

Riley Temple: Okay. Good afternoon. We are here today with Bishop Deon Johnson from the Diocese of Missouri. He has agreed to sit with me this afternoon, which is the 17th of April, 2023 at 2:03 Eastern time to provide an oral history that will be added to the African American Episcopal Historical Collection at the Bishop Payne Library at Virginia Theological Seminary. It will be available in perpetuity for people who are doing research on blacks in the Episcopal Church. One of my recent goals in collecting these oral histories has been to focus on the leadership of blacks in the Episcopal Church. What has been wonderful is that the number of black bishops is an embarrassment of riches.

Bishop Johnson brings an added distinction, one that gives me great pride. That is, he is the first openly gay black bishop in the Episcopal Church, and I am very pleased to say that. You have no idea.

Deon Johnson: Thank you.

Riley Temple: First of all, do you have any questions before we begin?

Deon Johnson: No. None that I can think of.

Riley Temple: Okay. Why do we not start? I would like to start at the beginning and talk about some issues that would point to your formation – your Christian formation. I think you were born in 1979.

Deon Johnson: 1977, but I will take '79.

Riley Temple: Oh, I bet you would. I bet you would. Oh 1977, so that would make you 40-

Deon Johnson: I will be 46 this year.

Riley Temple: You are a very young man. You have a long time ahead of you.

Deon Johnson: I get that a lot.

Riley Temple: I remember my forties. What a wonderful time. Tell me about your childhood. You were in Barbados, were you not?

Deon Johnson: Yes. I was born and raised on the island of Barbados. I grew up with my brother, my mother, and my grandmother. I often attribute my faith formation to my grandmother. She was the faithful Christian grandmother if ever there was one. I watched her say her prayers in the morning. She said her prayers from the Book of Common Prayer and her Bible at night.



She loved to sing, so there is a deep richness in those hymns and spirituals. One of the things that I often do in my preaching is I tend to use a lot of hymns because they really tell us a story. She shaped and molded me with her singing and with her praying, but especially with her actions. One of the formative moments for me which really defined how I encounter God happened not too soon after her younger brother had moved in with her. In Barbados, we generally did not have or do not have right now nursing homes. Extended families take care of the elderly. He moved in.

Riley Temple: Shocking, is it not?

Deon Johnson: I know. He moved in with us, and she took care of him for many years. Not for many years, but she took care of him for about a year or two. His health just began to decline to the point where she just could not do it. There are these places that he can go. It was almost like an adult type of daycare, but it was long-term care. Within two weeks of going there he died. It was devastating for her. A very formative memory is I remember the day of his funeral.

Riley Temple: How old were you?

Deon Johnson: I had to be about around 12 or 13. At the funeral, after the funeral we did the big thing. The funeral. In Barbados you stay at the gravesite until they cover it up, and we have a big ceremony about putting wreaths on. You stay until the very end. It was just the family left, and she was walking through the cemetery and raising her hand in anger at God. She was just mad that her brother was just gone. She said some words that I never thought would come out of my grandmother's mouth, to God no less.

Riley Temple: Such as? What did she say?

Deon Johnson: Some of it may not be appropriate recording. Some of what she said, her anger was palpable. I imagined her as Jonah or Job, just railing at God. That evening she went home and took up her Book of Common prayer and took up her Bible. She did the things that she normally did. She said her prayers. She read her Bible. She went to bed. What that little interchange taught me is that she had a deep relationship with God – deep enough that she could be angry, and she could say whatever she needed to say. Then she still went to work on that relationship.

It gave me in a lot of ways as a pre-teen, permission to have a deep relationship with God where you can be angry with God. You could not be speaking to God for a little bit. It really did help cement and affirm my faith. You know, if you are really in a relationship with God, there are



going to be times that you are not going to speak. There are going to be times when you are going to be angry at each other. That is all okay.

Riley Temple: This is astonishing intimacy, is it not?

Deon Johnson: It really speaks to a deep relationship. You do not get that mad if you do not have a relationship.

Riley Temple: Some years ago, I wrote my thesis on the theology of the work of August Wilson's plays. I came across, of course, Levy the trumpeters cursing God at the end of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. When I was speaking to my advisor who was the Reverend Dr. Judy Fentress-Williams, I talked to her about how old black women in the theatre hearing that yell out to Levy, oh no baby. Do not do that. Do not do that. Please baby. Judy turned to me, and she said, Riley if you can be angry with God then God matters.

Deon Johnson: Exactly. It speaks to that deep well of connection. You do not get. I mean, I think many times in our world, folks want that superficial connection to God. It is like the convenience. When you go deep, when you go very deep, you bring your whole self which means you bring anger with you. You bring the questioning. You bring the doubt. You bring all of that. I think that is the gift that she gave me in that short little interchange that, for her, was just what she did. For me, it said you get to bring your whole self to God.

Riley Temple: What were you thinking as it was happening as she made her fist?

Deon Johnson: I was feeling confused.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I had never. I mean, that was not who she is. She was not the I am going to be angry, raise fists, and raise voice type of person. I had not experienced her as that. Yet, there was a lot of freedom in that both for her, I think, but especially for me. It gave me the capacity to be freed up and to really engage with God on something more than just a superficial level.

Riley Temple: Prior to that, I assume that you and your family were church goers.

Deon Johnson: Every Sunday.

Riley Temple: Every Sunday.

Deon Johnson: It was a requirement for Sunday dinners.



Riley Temple: Were you active in the church?

Deon Johnson: I was an acolyte. I was a lay reader. I was in Sunday School, the whole nine yards.

Riley Temple: Your brother. Is your brother older or younger?

Deon Johnson: He is five years older.

Riley Temple: Oh, my goodness.

Deon Johnson: Yes. The deal in our family was when you turned 16 you could choose whether you wanted to stay or not. When he hit 16, he turned into a Christmas and Easter person.

Riley Temple: I see. Right. Yes. Yes. It is the same thing in my family, unfortunately.

Deon Johnson: It happens.

Riley Temple: All the time.

Deon Johnson: I will say he does still have a pretty deep abiding faith.

Riley Temple: What did your grandmother think of that?

Deon Johnson: She was not happy about it, but she respected his choice. Again, that was the gift that she said. Do you know what? You do not have to go. As long as you know that God is going to be there whenever you are ready, that is what makes the difference.

Riley Temple: Is your brother still with us?

Deon Johnson: Yes, he is still around. He lives in New York with his family. I am happy to say that they go a lot more now than just Easter and Christmas. It is not as much as I would love for them to go, but they go to church a little bit more than just Christmas and Easter.

Riley Temple: Then you left Barbados, did you not?

Deon Johnson: Yes. Around the age of 14, my brother and I immigrated to Mount Vernon, New York in 1992.

Riley Temple: Why Mount Vernon?



Deon Johnson: That is where our father lived.

Riley Temple: I see.

Deon Johnson: Yeah.

Riley Temple: You went to live with your dad.

Deon Johnson: Yeah. When I was four and a half, my dad and my mother separated. He moved to the United States. He was in the United States, and we remained in Barbados. We had the opportunity when I turned 14 to either continue our education in the United States or continue in England.

Riley Temple: Were you excited about that – coming here?

Deon Johnson: Yes and no. Growing up in Barbados, the United States is like the place. You know? You see these images. I will tell you, growing up one of the big images for us was like *Dallas*. I do not know if you remember the show *227*.

Riley Temple: I do actually, yeah.

Deon Johnson: Yes. Those were reruns in Barbados. We got *Dallas*, *Days of our Lives*, *227*, and *The Cosby Show*. That was what America was supposed to be. We said, yeah, we want to go see if we can live that.

Riley Temple: Did it meet your expectations?

Deon Johnson: You know, when you see *The Cosby Show* and then you move into an apartment, it is not quite the same thing. Moving to New York was a lot less intriguing once we got here because reality hit.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: Hey, you left your mother and your grandmother back in Barbados. You are embarking on a whole new life in a place that you do not know too many people. That was hard. The good thing is I moved right in time to begin high school, so that was an opportunity to begin to make new friends and to make connections. I will tell you the one thing that was a huge shock was winter coming from a place where it is 85 degrees all the time and sunny. This thing called winter where it is cold and this frozen rain falls was a bit odd. I still to this day do not like winter.



Riley Temple: You are being kind. Odd. My God.

Deon Johnson: I will go.

Riley Temple: Your father, I guess, was Anglican as well. Right?

Deon Johnson: Yes, he was raised Anglican. Right now, he is Methodist.

Riley Temple: Okay. Did you find a church right away?

Deon Johnson: I became a wandering Aramean for a little bit.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: In Barbados, the church is called the Anglican Church of Barbados. We are accustomed to the Anglican Church of England or Anglican Church of Canada. I was looking for an Anglican church, and there was no Google at that time. I could not go searching it. I think web crawler was the search engine at the time if that dates you. I just wandered around and could not find an Anglican church. For about six months or so I became Roman Catholic. There was a Roman Catholic church down the street from where I was. The liturgy was pretty similar to what I was accustomed to, so I thought I would do this. Nothing against our Roman Catholic siblings, but it was so impersonal.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: At 14, after about six months, I was like I cannot do this. I just stopped going altogether because there was this one Sunday that just cemented it for me. The passage was the raising of Lazarus. The great line, "and Jesus wept." The sermon, the priest got into the pulpit and said Jesus wept for all the unborn children and all the children that have been murdered in the womb. Jesus wept. He walked out and sat down.

Riley Temple: Oh.

Deon Johnson: At 14, I thought to myself, really? Here is this beautiful story of Jesus bringing something to new life and weeping over the love of a friend, and all you can say to me is that he wept for the unborn children. Yeah. That prompted me to leave. Sorry, I am done. For a couple months I just wandered. I just did not go until one day when I was walking home from school. I came across a sign for the Church of the Ascension, an Episcopal-Anglican Church. I thought, oh hold on. What is the Episcopal thing? I decided to take the little 15 to 20-minute walk from my house to



the Church of the Ascension. I showed up, and lo and behold here was an entire congregation, predominantly black, predominantly from the Caribbean.

Riley Temple: Really?

Deon Johnson: I met people from Barbados and Jamaica. You know, it just happened to be the Sunday that I showed up was International Sunday, so they had all the food that I grew up with for coffee hour. I thought, I have found my tribe.

Riley Temple: I am sure they welcomed you with open arms.

Deon Johnson: Oh, they took me under their wings. I will say that that has been the story of my life. I happen to show up, and folks will just take you under their wings. They took me under their wings. Someone would pick me up because it was about a 20-minute to almost 30-minute walk from my house to the church. Someone would come pick me up on Sunday. I joined the choir, so somebody from the choir would pick me up for rehearsals. I became an acolyte. It turned out that the priest that got assigned to that place as an interim was my second cousin.

Riley Temple: Ah.

Deon Johnson: I had no idea. His last name was Morel. I found out later that he was related to me. I was like, small world.

Riley Temple: Did it seem miraculous to you?

Deon Johnson: It had to be because when I got there and I saw his name on the front of the thing, I was like wait a minute. That is an unusual last name. His name was William Morel. Morel is not terribly common in Barbados. My grandmother, her maiden name is Morel.

Riley Temple: Wow.

Deon Johnson: It is kind of like I know the name, but there are not a whole lot of them. When I asked him where he was from, he said I am from Barbados. I was like, oh wait. Your last name is Morel, and you are from Barbados. Okay, we need to talk.

Riley Temple: When you said that you found the Roman liturgy to be somewhat cold, the Baptists say the same thing about us.



Deon Johnson: It was not even so much the liturgy that was cold. It was the people that just were not terribly engaged.

Riley Temple: The people, yeah.

Deon Johnson: It felt like rote if that makes any sense.

Riley Temple: Yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean.

Deon Johnson: I am accustomed at the peace, as in most of the Episcopal churches where people will shake your hand and say hi or hug you. It is holy chaos at the peace. In that church, it was St. Francis I think that was the name of the church. It literally was you turned around and you shook the hand with one person behind you, one person in front of you, and went back to the liturgy. There was no good to see you and welcome. It was like, we have stuff to do. Let us get on with it.

Riley Temple: Did you know at the time that you were a sexual minority?

Deon Johnson: I was just coming into that.

Riley Temple: What do you mean by that?

Deon Johnson: I was just coming into my own. No, that did not play a role in it. One of the gifts, I think, that growing up in Barbados and growing up with my grandmother that I got was that she would remind my brother and I often that you are God's beloved. Do not let anybody treat you as anything other. Do not treat anybody else as if they are not. I had a pretty good sense of self regardless of whoever I became, that I was still going to be loved deeply by God. That has always been a part of just me. You can like me. You cannot. It does not really matter. It does not stop me from being fully who I am. During that time, it was around 14 or 15 that I started to begin to kind of recognize. Hold on, Jane is not terribly cute. James on the other hand, that might be it. That began when I was around 14 or so. I grew up. Not grew up, but my formative time was during the era of Ricki Lake, Maury Povich, and Phil Donahue.

Riley Temple: Yeah. Yeah.

Deon Johnson: Those were all on TV. Every once in a while, they would have an episode or two or three or ten on, oh look my boyfriend's husband's son's cousin is gay. I would be riveted watching those. Oh my God, here is someone that seems to be just like me.



Riley Temple: Is your grandmother still with us?

Deon Johnson: No, she passed away in 2001 actually.

Riley Temple: She was able to see. You graduated from college in 2000?

Deon Johnson: Yes. She saw me enroll in seminary.

Riley Temple: Oh good. Good.

Deon Johnson: She never got to see, but she never saw me ordained or anything like that.

Riley Temple: Tell me about your high school.

Deon Johnson: I went to Mount Vernon High School. There were about 3000 students enrolled in Mount Vernon High School. What Mount Vernon had done was that they had consolidated the four high schools into one and built one big new one.

Riley Temple: I see.

Deon Johnson: High school was formative for me in many ways because that was the time that I began to explore my own sexuality, attractions, and all of that stuff. It was also the time that I made some lifelong friends. I have about four people that I went to high school with that we still stay in contact. We send Christmas cards, the occasional phone call, and text message.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: High school was also a challenge because you are dealing. I went to a high school, again, with 3000 students that had a pretty decent-sized Caribbean population. The majority were not folks from the Caribbean.

Riley Temple: I see.

Deon Johnson: I was dealing with a decent amount of bullying.

Riley Temple: Racially and otherwise.

Deon Johnson: Exactly.

Riley Temple: Your closest high school friends, are they Caribbean as well?

Deon Johnson: No, surprisingly. Well, one of them is Jamaican descent.



Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: His family is Jamaican, but he was born in the United States. For the most part they were American.

Riley Temple: Were they also people of color?

Deon Johnson: Mm-hm.

Riley Temple: Were any Episcopalians among them?

Deon Johnson: No, I had a good Baptist and a couple lapsed Catholics.

Riley Temple: Okay. Did you ever go to the Baptist church with your friend?

Deon Johnson: I did not. During high school, I was very, very involved in Church of the Ascension in Mount Vernon. That pretty much took up all of my Sundays.

Riley Temple: You went to Case.

Deon Johnson: Yes, Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, Ohio.

Riley Temple: Yeah. Why did you go to Case?

Deon Johnson: They offered me lots of money.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: I received a President's Scholarship which paid for pretty much everything except for books and accessories. I had to pay for books and whatnot. I had to maintain a 3.5 or higher GPA to keep the scholarship.

Riley Temple: You were a good student.

Deon Johnson: Yes. In my high school, there were 500 students in my graduating class.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: I was number four. I think I was number four or number five in the class. I do not remember which one.

Riley Temple: Did you? What did you major in at Case?



- Deon Johnson: That is complicated. When I went to Case, I was accepted into the – gosh, I forget the name – oh, the BAMD program. It is the Bachelor of Arts Medical MD Program. What it was is that you got accepted into Case and medical school all at the same time.
- Riley Temple: I knew about this, actually.
- Deon Johnson: Yeah. I was one of those.
- Riley Temple: I know people who did it, yeah.
- Deon Johnson: I was one of those weird people who got accepted to college and to med school all at the same time.
- Riley Temple: Medical school, yeah. Yeah.
- Deon Johnson: It is with the intention that you would complete your Bachelor of Arts in about two and a half or three years. Then you would be doing med school while you are doing your undergrad all at the same time. I dropped out of that program probably by my second year. One of the reasons why I had really wanted to be a doctor was to help people. I really loved the idea that doctors are there to help. One of the downsides of being at a teaching hospital is that you are teaching, unfortunately.
- Riley Temple: Yeah.
- Deon Johnson: Very early on we had to do rounds. Our medical advisor took you from freshman med all the way through the end of med school. I would get the opportunity to do rounds once every two weeks with the whole cohort. Everybody, no matter where you are in the journey, you all went to rounds. At one point we started referring to the folks as their ailments. The heart condition in room six. The cancer in room seven or something like that. That to me just seemed completely dehumanizing. It is like these people are much more than what it is that is ailing them. That caused a decent amount of disillusionment with me. It is like, if this is what medical school is going to be, I do not need this. I do not need to be here. I started off with a biology degree. When I graduated, I graduated with dual degrees in English and history with associate degrees in religion and biology.
- Riley Temple: I see. We will get back to this later, but I will want to explore with you how that experienced in medicine informs your ministry.
- Deon Johnson: It came in really handy during the pandemic.



Riley Temple: Oh, I bet. I bet. I bet. Even as a bishop as opposed to a parish priest. Okay, we will get back to that.

Deon Johnson: Yeah.

Riley Temple: You went on to Case. When did you know and how did you come to know that you wanted to go to seminary?

Deon Johnson: I grew up in a village, so I say to folks I come with a village mentality or a village perspective. What I mean by that is in a village, it is not just about you. It is about the village. It is about the community. It is listening to the voice of the community to tell you to stand in in many ways for God. Throughout my formation, folks kept saying to me when I was in high school, you are going to be a priest someday. I would just laugh it off. When I went to Case Western, again I got connected to the Church of the Transfiguration in Cleveland.

Riley Temple: What was that like?

Deon Johnson: That was again another African American congregation.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: It is the same thing. I used to walk. Someone decided, oh no, we are going to pick you up. They were going to take me under their wing. I became their parish administrator. I taught Sunday School all while in college. I became pretty integral into the life of that congregation helping find supply priests and leading morning prayer. They are the ones who said to me, you know we see this calling in you. The priest at the time, her name was Kate Elledge, she happened to be their long-term supply person. She filled out all kinds of forms and made an appointment for me to go see the bishop. Bishop Arthur Williams, who is still alive—

Riley Temple: Yes, indeed he is.

Deon Johnson: He is still one of my mentors. He has the voice of God, I might add.

Riley Temple: I have spoken to him. I know exactly what you mean.

Deon Johnson: Exactly. I had an appointment with him and we had conversations. He said, you know I think you need to seriously think about going to be ordained. I had said to him at that time, just so that we are all on the same page, I do want you to know that I am gay. If that is going to be a



problem, I am not doing this. I thought that was going to be where I got kicked out of this process and not have to deal with it anymore. He said, well, we will just sort that out when we come to it. The rest is kind of history. I went on and had the meeting with the folks that help you discern. Again, I kept thinking they were just going to tell me no. I will just keep moving on with my life and keep going. It turned out that they said yes. At that time, because my family still lived in New York, I was driving back and forth between Cleveland and New York.

Just before I left, this was near the end of the semester, I got a letter from Kraft Foods. I had been interning at Kraft Foods in the summers. I got a letter from Kraft Foods and a letter from the bishop. The letter from the bishop was making me an apostolate and inviting me to go off to seminary. The letter from Kraft Foods was inviting me to come work for them. It had a really, really nice-looking salary and a signing bonus.

I had both of these letters sitting in the passenger seat of my car as I am driving back to New York having to make a decision by the time I get done with break. The important part in this story is I am in the car, I am on the highway, and I am driving. The only wind in the car is from the A/C. I am literally thinking to myself, I need to make a choice. Lord, I need a sign. Strangely enough, the letter from Kraft Foods just picked up and blew into the back seat. I had my answer. Be careful what you wish for. I had my answer.

Riley Temple: Did you tell your grandmother that story?

Deon Johnson: She knows the story, yes.

Riley Temple: By the way, did your mother make it to New York as well?

Deon Johnson: Yeah, she did. She followed in 1994. She came a couple years after we did.

Riley Temple: Oh terrific, yeah. And your grandmother, I guess?

Deon Johnson: No. She stayed in Barbados.

Riley Temple: Oh, she stayed in Barbados.

Deon Johnson: Yeah, she came to visit a couple of times, but she was not. The cold was not. She was not, no.

Riley Temple: I do not blame her. Who can blame her?



Deon Johnson: Yeah, she was in her eighties by this time.

Riley Temple: Yeah. When you were at Case, were you in love at the time?

Deon Johnson: I am not sure. I think I was pretty closeted is not quite the right word. I kept pretty much to myself. I mean I was in a fraternity. I was the vice-president of the fraternity and all that.

Riley Temple: Which one?

Deon Johnson: Sigma Alpha Mu.

Riley Temple: A southern fraternity.

Deon Johnson: Yes, go figure. There is God's great sense of humor. No, I really had not been doing much by way of dating or anything like that. I had friends that we went out occasionally, but long-term dating just was not on the radar. Things were not as open, inviting, or safe as they are now. I mean, we would go occasionally to a club on the west side of Cleveland or something like that. We would go hang out at a bar or something every once in a while.

Gosh, there was this one club called the Cage or something like that. You go to dance. They had this absolutely hilarious thing I think the first Friday of the month. You came in and you got a number. If somebody liked you or something, they could send a note to you by your number. If you did not feel comfortable approaching the person one-on-one, you could write them a note. They would call out and say you have got mail if you are number 205 and 703 or whatever. Somehow, I remember that was really fun. Every once in a while, you would hear your number called, and it is like, oh my God. What is this? Yeah, dating did not really happen during college.

Riley Temple: When you left Mount Vernon and left Cleveland, you went to General. Did you live at home or did you commute?

Deon Johnson: No, I stayed at General. That was part of why I wanted to be formed there. I really loved General. I went to. The bishop gave me carte blanche as to where I wanted to go. I had my mind set on Yale Divinity.

Riley Temple: Okay.



Deon Johnson: The challenge for me is I went to Yale Divinity. I got to go visit these places. I went to Yale and stayed and did the visit. Then I went to General. I just took like six steps onto the close at General and thought, this is it.

Riley Temple: Wow.

Deon Johnson: This is the right place. My family was 45 minutes away if I needed to go home. It felt like a world away. To step out of the busyness of Ninth Avenue in Manhattan into the calm serenity of General's close is like to step into a whole other realm. It just felt like the right place.

Riley Temple: Let me see. Was Tim Boggs in your class by any chance? Do you know Tim?

Deon Johnson: Not that I know. No, I cannot say that he was.

Riley Temple: Okay. He was probably after you.

Deon Johnson: Yeah. There were 48 people in my class at seminary, so there were a lot of us. We were the biggest class they had in like 20-some odd years.

Riley Temple: Compared to Virginia Theological Seminary, that is not very large.

Deon Johnson: Yes.

Riley Temple: Right. You had a family there. You were formed together.

Deon Johnson: Yeah. Do you mean, did I have a family that went with me to seminary?

Riley Temple: No. Did you?

Deon Johnson: No, I did not.

Riley Temple: I guess my response is that while you were at General, the people who were there being formed with you were like family.

Deon Johnson: Yes. Like I said, my family was like 45 minutes away. I could just hop on the train on most weekends and go visit family, have some good food, and come back. The folks at General became kind of an extended family. You built bonds. Again, I am still connected to a lot of those folks in the church because we were formed together. I mean, the defining moment of my ministry was September 11th.

Riley Temple: That is right. You were there.



Deon Johnson: Yeah, I was standing by the World Trade Center when the plane hit the building.

Riley Temple: Oh. Oh.

Deon Johnson: It became the defining time of our formation. Again, I happened to be going down to St. Paul's Chapel for an interview that morning.

Riley Temple: Yeah. Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I was being interviewed to be one of their seminarians at St. Paul's Chapel.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I came out of I think it is the D line that comes out literally – or is it the E? Either the D, E, or the F comes out right next to St. Paul's, or it used to, but down the street from the World Trade Center.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I literally came up to see everybody kind of standing there looking up. I am like, what? There is smoke coming out of one of the buildings. What is going on? Again, in New York you are so accustomed to people filming movies that we just assumed. I mean, your mind does not compute that this is not a movie. I was one of those people just standing there looking up and going like, oh what is going on? You heard the second plane come down, and it slammed into the building. We are thinking, oh that is a really cool movie effect until you start seeing pieces of the building start falling. It is like, that is not a movie. I think I got onto the last cab back to the seminary as quickly as possible. Then I was greeted by the news that this was a terrorist attack. I stood on the West Side highway and saw those buildings collapse.

Riley Temple: I had to be in New York two days after or shortly after that. One of the things I remember is the curious and distinctive smell.

Deon Johnson: Yeah, it permeated everything. The other thing I remember very much from that day was how beautifully blue the sky was.

Riley Temple: Yes. Yes.



Deon Johnson: It was an unusually warm and cloudless September day. I think it was like in the mid-seventies. It was completely blue. There was not a cloud in the sky, so you could see the trail of the smoke that just as it billowed out. There was no wind. There was no place for it to go, so it literally just continued to billow out. You could see it for miles. To be standing over on the West Side highway, seeing the smoke, and knowing what was happening, it just kept smoldering. It smoldered for months I think before they could do anything with it.

Riley Temple: Yeah. Yeah.

Deon Johnson: What I always say to folks is that was a formative time for me. We began our ministry in trauma with that.

Riley Temple: What do you mean, your ministry? How did it take effect?

Deon Johnson: We as a nation, we tend to focus on September 11th. I say for my ministry, I focus on September 12th. On the 12th, we saw the best of who we could be. One of the lasting images for me was going out on the West Side highway, which is about two and a half blocks away from General and seeing all of these ambulances lined up for miles. Just walking down the West side highway and just seeing the different states, there was Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Florida. They were from everywhere. It was a stunning image in that here are all these people from all over the country coming to try and offer help. Stunning knowing that none of them were going to be leaving with people who survived. I mean, that is a powerful image, but it also spoke to the best of who we were.

St. Paul's Chapel became the place of refuge and triage. I spent many a time just offering pastoral care to firefighters, first responders, handing them water, and praying for them. As they found pieces of bodies, they were bringing them in to say a prayer with the firefighter as they got sent off to the makeshift morgue and all that stuff. I mean, I was in the thick of it for those first couple of days. Again, that is what we do as the church. We show up. We offer care. We bring Christ's presence for as long as it is needed.

Riley Temple: Christ's hands, feet, mind, soul, body, yes.

Deon Johnson: Yeah.

Riley Temple: It is a very powerful witness.



Deon Johnson: Like I said, it is what has defined my ordained ministry. I saw who we could be when we are at our best. For me, it is my goal and my call is for us as a church to go to that place of being our best selves for a world that needs us.

Riley Temple: When you graduated from General, by the way, where did you do? You did field ed work. Did you not?

Deon Johnson: Yes, I did my field ed at St. Luke in the Fields.

Riley Temple: Oh, St. Luke in the Fields. Yeah, lovely church. Then when you left General, you went back to Cleveland – Shaker Heights.

Deon Johnson: Yes. I was called to Christ Church Shaker Heights as the associate rector.

Riley Temple: How was that?

Deon Johnson: That was blessing and bane all at the same time?

Riley Temple: How so?

Deon Johnson: I was newly ordained, so I mean a wonderful community. I had done my summer internship with them, so they knew that I was coming. The bishop had told me, this is where you are going to be assigned. For my first 18 months, for the most part it was pretty good. My rector left at the 18 months or was removed at the 18-month mark because of embezzlement, some financial issues, and alcoholism.

Riley Temple: Oh. They usually go hand-in-hand.

Deon Johnson: Yeah. I found myself at the ripe old age of 28 being in charge of the third largest congregation in the Diocese.

Riley Temple: Oh, good God. My old grandmother would say, the Lord works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform.

Deon Johnson: Her wonders to perform, yeah. I would say again this was another defining moment for my ministry. I was on vacation in Barbados when all of this went down. I came back to a frantic vestry and a confused congregation. I am the only priest. Like I said, I was at the ripe old age of 27 or 28. Thank God for having a good sense of self, because I realize that a lot of this had nothing to do with me. I just set about to kind of go, what do we need as a church right now? We need to grieve. We need to name what it is. We



need to grieve it. Then we need to start figuring out what kind of future we want. That is exactly what we did.

Riley Temple: I do not know – I am sorry?

Deon Johnson: I said, that is exactly what we did.

Riley Temple: Yeah. I have known a lot of Episcopal clergy – Episcopal and not – a lot of clergy in their twenties. Few would have the presence, the fortitude, the spine, and the gravitas to do what you did. To what do you attribute that?

Deon Johnson: I would say a deep sense of self.

Riley Temple: You said that earlier, yeah.

Deon Johnson: Again, this was not about me. I think the clergy leaders in general get in trouble when they start thinking that it is about them. I was clear that this was not about me. This was about a congregation that was going through a trauma and needing to be healed, to walk towards healing, and to figure out what we needed for that. I simply responded with, what would I need in this moment were I someone in the congregation? I need to be able to name this. I need to be able to own it. I need to be able to grieve what has been lost. I need to begin to figure a way of repairing what was broken.

I was lucky to have really good lay leaders as well by my side that could help walk this journey with me, and a staff that did not fracture but kind of said this young guy with the collar is who we have. Instead of undermining him, we are just going to follow where he leads. I was blessed in that way. I mean, for instance, one of the things I remember from that time obviously this made the news. The news folks wanted to come and interview. Everybody kept saying no, you do not want the news to come. I said, wait a minute. Either they are going to tell the story their way, or we can tell the story. I would rather tell the story. I mean, even my staff was like we do not want to talk. We do not think you should talk to the news or anything like that. I said they are going to write the story regardless. I would rather us tell the story that we need to tell.

I invited them to come in. The impishness in me went, you know, they are going to want to have me sitting in some pew somewhere so that they can kind of get like tell us about the chaos and all this. I had them set up in our Good Shephard atrium. We had a Montessori atrium at that congregation. I had them set up for my interview in the Montessori atrium with all the atrium stuff behind me. Of course, the questions were, what is going on in the congregation? How are they dealing with this? My response was, the



congregation is in shock, but that is not stopping us from doing our ministry. You are sitting in our atrium. I decided. I had taken a media class when I was in seminary, and I just decided I will answer the questions that I want to answer rather than the questions that you ask me.

Riley Temple: What did you just say to me? You took a what class when you were in seminary?

Deon Johnson: A media class.

Riley Temple: See? How wonderful.

Deon Johnson: It was by accident completely.

Riley Temple: I hope it lasts from this new arrangement.

Deon Johnson: It does.

Riley Temple: I hope so because that is a very important skill to learn.

Deon Johnson: You answer the questions that you want to answer, not what necessarily is asked.

Riley Temple: Yeah, that is right. That is exactly right. Of course, there was an awful lot of sophistication already in you in order to be able to handle that, clearly.

Deon Johnson: I will take it.

Riley Temple: When have you had great doubts?

Deon Johnson: Oh, throughout all of this. Trust me. There were days when I went home.

Riley Temple: Can you talk? Do you want to talk about that at all how you deal with doubt?

Deon Johnson: I would not even say so much doubt. I would say second-guessing of self.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: Was this the right? I tend to be reflective. After whatever it is, I tend to stop and just think about it. Kind of reflect on, okay, what could you have done differently? What could have been done? What was the opportunity? There were many times that I literally was going through what was going on at the church and the chaos. I thought to myself, you know, you should



have responded differently to that. You could have responded in this way. I finally got to a point where it is like, you know, I cannot go back and change the past. I can only react or respond to where I am today. Whatever else comes after that, well second-guessing myself is not going to help. If I made a mistake, apologize. Own it and move along.

Riley Temple: What about second thoughts about your life's journey?

Deon Johnson: Ironically, even throughout all of that stuff I never lost track of why I was doing this.

Riley Temple: Yeah. Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I remembered myself. It is, you are here for this. The image of Esther. For such a time as this you were called. Having gone through the trauma of 9/11 and all that stuff I think very much well prepared me to deal with what was going on at Christ Church at the time.

Riley Temple: I love this.

Deon Johnson: Again, it is knowing deep down in my very being, this is not about me.

Riley Temple: I once preached about Esther using Esther after a woman testified against Judge Kavanaugh. The woman who stands in the halls of power to protect her people.

Deon Johnson: For such a time as this.

Riley Temple: Right. Exactly. Then you went to Michigan, yes?

Deon Johnson: Yes. I was called miraculously.

Riley Temple: How long? You were in Shaker Heights for?

Deon Johnson: Three years.

Riley Temple: Yeah. Then you went to St. Paul's where you were for 13 years.

Deon Johnson: Fourteen.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: Yeah, I got called to St. Paul's. I think I was one of youngest rectors they have ever had.



Riley Temple: How old were you?

Deon Johnson: I was 28 when I got called there. I can safely say that in the 14 years that I served them as rector, I have served three different congregations. The congregation that was there when I got there is not the congregation that was there when I left.

Riley Temple: Okay. How so?

Deon Johnson: When I got there, I have said this publicly, so I am not sharing anything that is out of school. When I got there, I think they were corporately depressed. You know? The building was not in very good shape. There were not a whole lot of people. They were like we cannot afford you. When I got there, we started with a \$65,000 deficit. I arrived in September of 2006 or the end of September 2006. That next year the budget had a \$65,000 deficit, which was more than my salary at the time. By the time that I left 14 years later, they had a balanced budget and an endowment. Like I said, the reason why we had a different congregation is the congregation that I started with I think was corporately depressed. It was like the building is in terrible shape. We are not happy. One of the very first things I did was the paint. I painted. I found the money, and we painted every single room in that building. It is amazing what a fresh coat of paint can do to a congregation that is struggling.

Riley Temple: Put on that new dress.

Deon Johnson: Yeah. My grandmother's advice to be successful is get up, dress up, show up.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I dressed the place up so that people would show up.

Riley Temple: You know, I lost a really good friend a couple of years ago now. One of the great joys of my life was to spend time with him. His name was Vernon Jordan. What you just said about your grandmother, he would say to me. Riley, do you know what mother wit is? Yes. Yes.

Deon Johnson: That congregation, I led them from 2006 up to about 2012. There was a big change. We became a much younger congregation. We became a congregation with a lot of children running around. The building did not work.



Riley Temple: Yes, but bishop that did not just happen.

Deon Johnson: It took some time and some work.

Riley Temple: It also happened as a result of vision and purpose.

Deon Johnson: Yes. I am a firm believer that where there is no vision, the people perish.

Riley Temple: People perish.

Deon Johnson: I mean, Isaiah was right. Part of the challenge, I think for the church right now, is that we are so accustomed to trying to survive that we do not know what casting a vision of thriving looks like. For me, that is what we are called. We are called to be prophets to our own people. The prophet both challenges and invigorates all at the same time.

Riley Temple: Sometimes things are at an octave so high that people cannot hear.

Deon Johnson: Part of it though is for me, and this has just been my ministry, is I will point to here is where we could be.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: This is what we could look like. The other thing is I say this to my clergy a lot. I do not worry about the money part. I am a firm believer that if the vision is compelling, if people can catch on fire with that vision, the money will follow.

Riley Temple: Yeah. Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I started very early on trying to build a community in a building that was not designed for building community. We would worship in very different ways. We would try different things. I added a service so that we could make the big service much smaller, and people could be in more intimate spaces and things like that. After a while, people kept going, why can we not worship like this all the time? It is like, well, our building does not allow it.

Riley Temple: Okay, this raises another point that I wanted to explore with you. That is, I have detected that you expand liturgy. You are a liturgist.

Deon Johnson: Yes.



- Riley Temple: Was this at St. Paul's the first time that you had given full-throated endorsement to your views of a more expansive liturgy?
- Deon Johnson: No. Surprisingly, that started at Christ Church. That was one of the things that the rector of Christ Church when I first got there had wanted. I was in charge of liturgy and children and family.
- Riley Temple: Okay.
- Deon Johnson: Part of the challenge at Christ Church was that it was a very diverse ethnically and culturally diverse congregation. We had people who were from India. We had people who were from different countries in Africa. We had people who were African American. We had people who were Caribbean-American. We had Australian and New Zealand folks. It was this United Colors of Benington. A lot of just straight from the prayer book just did not work for that congregation, so we had to figure ways of expanding the liturgy to accommodate who was in the pews.
- Riley Temple: Did you develop your own with some assistance from other forms or more progressive forms of the already existing liturgy in the church?
- Deon Johnson: Yes. A lot of it was just expanding what we had or figuring out how to adapt what we have in the Book of Common Prayer towards what we needed.
- Riley Temple: I see.
- Deon Johnson: At St. Paul's I really got to do that a lot more. I had to deal with a building that was not designed for Episcopal liturgy.
- Riley Temple: What do you mean?
- Deon Johnson: The way that St. Paul's was when I got there, if you can imagine an original, small church that is gothic. You know? Long 747 type of building. They were supposed to build two transepts on either side, but they could not, so they built one transept. If you sat on one side of the church, you could not see who was around the corner. It is like an L, so the altar was at the peak of the L.
- Riley Temple: Yeah.
- Deon Johnson: On Sunday morning, I kept saying to them you need to buy me a lazy Susan so I can just spin around for the two sides. I mean, I put the altar at the angle so that I could see from the altar everybody. They could not see



each other. That building was not designed for that type of response or for that type of liturgy. I did not have a choice but to adapt the liturgy to meet the needs of the space, and that is kind of how it started.

Riley Temple: It worked?

Deon Johnson: It worked. The other piece that I was very mindful of in Brighton, a lot of the people who eventually started coming to church were people who had no religious background to begin with. We had a lot of what you would call the nons – the folks who were non-affiliated – who started showing up at church. It meant that our language had to change. We could not use Narthex, sacristy, and vestibule. Again, if you have no church background these things do not make sense to you. Some of the things in the liturgy, I saw our worship, our liturgy, and our community gatherings as opportunities to teach. I would put little thought bubbles in the bulletin to explain this is an opening acclimation. This is what it is. This is the calling to purity. This is why we do this. I found myself using the liturgy as a way of teaching the faith and helping form people in their own faith. It allowed me to begin to expand some of that. It kind of demanded it because the language of the Book of Common Prayer was not helpful for people who have no church affiliation.

Riley Temple: Right. I am sorry – that is my dog. You are a teacher. Do you see that first and foremost, or no?

Deon Johnson: I love teaching.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: Yes, that is one of the parts of being a bishop that I absolutely love. I love just being in a room. Put me in a room full of people that are asking questions, and I am in my element.

Riley Temple: We will get to this. I know you do not have. Being a bishop permits greater focus on teaching than running a parish, obviously.

Deon Johnson: A bit more, yes.

Riley Temple: A bit more.

Deon Johnson: Well, when I was in a parish, I had a set forum that I taught every Sunday, Wednesdays, or whatnot. With being a bishop, I am kind of like the traveling roadshow. I will go and they will ask me, can you talk on this?



Can you answer this? The challenge is building a relationship quickly with the community that you do not see every Sunday.

Riley Temple: Where have you in your ministry been challenged by, or alternatively both or either, buoyed by race?

Deon Johnson: All throughout it. I will give you one example. St. Paul's when I was there was 99% white. When my family showed up or friends showed up, the diversity quotient went up a lot.

Riley Temple: Yeah. It was a big step for them to call you.

Deon Johnson: It was a big step for them to call me.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: They called me. I was not appointed or anything. They literally chose me out of a field of five. They were concerned for me when I accepted. They were like, you know, this is not exactly a very diverse place. Are you going to be comfortable? I said to them, Detroit is 45 minutes away. If I need to go find some of my people and some of my food, I can go do that. No, I am okay. A lot of the times it was not the congregation. The congregation was perfectly fine with me. It was the wider community that we often had problems with. For instance, when we were in the midst of our renovation of the church, I had stained glass folks come to look at our stained-glass windows.

Riley Temple: Excuse me just one second. Baxter. Baxter stop. Baxter. I am sorry.

Deon Johnson: No problem. I had this stained-glass contractor coming to look at one of the windows. It was my day off. It was a Friday – my day off. I am just in jeans and a shirt or something like that. I showed up to meet this person. He goes, I am looking for the rector. I go, yeah, I know. Oh, well where is the rector? I am the rector. He is like, how are you the rector? You are black. I looked at him and I said, you know, I tried and it just does not rub off. You are kind of stuck with me black as the rector. Come on in. I showed him the thing. Needless to say, they did not get the contract.

Riley Temple: Was he embarrassed?

Deon Johnson: I think after the fact when I said it, yes. At first, I think it was kind of like brain and mouth just were not in sync. He just said the first thing. Oh, but you are black. Yeah, it does happen.



Riley Temple: When did it first occur to you that you had a role in the Ecclesiastical hierarchy?

Deon Johnson: Again, I will claim village. One of the things that I have not really done very much of is I am not very good at self-promoting. That is just not part of who I am. I have been in two bishop searches.

Riley Temple: Before you go on, let me just say one thing. You may not be good at self-promoting, but you walk into a room and it is noticed. All right. Go ahead.

Deon Johnson: Well, thank you.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I have been in two bishop searches. I was in a search for the Diocese of El Camino Real. I was pretty clear that they were not going to be electing me, so I was not terribly worried.

Riley Temple: Are you bilingual, by the way?

Deon Johnson: Mi esposa is from Mexico.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I know enough Spanish to be dangerous.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: The gift in that was that it was my friends who said to me, we really think you need to put your name in for El Camino Real. I am one of those people that if three people say the same thing to me independent of each other, I will consider it. I did. I considered it. I said, okay, do you know what? I will put my name in, and we will see how it goes. Gay bishops have not gone over very well in this church, so we will see how this happens. The fact that I made it onto the slate was surprising to me. Obviously, I was not elected. Right after that election, that election took place on June second.

Another one of my friends sent me a note and said, have you seen the Diocese of Missouri's profile? I thought I could not find Missouri on a map if I tried. No, I have not seen it. She sent me the profile, and I looked at it. I was like, oh, this is really cool. I just got done with a bishop search. June 15th was their deadline to get all the materials in. I said, nope. Unless they somehow miraculously manage to extend the deadline, I do not have



the time. I do not have the energy. I just do not have the capacity to deal with it right now. The next day, another friend of mine sent me the exact same profile to my email saying, have you considered this? This might be really cool for you to do. I responded to him the same thing. Then the next day, another person calls me up from the Diocese and says we would love for you to apply. I am like, I do not have it in me.

Lo and behold, on the fifteenth my friends called me up and said I am holding you to your promise. You said that if they extended the deadline you would apply. They just extended the deadline. Of course, I am thinking to myself, oh great. I have to go because they extended the deadline. I sat down and I wrote the essays. At this point, I was just brutally honest. I was like, do you know what? I am just going to tell you exactly what I think. You will weed me out of this process, and I will continue to be just a parish priest doing my thing. The rest is history. I ended up getting to be on the candidates retreat. I ended up being on the slate. November 19, 2019, I was elected on the first ballot, which was hilarious to me. I was not expecting to be elected. I was expecting to get a phone call to say, thank you so much. Here is your participation prize.

Riley Temple: Did anything surprise you? What has surprised you?

Deon Johnson: In the process or in being elected?

Riley Temple: Both.

Deon Johnson: In the process, I will say I was absolutely surprised by the level of hospitality that Missouri offered me. Do not get me wrong. The hospitality in El Camino Real was really good, but the level of care in Missouri in making sure that we had down time, in making sure that we were well-fed, that it was not overload during the walkabout process was absolutely amazing. I mean, these folks took hospitality seriously. Even thinking about where they were going to put us up and that we had shepherds that were going to be with us. It was just top-notch the way that they took care of us.

Then the election process. That again is the same thing. They took really good care to make sure that the transition was going to be a smooth one. Then the pandemic happened, but that is a whole other. That is perhaps the biggest challenge. All the plans got thrown out the window once the pandemic started.

Riley Temple: Have you? Being bishop in Missouri, has it given you opportunity to explore in earnest your interests and your vision in expanded liturgy?



Deon Johnson: Yes. One of the gifts that the pandemic gave me was that we now had to figure out you cannot just adopt or adapt BCP 1979 to an online environment. You cannot make the liturgy performative. You know, it is not just something that you look at from a screen from afar and it is like, look. How do you engage with people who are engaging with this online in a way that is life-giving and transformative as if they were sitting there with everybody else? That is not an easy liturgical task to do, but we managed to tackle it here in the Diocese of Missouri.

One of the things I did was I wrote it is called an Agape Per Sunday. It is based on the Maundy Thursday Agape Liturgy from the Book of Occasional Services where it blesses food, bread, wine, and other things like that. It is not communion, but it is close. It is kind of an Agape gathering. I wrote a new liturgy for that that we used in the Diocese throughout the pandemic. The priests could be at the church, saying the words, blessing for food, wine, bread, and all of that stuff. People at home could be saying the same prayers along with their food, bread, wine, and other things. It felt like a dispersed gathering of Agape.

Then adapting and figuring out how to adapt to do Holy Week in a different way. Plus, again, being a liturgist, my Diocese has been really asking for how we adapt to the forms that we need now. I have been challenged to write liturgies for high holy days that do not have liturgies. Pentecost Sunday is a big Sunday, but there is no liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer specifically for Pentecost.

Riley Temple: There is nothing other than the preface and the readings.

Deon Johnson: Exactly. It is the same thing for Christmas. I mean, Christmas or even Easter Sunday both can just go over looking like any other Sunday. It is like, these are our big high holy days. We need special liturgies that speak to what these days are about. That has been the gift that I have been able to offer to this Diocese. I write new liturgies for specific seasons.

Riley Temple: Have the gifts been accepted?

Deon Johnson: Oh whole-heartedly. It has been amazing seeing some of them being done and experiencing leading some of them when I go for visitation. Folks will come up and say, oh my gosh, what we did for Pentecost last year was really, really good. It really gave me a different sense of Pentecost. You get to see it live and in person.



Riley Temple: I do some writing. When you sit down to craft a new liturgy, an expanded liturgy, what is the process that you use? Are there practices that you employ or rituals that you use before you become immersed?

Deon Johnson: Yes and no. On my phone I have the Notes app.

Riley Temple: Okay yeah.

Deon Johnson: If I am walking down the street, if I am in the airport, and a phrase or something just sticks with me, I just quickly write it down or something. I do not know what I am going to use it for, but it just pops into my head. It is like, oh that sounded really interesting.

Riley Temple: Writers used to do that with a little notepad.

Deon Johnson: Yeah, I just keep those there. For instance, I had to write a set of liturgies for the visit to the Legacy Museum in Alabama.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I had to write some liturgies for the House of Bishops.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: I had never been to the Legacy Museum, so I am writing liturgies for a place that I have never been to. I just did a bit of research and looked up about lynchings, looked about racial segregation, and all of that stuff. I just simply borrowed from what they already had to create the liturgy around it. To visit that place, you go in with expectations. The liturgy begins with the Liturgy of Expectation. There is also lament in that. You are lamenting what has been. What I usually do when I am writing a liturgy is I write a theme for that liturgy, and then I try to follow up on that theme. What is it?

Right now, I am in the middle of writing a new liturgy for Juneteenth. Juneteenth is such a new holiday; we do not have any resources for it just yet. My little notes for Juneteenth, I wrote down remembrance, repentance, repair, and rejoice. That is the fourfold way the liturgy should unfold. We have to remember who we are talking about. We start with 1619 with the slaves. We have to repent. As a community, we have to repent of our role in that. I am thinking, you know, we ask for forgiveness, but there is no absolution. Again, repentance means that you are saying you are sorry, but we are not coming to a conclusion when it comes to Juneteenth. That is the remember and the repent. Then the repair is what



does this liturgy need to do? It needs to help us repair the reaches that have happened because of racial disharmony. Then we get to rejoice. The rejoice is gathering at the table.

Riley Temple: Let me just ask one question to make sure I understand. Absolution is meaning offering pardon and forgiveness.

Deon Johnson: Yes. I am thinking for this liturgy there is no pardon and forgiveness. That work is still to be done.

Riley Temple: It is an ongoing journey.

Deon Johnson: Exactly. Unlike on a Sunday morning when you offer most personal God, we confess that we have sinned, the priest offers and absolution and says those things that you have done have now been forgiven.

Riley Temple: Manifold sins and wickedness.

Deon Johnson: Exactly. I am thinking for this for Juneteenth, because it is dealing with slavery and because it is dealing with the legacy of slavery which we are still seeing played out on the TV practically on a daily basis—

Riley Temple: Last night.

Deon Johnson: I mean last night down in Tennessee with the representatives that were kicked out of the House, it was all of that. I thought, you know, if we are going to talk about repentance, we need to continue that work of repentance. There is no absolution for that.

Riley Temple: Where is the hope? Talk to me about the hope.

Deon Johnson: The hope is the rejoicing that we can rejoice together and look towards what comes next.

Riley Temple: Okay. Okay.

Deon Johnson: The hope is in the repair. I am thinking a litany of repair and repentance. We always move towards hope. That is the one thing you will always, for me, that is what it is all about. There is always hope.

Riley Temple: I will tell you a quick story. Here in Washington, one time I went to a screening of Selma, the movie.

Deon Johnson: Yes.



Riley Temple: Of course, it was at the museum. John Lewis at the end was up there, Ava Duvernay, and blah-blah-blah. It was toward the end of Barack Obama's second term. I went up to John Lewis, who I had come to know, and I said Congressman I have lost hope for racial reconciliation in this country. You would have thought that I had stabbed him with a knife. He took me by my shoulders and he walked me backward to the wall. He took his finger and put it right in my sternum. He said you must never lose hope and not live without hope. Eyes welling up. May he rest in peace.

Deon Johnson: Yeah.

Riley Temple: I want to spend a couple of minutes. I know we have got until 2:30. I want to spend just a couple of minutes on Seder.

Deon Johnson: Yes.

Riley Temple: Tell me about the effect of the ban.

Deon Johnson: I mean, a little background. The week before Holy Week or the week before the week before Holy Week – one of them – I was on retreat with our diocese and clergy. Someone asked me the question about, what do you think of Christian Seders? I said, no, do not do them. One of the clergy asked, could you put that in writing? We have a couple of people who were asking about wanting to do that. I said, we should not do that. That is not our Christian culture. I sat down and crafted a letter that pretty much said, in the Diocese of Missouri it is not part of our tradition. It is absolutely forbidden. It has garnered much more interest than I thought. I just thought, here is a letter that I am just sending to my Diocese saying this is not something that we should do. I have gotten notes and emails from people from Australia saying, thank you so much. I am like, I do not think I did anything that was that ground-breaking. I mean, this is not what we should be doing.

Riley Temple: By not what we should be doing, you mean supersession. What is it called?

Deon Johnson: Exactly. It is supersessionism.

Riley Temple: Yeah.

Deon Johnson: We are not here to replace the Jews.

Riley Temple: You did not ban Ecumenical Seders if I recall.



Deon Johnson: No, attending one. I am going to one this coming Thursday because I was invited to by the Jewish Federation to be a part of it. I said visiting and being a part if you are invited, by all means. A bunch of Christians play acting with the Passover of somebody else's tradition I said would be the equivalent of the Islamic group deciding to have a Eucharist because Jesus is the prophet.

Riley Temple: I have been a part of an Ecumenical Seder for many years. We are from everywhere. There are only 12 of us, but we cover a whole lot of bases. Of course, we do the Haggadah. Then I try to explain to them the language of the Exodus story and what it has meant to African Americans.

Deon Johnson: Yes.

Riley Temple: It is how the sacrifice of the blood of a lamb without blemish speaks to us in renewal and not having death as having dominion over us.

Deon Johnson: Yes.

Riley Temple: It is in any event. After that, we read a portion of Elie Wiesel's address at Auschwitz and then some dialogue from *Bent*, you know the play about homosexuals in the Holocaust, and then a portion of the Martin Luther King's 1963 letter from a Birmingham jail. It is how we end. It is all about the difference from oppression. Perhaps Bishop, let me lobby you to work with your Jewish brethren and sisters to develop a liturgy for an Ecumenical Seder.

Deon Johnson: That would be conceived.

Riley Temple: All right. I am going to leave it alone. Now we have to stop in about five minutes.

Deon Johnson: Yeah.

Riley Temple: I have enjoyed this conversation. I feel like we have only covered so much, but you do not have that much time. I want you to use the last few minutes to tell me what questions you thought that you would be asked and you were prepared to answer that I did not ask.

Deon Johnson: I did not come with any preconceived questions to be asked.

Riley Temple: Okay.



Deon Johnson: I came to our time together just open for wherever the Holy Spirit was going to lead us.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: I have no unanswered questions within me.

Riley Temple: Oh good. Then we have a few more minutes. Can we talk about your marriage? How long have you been married? How did it come about? Were you married in the Church? How was that received in the Diocese of Missouri?

Deon Johnson: Yeah. This June or this January we have been together for ten years. We got married in 2018. It took a little while after. In 2015 marriage became legal, so we waited until 2018. This year is our fifth anniversary of marriage coming up in June. We met online kind of like how most people are meeting these days. The Diocese of Missouri was pretty open to a black gay married immigrant becoming their bishop. Like I said, as I mentioned earlier, my husband is Mexican American. He was born in Mexico, so I guess he is technically Mexican. We are raising two small children – not small children anymore – two young humans. One is 13 and one is 11.

Riley Temple: Thirteen.

Deon Johnson: Yeah, tell me about it. The Diocese has embraced us. We were very clear even during the walkabouts that you are electing a bishop, not a bishop and a spouse.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: We have. Yovani [PH] was raised Roman Catholic and still considers himself to be Roman Catholic. There is no expectation that he is going to travel with me during visitations or anything like that. Sometimes he goes, and sometimes he does not. I leave that entirely up to him. It is like there is no role that you have to play. They have been very, very supportive of both of us in this Diocese, and they continue to.

Riley Temple: That is wonderful news. I do not know if you want to address this at all, but there is a vacancy coming.

Deon Johnson: Which one? The presiding bishop? Oh, good God, no. No. I do not even think I am eligible because I have not been a bishop for five years.



Riley Temple: Oh, all right.

Deon Johnson: No. It is not to mention with knowing the extensive amount of travel that is required of the presiding bishop and stuff like that, I travel enough as it is. I do not think that that would be for me. I do not think that that is. Let me not say that. I will say I do not think that is my calling. If the village says to me, hey, this is something that we want you to consider, I will consider it. Right now, I do not think that I have. My family would not let me consider it. I need to be with my family for now.

Riley Temple: Okay. Especially at that age, I guess, of 13.

Deon Johnson: Exactly.

Riley Temple: In terms of the understanding of the collaboration and joining of resources and “merger” or whatever it is of General and Virginia, I am sure you have some ideas about how that should be managed and operated and where you would like to see it come out. Have you been able to share that with people who need to hear it?

Deon Johnson: Yeah, I am on the advisory board.

Riley Temple: Okay.

Deon Johnson: I have been elected to the Board of General, and then we got switched over to being the advisory board to what is happening.

Riley Temple: That is right. That is right.

Deon Johnson: What I am saying is the way I see it is we are entering into an uncharted path that nobody knows what the end looks like. I do not think Dean Marcum, Dean DeLashmutt, no one knows where this is going. We are in an experimental time in the life of the Church. I applaud both General and VTS for taking a chance on something that they do not know what it is going to look like.

Riley Temple: Hear. Hear.

Deon Johnson: I do not have an opinion as to what they should do. I think what they are doing and kind of just exploring possibilities and trying some things is perhaps the best way forward. I think that that is where the truth needs to go. We keep trying to go back to how we were in the 1950s. Someone recently said in a sermon, Jesus is coming. The 1950s is not.



Riley Temple: I like it. I like it.

Deon Johnson: That is true. We are not going to go back to that time. We have to adapt. One of the things when I was at St. Paul's that I did that I have been suggesting to our Diocese here is I had a sign made and put by the door that said, if you do not like change, you will like being irrelevant even less. For the church, we are in a period of significant change.

Riley Temple: Are we not all? Are we not all?

Deon Johnson: We are. The thing is we can either embrace that we are going to have to change, or we can push back against it.

Riley Temple: We must learn to live, to survive, and to exist. We have to learn to manage change that we experience.

Deon Johnson: Exactly. I think that this Church will do more than survive. Here is the thing. This is what I have been saying to my Diocese. The things that we need to survive are not the things that we need to thrive. Survival is about me. Survival is about keeping things going so that I can be around for another day or another hour.

Riley Temple: Yeah. Yeah.

Deon Johnson: Thriving is about the other. It is not about just me. It is about all of us together. The Church I think is called into a season of thriving. We need to stop being worried about budgets and who is showing up in the pews and do the things that we know that Jesus called us to do to thrive. Here ends my sermon.

Riley Temple: Thank you. I also want to take this opportunity to thank you for spending this time with us and spending this time with me. I mentioned how challenged I am. It was a moment of personal privilege. How challenged I am about hope. I cannot be hopeless with people like you. You, as a leader in this denomination who has such vision and such expansive ideas that will keep us hopeful always. I will pray for you mightily and thank God for you.

Deon Johnson: Thank you. I live at the corner of hope and joy.

Riley Temple: All right. What we are going to do is I am going to take this recording. I am sending it to a transcription service. Then we are going to review it and put it in transcription form. Very few people who I interview want to go



back and read that transcript, but if you would like, please feel free to do so.

Deon Johnson: No, I am just fine.

Riley Temple: Okay. Thank you, Bishop. Thank you so much.

Deon Johnson: Thank you. I hope you enjoy the rest of the day.

Riley Temple: Thank you. You too, bye.

Deon Johnson: Blessings. Bye-bye.

