



FAITHFUL CONVERSATIONS

Belonging

Eric Barreto interviews Willie James Jennings on what it means to belong.

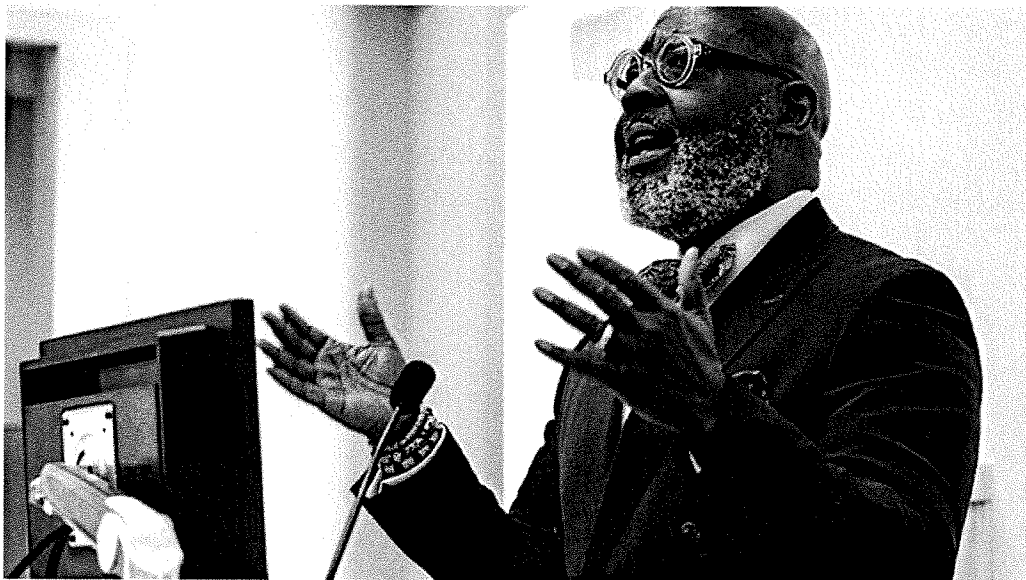
BY **ERIC D. BARRETO** & **WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS**

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Willie James Jennings, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale Divinity School. Photo by Gregg Brekke for Presbyterian Outlook.

What does belonging feel like?

Eric: A few years ago, you lectured here at Princeton Seminary and exhorted us to wonder, ‘What does Princeton Seminary feel like?’ The question has stuck with me. So, starting with you, Dr. Jennings, what does belonging feel like to you?

Willie: In the context of higher education, and, especially, theological education, belonging feels like being surprised by the familiar. Students who come from far and wide, from places that are so distant from higher education, when they arrive and sense home, they smell it, there’s a whiff of home in this place among people that are not connected to them. What slowly starts to emerge is a sense of belonging. Not the old kind of belonging or the one that they’re familiar with from their homes, but a new kind of belonging. What I would want for every institution is for students to say, ‘Sometimes when I’m here, I feel like I’m home.’

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Belonging feels like being surprised by the familiar.

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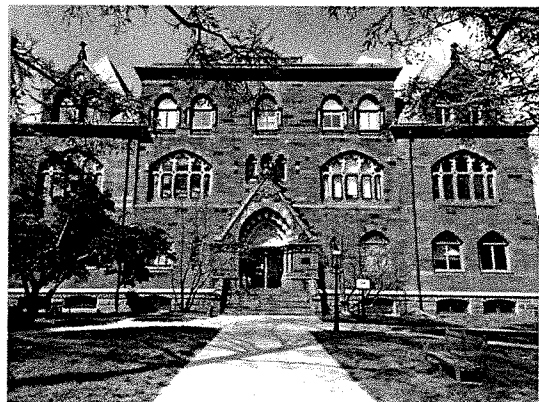
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Willie: That's exactly right. Those of us who inhabit these institutions, we can say at the start of every academic year, 'we want you to feel like you belong here.' But what we're waiting for is over the course of a career in school, a student will say very gently, but very, very clearly, I do belong here. And I sense that I belong. And that means we're challenging the fundamental alienation that many students feel when they enter not only higher education, but especially theological education.

What is distinctive about Christian belonging?

Eric: I'm seeing this term and this notion of belonging in lots of different contexts, not just in theological reflection. Especially during this pandemic season, a lot of commercials either referring specifically to belonging or alluded to it — the sense that we're all in this together, that there's something we ought to nurture in community, even as they're trying to urge us to buy more stuff. What can Christian theology contribute to these larger discourses of belonging that we might miss in those other contexts? What's the distinctive Christian witness to belonging?



Stuart Hall at Princeton Theological Seminary. Photo by Gregg Brekke.

Willie: At the heart of Christian community is creating belonging where there had been boundary, border, separation and segregation. A Christian sense of belonging always cuts across every other kind of alignment and allegiance.

Eric: Belonging used commercially is a way to continue to nurture the status quo, a way for the quiet people to say, let's just all get along. [This] undermines the importance of critique and even the importance of the prophetic, because this idea of belonging simply wants to invite us into a silence and an acquiescence, to the way things are. But in terms of a significant and specific Christian witness of belonging, what's at stake is creating points of connection. Creating ways of intertwining and of being involved where others would prefer separation — especially when that separation supports the way the economic system works, supports the way so many things work both

nationally and internationally. So a Christian vision of belonging is, in a fundamental way, always revolutionary, always counter-hegemonic, to use the more technical term. It pushes against the grain of the way we create alliance and allegiance. And that, for so many people, is incredibly threatening.

Eric: A Christian vision of belonging is also a giving up of control. We have been invited into the life of a God who invites people we would prefer God would not invite. That reality of a wild God who continues to draw people together who we would prefer not to be together, is where the real challenge of the Christian witness of belonging lies.

Thinking from the margins

Eric: One of the things I'm always struck by in reading Acts is that the Spirit's activity is constantly surprising. Those who've been called by God into community realize that the community's always larger than they had imagined. We're constantly surprised by the wideness of God's grace.

Willie: Yes. Yes. That's one of the reasons why I have appreciated so much over the years, the important work of so many womanist theologians and ethicists. I often quote the famous phrase from M. Shawn Copeland, the great Roman Catholic theologian who wrote a famous essay, "The Thinking Margins." And she talks about Black women not only being at the margins, but establishing a reality of thinking at the margins. And from that beautiful insight of Copeland's I have always lifted what it means to be a Christian. That we are thinking not only from the margin, but thinking with those who are at the margins and reading all of life, all of history, if you will, from the margins.

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Eric: I'm constantly reminded of that famous line in Ephesians 2, which begins, "Remember, you Gentiles, remember" and we know theologically that the collective practice of remembering is such an important, crucial reality of Christian existence. It's remembering the stories that for many of us we've never heard, but to learn them and to hold on to them is a crucial element in constituting a Christian practice of belonging.

Eric: And being able to hear those stories without possessing them, taking ownership over them in a way that is very tempting from a majority culture perspective, toward a market perspective.

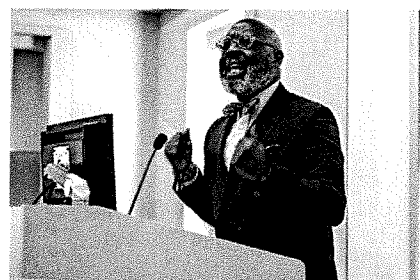
Willie: I've talked about this in *After Whiteness* in terms of the third fragment that we always have to be careful of, the fragment of the commodity. Especially those of us in education, we always have to be careful not to become intellectual merchants, who traffic in the stories of others for our own benefit, doing just as much violence to them as those who are inside the stories. Now, that doesn't mean we should be hands-off with the threads. It means that we should be hands-on in offering our hands to them. In that regard, we share stories as the step toward deep sharing of life.



Willie James Jennings. Photo by Gregg Brekke for Presbyterian Outlook.



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What intersections are there between belonging and place?

Eric: One of the things you wrote in *The Christian Imagination* is that Christian theology lost its way when it was yanked out of a particular place, a particular moment, a particular people. That the move to make Christian theology abstract left behind place, and people, and time to the detriment of Christian witness.

Eric: What intersections do you see in belonging and place? What difference does land, soil, local culture make as we try to articulate the shape of belonging?

Willie: As creatures, we were never meant to imagine ourselves displaced. We are never meant to imagine ourselves as simply floating on top of the ground without any connection to it. To be connected to a place is crucial in order to see the possibilities of a deep ethic of belonging. A sense that what happens in this place, this city, this town, this community matters to me. What happens in this place affects me. In order to make that kind of ethic clear, we have to work against alienation, displacement. We have to work against the logic of private property that tells us that what happens on my land is my business and nobody else's. We have to work against a certain kind of individualism that imagines that as long as things are going well for me, it doesn't matter what's happening to the ground.

Willie: We have to work against a reality of disconnection that's built on the networks that we live — where we just drive to work, go to my store, go to my few haunts, back home, and that's my network.

Eric, when you look outside, there are not — built into the very fabric of creation — property lines. Built into the sky — there are not clear demarcations between what's yours and mine, what's the United States and what's Canada, what's the United States and Mexico. They are not there. But in us and in our minds, they are there. We have been taught to see what is not there, which makes a sense of connection that

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The greatest pitfall of belonging is that we imagine it inside the constraints of being a creature. We imagine it only to the extent that we can see interest and connection.

For example, if you're a part of a people that lives near the ocean, and your whole life has been by this water, and the water is not simply something that you live near, but it's something that lives in you, something that speaks through you, you'll realize that there's no way you can imagine yourself owning the ocean. The ocean claims you. Your vision of your responsibility has been overturned. Your responsibility is to continue to live in ways that the life of the ocean moves through you and you support the life of the ocean. And if you live near the ocean, you're connected to wherever the ocean is. Wherever the water is, [it] is important to you because the life of the water is one life. We're pressing against those lines I mentioned earlier that we imagine are drawn. 'These, these are Japanese waters. These are Chinese waters. These are Filipino.' No, no. There's no waters with a possessive tie to them. And what that means is that we're looking at a particular formation, a particular subjectivity that doesn't imagine my responsibilities end with the waters around me. They extend to wherever the water is.

In my experience, the peoples who most quickly understand the significance of planetary threat are peoples who always understand that the planet speaks to them and that they are connected to the planet.

Eric: Beautiful. I grew up on a tropical island, so talking about the ocean and the water really resonates with me. One of the lessons I get from being by the ocean, too, is that it's not a controllable force. It's a force that brings life and can bring death, too. So this will bring us nicely into theological education. In your book, *After Whiteness*, you teach us that theological education has gone astray. When we have centered this kind of self-sufficiency that rests on possession, mastery and control, as the height of the formation to which we strive. If that's what we're after – the self-made man in particular – how might belonging help us imagine theological education beyond these constraints, beyond possession, mastery, and control?

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If that's what we're after – the self-made man in particular – how might belonging help us imagine theological education beyond these constraints, beyond possession, mastery, and control?

Willie: We need a different overarching image driving us forward. The image I offer in *After Whiteness* is Jesus in that crowd. That image helps us see the uncontrollability not only of life, but uncontrollability of the kind of vocation and work we should be about. In the heart of it, there's the renunciation of the desire to control or to show control by how we do our work. What's so great about that image is that Jesus is drawing a crowd of people who would not, under any circumstance, be anywhere near each other. But here they are with Jesus. And the only thing keeping them from killing each other is that they want what Jesus offers.

Willie: But there's the other side of it, too: this is a crowd that Jesus and the disciples cannot control. They have to simply be present. It is in the crucible of that crowd pulling, tugging, screaming out for Jesus that he comes to the recognition that he can't hold himself back anymore. He has to give his body to this crowd. And here lies the logic of the Eucharist. There is something fundamental both about that reality of Jesus offering his body, and the recognition that the crowds are together only because of him, that I want to center in theological education.

Willie: Our goal, at the heart of theological education, is to help cultivate people who ... are able to facilitate the gathering of people

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Willie: But that would not be the point. I once had a British gentleman talking to me who said, ‘well, don’t you think that in order to do the things that I’m talking about, you need people who have mastery and control?’ And I said to him, ‘listen, if you went up to a really great musician and asked her, do you feel like you have mastery, control and possession, full possession of your instrument and all the music you play,’ she would look at you like you had three heads.

Willie: Great musicians never say, I have mastery of the piano. I have mastery of the violin. I have complete possession of all the music that I’ll ever have to play. That way of thinking about what they’re doing is so far removed from how they understand what they’re doing. What they will say is, I want people to hear the music.

Eric: But we are communicating in theological education that these three years grants you a “master” of divinity. And it shapes the practice in the pulpit, in the pastor’s office, that I think we need to reimagine and reconstruct.

Willie: It’s more than just inviting ministers into a reality of humility. It’s inviting them into a reality of shared interpretation. That if somebody gets into the pulpit and creates distance right in the moment when they’re supposed to be collapsing the distance — what a missed opportunity.

Eric: For folks who have already been formed in some of these spaces, who are leading churches, who are teaching in theological education, what are the practices of undoing some of that formation, of belonging in a different way? Where do I start?

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One of the crucial questions that every pastor and every professor should ask themselves is this: Am I free?

Willie: You start by telling to your own self, either in writing or however, your story of formation. Go back and touch the fabric of your own life in the places where the wounding began. I remember the first time they told me I was inadequate. I remember that first paper I got back that had so much red, I thought somebody had been cut. You start there and then you ask, when did I make the agreement? When did I make the agreement that if you would let me be here, if you let me be in that place, I will become that man — self-sufficient, possession, master of control.

We start by recounting that story. That’s the crucial first step. The next step takes us to that biblical passage when Jesus had those many people who had to be fed. And the disciples said, ‘we don’t have anything to feed them.’ And Jesus said, ‘what do you have in your hand?’ Take the fragments of our lives and the fragments of what we’re doing – whether we’re professors or ministers – take the fragments and start to play with the fragments.

And in that moment, we want to walk away from needing to have mastery over them, needing to have control and to possess all of them. We just have fragments. And then we take those fragments, and then we take the fragments of the stories of the peoples around us and we start a new work of weaving. Those are the first two steps to start the new work of weaving the fragments in light of the history that brought me to this place, that brought me to this church, this pulpit, this lectern. Inside of that, Eric, is the freedom that so many, whether in the pulpit or the lectern, are yet to feel. I’ve been doing this for many decades now, and one of the things, one of the crucial questions that every pastor and every professor should ask themselves is this: Am I free? And if the first response is a feeling of irritation – why are you even asking me that? – then we know that you are not.

If there’s anything that a minister or professor should feel more than anything else is the freedom to play with the fragments.

The April 2023 issue of Presbyterian Outlook explores the concept of belonging from various perspectives, identities, places and positions.

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ERIC D. BARRETO

Eric D. Barreto is the Frederick and Margaret L. Weyerhaeuser associate professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary and is a member of the leadership team at The Belonging Project.



WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

Willie James Jennings is associate professor of systematic theology and Africana studies at Yale Divinity School. His most recent book, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, examines issues of theological education within western education.

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