege is an important first step in eliminating racism. It is a confession and a commitment that “This is who we are now and we commit to addressing White privilege in here.”

What about bodily movement in worship? Do you move at all when you pray and sing? Are you clapping or raising your hands up while praying or singing? Are most hymns only suitable for organ or piano, or are other instruments being used? Do you honour silence? Do you also encourage non-verbal responses (with action or gesture)? Is English the only language spoken during worship? What images of Jesus are hanging in the church?

(To further explore these issues, you might consult the United Church’s *Questioning Worship: Engaging All God’s Peoples*, available from [UCRDstore](#).)

Self-scrutiny is a wonderful Lenten discipline. To honestly examine our worshipping practices focusing on anti-racism is to discern whether our church seeks to be the good tree that Jesus talks about. What matters at the end of this Lenten journey of self-scrutiny is that worship leaders have the desire and courage to create a space where different ways of worshipping are welcome and regularly practised. It is not enough to sing hymns from Asia only during Asian Heritage Month in May and use prayers from Africa only during Black Heritage Month in February.

## “You Will Know Them by Their Fruits”

Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits.” People know whether we are committed to eliminating racism by the way we worship. “Faithful worship,” the United Church wrote in *That All May Be One: A Resource for Educating toward Racial Justice*, “tells the truth and therefore exposes and denounces lies. In worship we rehearse again and again our allegiance to God and to God’s imagination for the cosmos. In worship we yield to the transforming power of the Spirit” (p. 70).

“Ask...search...knock.... In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:7–12). That is the golden rule. Following this rule is never easy. Eliminating racism is like entering through the narrow gate. Jesus said, “the road is hard that leads to life” (Matthew 7:14). But we must choose the road that leads to life and not death. Eliminating racism is the road to life, a life of singing, poetry, storytelling, laughter, and dancing.

### Sung response

“Give to Us Laughter” (*Voices United* 624)

### A Ritual of Reconciliation

At the outset of the service, have four leaders, accompanied by appropriate music, such as the traditional spiritual “Wade in the Water,” ceremonially place a bowl of water in each of the four corners of the church.

When offering plates are passed around, pass around soap paper and pens as well. Prayer leaders will go back to the four corners where the water bowls are located with oil (olive oil or any essential oil) in a small jar and wait for people to come forward.

As music is played (MV 138), invite people to write down a time when they have experienced racism or witnessed an act of racism. How did it make you feel? Write or draw that feeling. When you are finished, bring it up to one of four stations where a bowl of water is placed. Put the paper into the bowl and watch it dissolve into the life-giving water, which is God’s transforming grace.

Then, you are invited to be anointed with oil for healing and reconciliation. The four direction prayer leaders will enact the ritual. Oil can be put on the wrist as a sign of healing and commitment.

### Sung response

“My Love Colours Outside the Lines” (*More Voices* 138)

Invite people to join in singing this hymn after half of the congregation has participated in ritual. This aims to create a multiple movement of singing, listening, standing, touching, watching, and walking. Makes sure that the last verse can be sung together after everyone is back in their place.

### Commissioning Hymn

“My Soul Cries Out” (*More Voices* 120)

### Benediction

May the God of hope  
fill you with all joy and peace,  
so that you may abound in hope  
by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

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