

## A CONVERSATION WITH CLAUDIA MAIR BURNEY

***Zora and Nicky* is about two of the subjects held most sacred in America: race and religion. How do you see racism reflected in our culture and the church today?**

I think racism is alive and well in America in both blatant and subtle ways. How could it not be? We've got a painful legacy to contend with—the shared soul wounds inflicted on us through the experience of chattel slavery. I'm forty-three years old. If my great-grandmother could tell me stories about her mother being greased and placed on an auction block, we aren't far removed from the horror of those days.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour in Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." I don't see that things have changed much. If I go to my black church, I'm comfortable. Everything is familiar—the music, the preaching style, even the way we worship. I'm not a minority there. It's the same for white Americans. Go to a predominantly white church and you're likely to have a distinctly European experience of church. I've gone to several predominantly white churches where I never saw a black person on the ministry staff or heard a black gospel song during worship. I was completely excluded culturally. It wasn't intentional; it just showed what was culturally

important to them, what was comfortable.

I've seen these same church leaders deeply hurt that black people would not come and stay. I know why they didn't stay. It's because they didn't find anything there for them. They had a European church experience in those churches, and they weren't European.

Doing what is familiar isn't inherently wrong, but it keeps us separate. We don't have to deal with the messy issues of our biases when we stay with the people most like us. We don't have to confront our fears, or our hate. But it's still there, and until we can meet at the foot of the cross and say, "I've got this wound, but I'm willing to give it to Jesus to heal," and then say to our brother or sister who is not like us, "Hey, show me *your* wound and we'll take that to the cross too," we aren't going to make any progress.

We also have to make a commitment to stop hurting one another. And we must create safe places to share our pain, fissures, and scars, or we won't take that risk. And it is a risk. That's why so many of us are trapped in our little segregated dead ends, every bit the pious deniers, which in many ways, is not much different than being pious liars.

### **Can you tell us a bit about your faith background?**

In a word, my faith background has been *messy*. I started off having my "born again" experience at the age of fifteen in a fiery Church of God in Christ. From there I went to what is now called Word Faith or Word of Faith churches. I went to a variety of independent charismatic-friendly churches, black and white, some having very little accountability. I saw a lot of abuse during those years.

I left the church as a young adult. I did a lot of running from God. I chanted with the Hare Krishnas, wanted to be a whirling dervish, got all new-agey. I blew through a whole range of religious experiences seeking the love I'd left behind in Jesus. And then I spent years making my way back to Him. Although I'd returned, I was unable to articulate or honor the deepest longings of my heart, which I believe were put there by God. I wanted a very multicultural experience in worship, and I don't mean only black and white together. I'm closer to having that now than I've ever been, but I'm not quite there yet.

Now I'm Eastern Orthodox. I like it because it's pretty much the same everywhere. No matter what Orthodox church I go to, we're going to be celebrating the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. It isn't personality driven. You go to worship God and receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. We aren't driven into emotional frenzies. We don't have a preacher who is a superstar. It's just one long prayer service until we receive the Body of Christ. I love it. It feels safer than the madness I've been through.

**Zora and Nicky are both changed by what you would describe as incarnational Christianity. What does this mean to you? Is it something you've experienced in your life?**

I got a real "incarnational Christianity" bug as I wrote this novel. I'd heard the term, but it didn't click until I began asking myself questions as I wrote. What does it mean to have "this treasure in earthen vessels"? If I were to take being the body of Christ seriously, how would that affect how I lived? Christ loved. He healed. He deliv-

ered. I asked myself: How do people heal? How do they love through Christ? I put the characters in situations that challenged them to make Christ real to one another. For example, Christ is concerned about our needs. If we need clothing, He's probably not going to drop a few outfits out of the sky. It's more likely that He'll provide through community. He provides for His body through His body. I believe if we caught on to this we'd change the world. People like Saint Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta changed the world through incarnational living.

I'm still trying to find my footing. This is all new and exciting, and it's turned everything I thought I knew about being a Christian on its ear. I can't be the same old self-obsessed, apathetic slug if it's up to me to be Christ to "the least of these." There goes my worldly ambition! My desire for success and fame falls to the wayside when I think of all the need out there. And it's up to me to do something. So, now I say, "Amen!" I'm trying to empty myself like the Virgin Mary did and let the Holy Spirit fill me, and use me for service that goes way beyond what I thought I was capable of giving. But it's still a challenge. It goes against the grain of all the selfishness I've absorbed because of the fall, because I'm American, and because I'm an unwitting victim of the disease of affluenza, no matter how much or how little money I possess.

## WHAT'S NEXT FOR MAIR

My next book, tentatively called *Wounded*, is about a young African American woman who is sitting in her Vineyard church and receives the wounds of Christ—the sacred stigmata. I'll explore some very personal issues, particularly a question I've asked myself many times: What does it mean to share in Christ's suffering? In that novel I explore what makes an individual more receptive to accepting his or her personal cross. The main character, Gina, has lived much of her life as "the least of these." And now Christ wounds her in this peculiar and extraordinary way. And she doesn't fit the profile of one who'd likely receive such a grace. She's a black protestant single mother who is not particularly devout, but she knows something about suffering.

The theme of poverty of spirit seems to be woven into all my work, and from what I see in the Gospels, poverty of spirit is something we definitely need to pay attention to, whether we understand exactly what it is or not. I don't think you can live out any of the other Beatitudes without being poor in spirit first. Poverty of spirit is deep. We don't particularly raise our hands high to be chosen for that blessing. And blessed are they who mourn? Ewww! No thanks, unless you're the one who's in deep mourning. Then you need that blessing badly.

Christian community will also play a key role, and in my books,



community is often found outside of one's "home church." Many of my characters have been alienated from church, or they have had experiences as messy as my own. I want to give messy people like me hope.

Jesus loves us, meets us exactly where we are, and grows us through His great love and unfathomable mercy. If somebody closes my book and feels like no matter what kind of hot mess they are, God still loves them, then I've done my job. I trust God's love to draw them to Christ, and then the Holy Spirit can begin to make them more like Him, but I really believe they have to know the love is there first. The John 3:16 stuff. Love really does cover a multitude of sins. I think we need a new revelation of that. We tend to forget, and that is truly a shame.

Thanks for the chat. May God have mercy on us all.

Pax et Bonum!