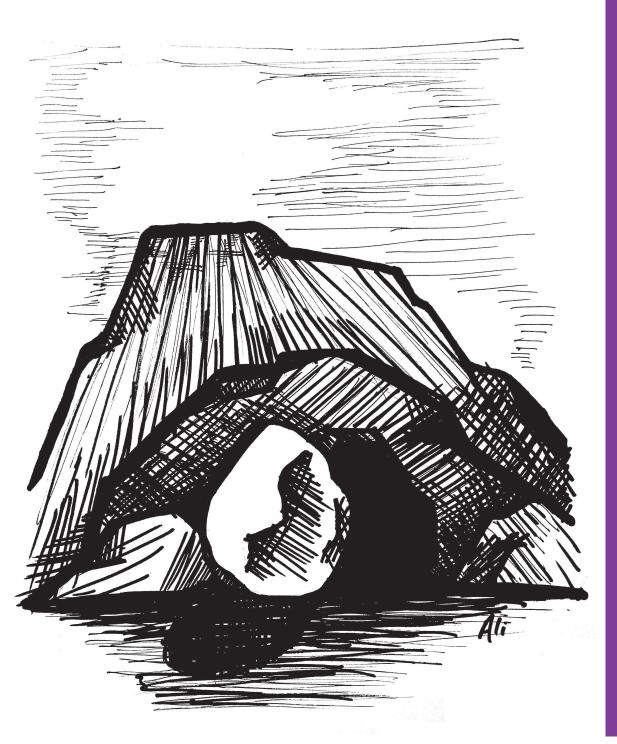


Owakenings

::: THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF RENEWED HEART MINISTRIES ::: MAY 2019 :::



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Jesus for Everyone **Podcast**

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Herb Montgomery



by Herb Montgomery

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24:5–6)

Triumph Over Execution

Last weekend, the majority of Western Christians ritually celebrated Easter. This time of year, in the context of spring, many Christians pause to memorialize and celebrate the story of Jesus' resurrection. Although early Christianity included risking a cross for standing with the social changes that the teaching of Jesus implied, early Christianity was about resurrection, not death. It was not about getting to an otherworldly heaven, and it was not about hell (hell isn't even mentioned in the book of Acts once). Early Christianity wasn't even about a cross. It was about resurrection:

"With great power the apostles gave their testimony to *the resurrection* of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." (Acts 4:33, *emphasis added*)

"You crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. *But God raised him up*, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." (Acts 2:22-24, *emphasis added*)

"This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses." (Acts 2:32-33, emphasis added)

"You handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, but God raised from the

dead." (Acts 3:12-16, emphasis added)

"Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom *God raised from the dead.*" (Acts 4:10-11, *emphasis added*)

"The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree." (Acts 5:30-32, emphasis added)

"They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but *God raised him on the third day.*" (Acts 10:36-43, *emphasis added*)

"Even though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed. When they had carried out everything that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But *God raised him from the dead...* And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by *raising Jesus.*" (Acts 13:35-38, *emphasis added.*)

The early message of the Christian community was not the individualized, privatized and personal message that Jesus had died for *you*. The message wasn't even that Jesus had died. It was that this Jesus, whose popularity with and message of hope and change for the masses threatened the powers-that-be; this Jesus executed by those with the most to lose from changes in the status quo; this Jesus, a prophet of the poor from Galilee, God had raised back to life! He was alive!

We can only understand why it was such good news that this Jesus was resurrected if we understand how deeply his teachings had resonated with those who faced marginalization, exclusion, and exploitation in his society every day.

"Even when it looks like nothing is ever going to change, and regardless of whether or not changes are ever made to the extent we desire, the mere presence of our voice makes things different than they would be had we not taken a stand, showed up, or spoken out."

Jesus' Teachings Are Salvific

This week, I want to amplify the work of Delores Williams as we seek to understand what people in Jesus' own time found truly special about him. Williams is a womanist theologian who I believe has much to offer us today as we seek to follow Jesus in the most life-giving way in our context. She writes from her experience as a Black woman, yet the majority of her work is rooted in the history of Black women and Black families in the US, the Black Church's oral tradition, and the Bible's stories about women, especially marginalized and African women.

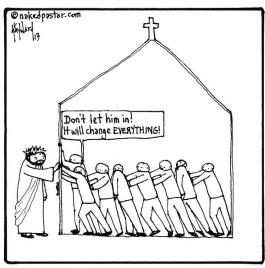
"Black women are intelligent people living in a technological world where nuclear bombs, defilement of the earth, racism, sexism, dope and economic injustices attest to the presence and power of evil in the world. Perhaps not many people today can believe that evil and sin were overcome by Jesus' death on the cross; that is, that Jesus took human sin upon himself and therefore saved humankind. Rather. it seems more intelligent and more scriptural to understand that redemption had to do with God, through Jesus, giving humankind new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life. Redemption had to do with God, through the ministerial vision, giving humankind the ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life. Hence, the kingdom of God theme in the ministerial vision of Jesus does not point to death;

it is not something one has to die to reach. Rather, the kingdom of God is a metaphor of hope God gives those attempting to right the relations between self and self, between self and others, between self and God as prescribed in the sermon on the mount, in the golden rule and in the commandment to show love above all else." (Delores S. Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, pp. 130-131)

I agree with Williams here. Jesus being executed by imperial power for being a threat wasn't what was special or salvific about him. What made him special was his kingdom teachings, his vision for what life can look like here on Earth for us as a community. He laid before us an alternative path that leads to life: not a life we somehow earn by following him, but a life that is the intrinsic result of the choices we make in how to relate to ourselves and others.

Williams unpacks further how the resurrection affirmed Jesus' teachings:

"Matthew, Mark and Luke suggest that Jesus did not come to redeem humans by showing them God's 'love" manifested in the death of God's innocent child on a cross erected by cruel, imperialistic, patriarchal power. Rather, the texts suggest that the spirit of God in Jesus came to show humans life— to show redemption through a perfect ministerial vision of righting relations between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and of tradition) and spirit. A female-male inclusive vision, Jesus' ministry of righting relationships involved raising the dead (those separated from life and community), casting out demons (for



example, ridding the mind of destructive forces prohibiting the flourishing of positive, peaceful life) and proclaiming the word of life that demanded the transformation of tradition so that life could be lived more abundantly... God's gift to humans, through Jesus, was to invite them to participate in this ministerial vision ("whosoever will, let them come") of righting relations. The response to this invitation by human principalities and powers was the horrible deed the cross represents the evil of humankind trying to kill the ministerial vision of life in relation that Jesus brought to humanity. The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil trying to defeat good. The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God's spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the ministerial vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it. (Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, p. 130, emphasis mine.)

The Truth Within the Resurrection Story

Williams is describing the gospel message of the first half of Acts. The truth within the story of the resurrection was of Jesus' vision for what human life could be. This vision so captured the hearts of the oppressed in his time that it was victorious over the attempt to kill it. Jesus' death *interrupted* his lifelong salvific work. He did not die so that we in the 21st Century can be individually and personally assured of going to heaven when we die. Jesus died because he stood up to the status quo in the 1st Century.

And the resurrection is the overcoming of this interruption, this death. It's the reversal of all that Jesus' death meant. The resurrection reignites the flame of Jesus' vision for human life that those in positions of power had attempted to extinguished with his execution. The truth within the story of the resurrection is the restoration of Jesus' message. It is the picking-back-up of Jesus' teachings from being trampled in the dust of death and them living on in the lives of those who choose to embrace the hope that another world was actually possible. The truth within the story of Jesus' resurrection is of

a God on the side of those Jesus also lived in solidarity with over and against the system, and not a God on the side of the system over and against those being exploited as is often the system's narrative.

I remember years ago listening to an Easter presentation on Luke's resurrection narrative by the late Marcus Borg. I loved the truth within this story which Borg reimagined for me that day.

"The domination system tried to stop him. They tried to shut him up. But even a rich man's tomb couldn't hold him. 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!' He's still out there," Borg said into the mic. "He's still recruiting, 'Come follow me.'"

Jesus' Palm Sunday demonstration and Temple protest which followed labelled his movement as something that finally had to be dealt with. Within the week. Jesus was dead. Yet the resurrection transforms his death into an attempted set back and not a final silencing that makes Jesus a failure. The truth within the story of Jesus' resurrection narrative is that systems of injustice don't always win. The status quo doesn't always have the last word. Justice is worth fighting for, even when the outcome looks bleak. Even when it looks like nothing is ever going to change, and regardless of whether or not changes are ever made to the extent we desire, the mere presence of our voice makes things different than they would be had we not taken a stand, showed up, or spoken out.

Joan Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker remind us again that the gospel is not about an execution but about a refusal to let go of life.

"Jesus did not choose the cross. He chose to live a life in opposition to unjust, oppressive cultures...Jesus chose integrity and faithfulness, refusing to change course because of threat... It is not the acceptance of suffering that gives life; it is commitment to life that gives life. The question, moreover, is not Am I willing to suffer? but Do I desire fully to live? This distinction is subtle and, to some, specious, but in the end it makes a great difference in how people interpret and respond to suffering... To be a Christian means keeping faith

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"Why Resurrection" continued from page 3

with those who have heard and lived God's call for justice, radical love, and liberation; who have challenged unjust systems both political and ecclesiastical; and who in that struggle have refused to be victims and have refused to cower under the threat of violence, suffering, and death. Fullness of life is attained in moments of decision for such faithfulness and integrity. When the threat of death is refused and the choice is made for justice, radical love, and liberation, the power of death is overthrown. Resurrection is radical courage. Resurrection means that death is overcome in those precise instances when human beings choose life, refusing the threat of death. Jesus climbed out of the grave in the Garden of Gethsemane when he refused to abandon his commitment to the truth even though his enemies threatened him with death. On Good Friday, the Resurrected One was Crucified." (For God So Loved the World? in Christianity. Patriarchy and Abuse. p. 18-20, edited by Joanne Carlson Brown & Carole R. Bohn)

This is why the truth within the story of the resurrection narratives of the gospels is still worth remembering, ritualizing, and celebrating. This is why the story still matters to me. Why resurrection? This is why.

HeartGroup Application

This week, spend some time as a group sharing with one another:

- How does the story of Jesus' resurrection give you hope in the here and now, in our world today, and not simply for an afterlife?
- 2. As a Jesus follower, how does the story of Jesus' resurrection inform your work for justice in your own sphere of influence today?
- 3. How did you as a group celebrate the story of Jesus' resurrection this year? What parts spoke to you? Share your experience with the group.

Where you are today, keep living in love, compassion, action and justice.

Another world is possible.

I love each of you dearly.



Have you benefited from RHM's work?

We at Renewed Heart Ministries are asking our followers to share their stories of how RHM has been a blessing to you. We believe every person's story matters and every person's voice has value. Sharing our stories is one of the ways that we bring change and heal our world. Hearing one another's stories empowers us to let go of our fear of one another and enter into compassion. Listening to

the diverse experiences of one another's lives leads us to replace insecurity with a much broader understanding of each other and our larger world.

We want to hear your story! And if you give us permission, we may feature your story in one of our upcoming newsletter issues so your story can help others, too! (But only if you give us permission.)

Will you share your story with us?

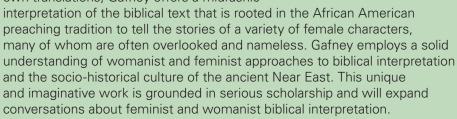
Send your story of how you have been positively impacted by the ministry of Renewed Heart Ministries by emailing: info@renewedheartministries.com.

We look forward to hearing from you.

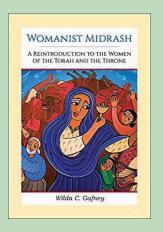
Book of the Month for May 2019

Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne by Wilda C. Gafney

Womanist Midrash is an in-depth and creative exploration of the well- and lesser-known women of the Hebrew Scriptures. Using her own translations, Gafney offers a midrashic



[You don't have to order this book through Amazon.com, but if you do, please consider using Amazon Smile (smile.amazon.com) and selecting Renewed Heart Ministries as your designated charity for a portion of your purchase to be donated to RHM at no additional cost to you.]





"Where else do you see institutions threatened by the voice of prophets? We may not call them prophets in every institution, yet the punishment of prophets is a universal dynamic. Whenever there are people calling not only for personal piety but also for societal change, seeking to make our world a just, safe, compassionate home for everyone, those who have much to lose will use these tactics."

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets." (Matthew 23:29–31)

RHM's book of the month for April was Walter Rauschenbusch's 1917 classic A Theology for the Social Gospel. Although Rauschenbusch writes in the language and limits of his time and social location, he and others in the early social gospel movement nonetheless broke new ground by calling Christians to return to the gospels' teachings on social change, social justice, and social salvation. Their call contrasted with versions of Christianity that focus on private, individualistic, or personal salvation. Many who have been raised in evangelical Christianity today still are surprised when they discover the gospels' focus on systemic injustice. This focus was

accurately labelled the "social gospel" not because it focused on social salvation instead of personal salvation (as some have wrongly accused) but because it focused on social salvation alongside personal salvation.

Forty years after A Theology for the Social Gospel was published, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., read it and wrote, "It has been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried" (Stride Toward Freedom, p. 91).

This week I want to look at a juxtaposition that Rauschenbusch uses in the end of A Theology for the Social Gospel. I admit freely that it's over-simplified in terms of what we know today. I also find Rauschenbusch's description of the function or motivation of the ancient priestly class in this paragraph to misrepresent the priestly function in the Jewish faith tradition as a whole. I do believe Rauschenbusch's description matches his own experience with institutionalized Christianity and the professional clergy's push back against his call for a more socially focused

gospel. I believe he is reading his own experience back into the text. I. too, can attest that it is difficult if not impossible to get professional Christian clergy to see things at times that their paychecks requires them not to see. This can happen within any faith tradition when an institution and those employed by that institution become aligned with injustice, exploitation and/or exclusion. Yet this passage from Rauschenbusch still has much to offer us as we seek to speak truth to power or call out systemic injustice despite push back from those who benefit by what Rauschenbusch named as "institutionalized sin" (whether within our faith traditions or our larger secular communities). The juxtaposition he uses is that of priest versus prophet in the Jewish faith tradition. I found his comments under what he classifies as prophetic deeply encouraging and this week I want to share them with you.

"The priest is the religious professional. He performs religious functions which others are not allowed to perform. It is therefore to his interest to deny the right of free access to God, and to interpose himself and his ceremonial between the common person and God. He has an interest in representing God as remote, liable to anger, jealous of his rights, and quick to punish, because this gives importance to the ritual methods of placating God which the priest alone can handle. It is essential to the priestly interest to establish a monopoly of rights and functions for his group. He is all for authority, and in some form or other he is always a Spokesman of that authority and shares its influence. Doctrine and history as he teaches it, establish a jure divine institution of his order, which is transmitted either by physical descent, as in the Aaronic priesthood, or by spiritual descent through some form of exclusive ordination, as in the Catholic priesthood. As history invariably contradicts his claims, he frequently tampers with history by Deuteronomic codes or Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals, in order to secure precedents and the weight of antiquity. He is opposed to free historical investigation because this tears open the protective web of idealized history and doctrine which he has woven about him. He is the middle person of religion, and like other middlemen he is sincerely

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"Prophets & Priests" continued from page 5

convinced that he is necessary for the good of humanity and that religion would perish without him. But underneath all is the *selfish interest of his class*, which exploits religion.

The prophet becomes a prophet by some personal experience of God, which henceforth is the dominant reality of his life. It creates inward convictions which become his message to men. Usually after great inward conflicts and the bursting of priest-made barriers he has discovered the way of access to God, and has found him wonderful, 'just, merciful, free.' As a result of his own experience he usually becomes the constitutional enemy of priestly religion, the scorner of sacrificial and ritual doings, a voice of doubt about the doctrines and the literature which shelter the priest. He too is a middleman, but he wants no monopoly. His highest desire is to have all humans share what he has experienced. If his own caste or people claim special privileges as a divinely descended caste or a chosen people, he is always for some expansion of religious rights, for a crossing of boundaries and a larger unity. His interest is in freedom, reality, immediateness, the reverse of the priestly interest. His religious experience often gives a profound guickening to his social consciousness, an unusual sense of the value of life and a strong compassion with the suffering and weak, and therefore a keen feeling for human rights and indignation against injustice.

He has a religious conviction that God is against oppression and ', on the side of the weak...The prophet is always the predestined advance agent of the Kingdom of God. His religion flings him as a fighter and protester against the Kingdom of Evil. His sense of justice, compassion, and solidarity sends him into tasks which would be too perilous for others. It connects him with oppressed social classes as their leader. He bears their risk and contempt. As he tries to rally the moral and religious forces of society, he encounters derelict and frozen religion, and the selfish and conservative interest of the classes which exploit religion. He tries to arouse institutional religion from the inside, or he pounds it from the outside. This puts him in the position of a heretic, a free thinker, an enemy of religion, an atheist. Probably no prophet escaped without bearing some such name. His opposition to social injustice arouses the same kind of antagonism from those who profit by it. How far these interests will go in their methods of *suppressing* the prophets depends on their power and their needs." (A Theology for the Social Gospel, pp. 274-277, emphasis added.)

Let's take a brief look at a few of Rauschenbusch's statements.

History Contradicting Claims

Today, both science and history can contradict long-held religious beliefs or doctrinal claims. It's tempting to become

defensive and resistant to new information rather than learning how to lean into new information. Deconstruction is naturally uncomfortable. We must be honest in parsing the difference between resistance due to personal discomfort and resistance due to threats to institutions from which we derive privilege. As Rauschenbusch states, it's possible to be "opposed to free historical investigation because this tears open the protective web of idealized history and doctrine which lonel has woven about

[oneself]."

Where have you seen this take place? Take some time to list examples that come to mind.

Selfish Class Interests

Religion has often been complicit in making oppressed communities passive and in exonerating or justifying one class's exploitation of others. I agree with Rauschenbusch's statement that when voices question the status quo, they are quickly labeled "enemy" or a "voice of doubt" or even "heretic." We see an example of this in John's version of the Jesus story: "Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about [Jesus]. Some said, 'He is a good man.' Others replied, 'No, he deceives the people.'" (John 7:12)

All Humans Share

Jesus, like other Jewish prophets before him, had an inclusive encounter with the Divine. His desire was egalitarian inasmuch as he wanted those being excluded to also have a seat at the table. Rauschenbusch observes, "If his own caste or people claim special privileges as a divinely descend-ed caste or a chosen people, he is always for some expansion of religious rights, for a crossing of boundaries and a larger unity." Those who push for a more egalitarian society transgress boundaries in their work and are often accused of not staying within the lines drawn for them and for others in society.

Social Consciousness

The Hebrew prophets, Jesus, and many others throughout history who have stood up to institutionalized injustice, seeking change in individual hearts and social and systemic change as well, can often trace their social consciousness and the roots of their passion for social justice to the belief in a Divine Universal Love. As Rauschenbusch wrote, "His religious experience often gives a profound quickening to his social consciousness, an unusual sense of the value of life and a strong compassion with the suffering and weak, and therefore a keen feeling for human rights and indignation against injustice." For Christians, this passion for justice is grounded in the belief that if there is a God who loves everyone, this same God stands with the oppressed

"The Gospel defines three dimensions of this eternal life: knowing God; receiving the one sent by God to proclaim abundant life to all; and loving each other as he had loved them. Eternal life, in all three meanings, relates to how life is lived on earth. The concrete acts of care Jesus has shown his disciples are the key to eternal life. By following his example of love, the disciples enter eternal life now. Eternal life is thus much more than a hope for postmortem life: it is earthly existence grounded in ethical grace."

RITA NAKASHIMA BROCK & REBECCA ANN PARKER SAVING PARADISE: HOW CHRISTIANITY TRADED LOVE OF THIS WORLD FOR CRUCIFIXION AND EMPIRE

and is on the side of distributive justice. It is ironic that those whose belief in Love led them to the work of justice too often come to be ostracized by the very religious communities they first learned that Love through.

Heretics

Rauschenbusch's use of this term struck home for me. When we stand up against injustice and some of those in privileged positions in our faith communities are also in positions of privilege in our larger society, it still amazes me how efficiently religious systems label and shut out or suppress voices for justice that they deem a threat. "This puts him in the position of a heretic, a free thinker, an enemy of religion, an atheist. Probably no prophet escaped without bearing some such name." I could give quite a few examples of where I have witnessed or experienced this dynamic.

Suppression

"His opposition to social injustice arouses the same kind of antagonism from those who profit by it. How far these interests will go in their methods of suppressing the prophets depends on their power and their needs." I've seen those who side with Love and Justice go from having a packed speaking schedule for years in advance to almost overnight being treated as if they no longer exist. In the Jesus story itself, suppression took the form of false accusation and execution.

I want to be very careful here. Jesus was not trying to start a new religion. He was deeply Jewish, and most of his more inclusive interpretations of the Torah had Jewish precedents before him. Yet his interpretations threatened those who had everything to lose politically.

Where else do you see institutions threatened by the voice of prophets? We may not call them prophets in every institution, yet the punishment of prophets is a universal dynamic. Whenever there are people calling not only for personal piety but also for societal change, seeking to make our world a just, safe, compassionate home for everyone, those who have much to lose will use these tactics.

If you are in the midst of being treated this way, remember, you're in the right story. You're not alone. Another world is possible. If you need to take a break for self-care, do so. It's okay to take a break; just don't give up. We are in this together. And together we can make a difference. Another world is possible.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets." (Matthew 23:29–31)

Schedule

MAY 2-5, 2019

Rehoboth Weekend Retreat Rehoboth Beach, DE, USA 304.520.0030

JULY 10-13, 2019

40th Annual Kinship Kampmeeting Portland, OR, USA 304.520.0030

The RHM team, in any given month, consists of a small team of 10–12 people working either full-time, part-time, or as volunteers dedicating hundreds of hours to make what we do possible. If you find blessing, encouragement, and renewal here, please consider becoming one of our Monthly Partners with a reoccurring donation or by making a one-time gift.

2019 Full Year Budget Goal: \$185,000.00

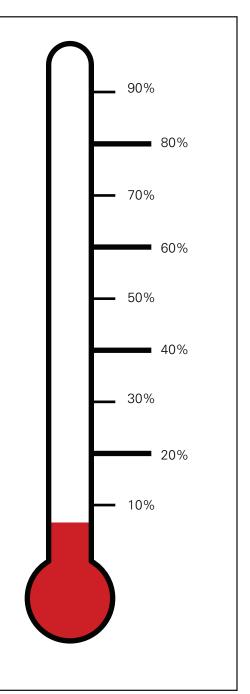
January-March Budget *Goal:* \$46,251.00

January-March's Contributions *Received:* \$26,685.20

March Contributions *Goal:* \$15,417.00

March's Contributions
Received:
\$7,590.04

To support our work and help us grow, go to renewedheartministries.com and click "donate."



Renewed Heart Ministries is a not-for-profit group that is passionate about rediscovering, following and helping others rediscover the teachings and sayings of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. We believe these teachings have an intrinsic value in informing the work of nonviolently confronting, liberating and transforming our world into a safe, more just, more compassionate home for us all.

Everything we do here at Renewed Heart Ministries is for free. Even the many educational events that we hold in various venues. You can support our work either with a one-time gift or by becoming one of our monthly contributors by going to RenewedHeartMinistries.com and clicking the donate tab at the top right.

Or you can mail contributions to: Renewed Heart Ministries P.O. Box 1211 Lewisburg, WV 24901

Also, please sign up for our free resources and remember, every little bit helps.

Anything we receive over and above our annual budget we happily give away to other not-for-profits who are making both personal, systemic and structural differences in the lives of people who are less privileged.

And to those already supporting the work of Renewed Heart Ministries, your generous support makes it possible for us to exist and to continue being a presence for positive change in our world. So with all of our hearts, "Thank You."

Together we are making a difference, till the only world that remains is a world where only Love reigns.



Featured Presentation

The Jesus of the gospels was a Jewish, prophet of the poor from Galilee who repeatedly stood in solidarity with those who lived on the margins and undersides of his own society. These stories and the wisdom they hold can speak volumes to those of us today who are also working on the edges of our own society for justice, equity, and inclusion.



This month, it is our pleasure to feature a presentation Herb gave last year in Australia titled *Jesus From the Edges*. It's our hope that Jesus through this lens of interpretation will renew your spirit and keep you going as you continue to Jesus in working to make our world a safe, just, compassionate home for all. Another world is possible.

Jesus From the Edges by Herb Montgomery.



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The "Jesus For Everyone" podcast

New episodes every Friday!

A weekly podcast where we discuss where faith in Jesus and social justice work for the vulnerable today intersect and what a first-century, Jewish, Galilean prophet of the poor might offer us today in our work of survival, resistance, liberation, restoration, and transformation.

