



# God Sees Us: Talking To Youth About Race and the Priesthood

by Janan Graham | Aug 3, 2016 | Faith, Featured, Racism, Why I Am Mormon, Youth | 0 comments



*The following essay was written for a group of Laurels and Priests in Highland, Utah. It was created in regards to a discussion about the Priesthood and Temple restrictions set for black Latter-day Saints, racism and how to have a conversation about the restrictions with a younger audience.*

Hi, my name is Janan Graham-Russell and I'm a writer, scholar, wife, partner and mom. And I'm a black Latter-day Saint. One might ask why it is important to make the distinction of "black" as a Latter-day Saint, but in my journey through Mormonism, it has informed who I am as a Latter-day Saint.

One of my favorite TED Talks was one given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a best-selling author and writer from Nigeria in 2009. The focus of her talk was on the danger of a single story. You might wonder, what is so dangerous about a "single story" and what does this have to do with being a black Latter-day Saint? But the power is found in a few short lines she offers on her experience.

In a series of conversations, Adichie details her exchange with American and British literature.

"Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are."

She goes on in describing a personal experience after meeting her father's family.

"Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them."

Throughout her talk, she points to the misconceptions she and others have had of her and others like herself and how that can limit the potential of others.

From filters to Photoshop, we live in a culture full of images that may and may not present accurate images of who people are really are. The lack of representation of certain groups can often lend itself to skewed ideas about said groups. In terms of black people, as a Latter-day Saint, it becomes even more complicated as African Americans make up 3% of the membership. Of course, outside of the US, the percentage of people of black African descent is much higher. These complications are compounded by the Church's history in regard to race and where that brings us to today.

Various faith traditions imposed restrictive practices regarding black members in the 1800s, leaving these black members to split and form their own congregations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. At the same time, the LDS Church was unique in how these practices affected individual men, women and families. There was at least one black man who held the priesthood

before the restrictions were placed (Elijah Able) and temple rights held by black members. These restrictions were eventually lifted in 1978 by then-Church president Spencer W. Kimball. As witnessed by the latest Church essay on race and the priesthood, the official stance of The Church is that it now disavows racist folklore used to explain the reasons behind the ban and racism itself.

So why do I stay? This is a question I get rather frequently, which the idea being: "With its history, how can you hope for the future?" I joined The Church at a very interesting crossroad of my life: I was 21, it was my last year of college and I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. A place, I'm sure most of you will be at some point of your lives. I had been raised as a non-denominational Christian but during my time in college, I had stopped going to church less and less. That summer before I joined the Church, I felt like something was missing in my life; that there was more than what I was seeing before me. That was when I began searching for how others explored and exhibited their faith. I soon met some sister missionaries. We all had a lot to talk about...I had my Christian roots but was still working on where I wanted to allow my faith to grow. What drew me most to the Church was the concept of the three degrees of glory and the sealing of families. Each faith has its own idea of salvation but it was this one specifically that resonated deeply inside of me. That was 6 years ago.

My curiosity of faith led me to pursue a Master degree in Religious Studies. My time in divinity school taught me a lot about faith, doubt and how to navigate the sometimes steady, sometimes rough waters of Mormonism. To navigate the troubling history and the disturbing things members have said to me or others like me at times. I had been aware of the restrictions that kept black members from obtaining the highest degree of glory as I was investigating the Church. In the 6 years since I joined, I have seen and felt how those restrictions still impact black members today. I remember the first time I went to the temple in DC for baptisms and the feeling I felt upon seeing a painting of Jesus in Heaven, surrounded by all white angels.

*"How does this church see me? Does this church see me?"* I wondered.

It is a question I imagine many Saints of color ask themselves in a predominantly white church (at least in the United States). Seeing yourself represented in the divine is a powerful reminder of the aspect of the divine that exists in each and every one of us. It's an admittedly painful feeling to know that there are those who considered (and arguably, still consider) black people as anything less than

children of God. I never knew if the Sisters and Elders who taught me were aware of the restrictions but for the most part, I never encountered any issues.

In the time since then, I often ask other members about the restrictions with varying degrees of responses. Some that align with the race and the priesthood essay. Some that have continued to suggest the same concepts that have clearly been associated with racist thought. Along with my culture and my history, I am a human being. My blackness is not something to be erased because it is the way that I was created. To suggest that being is somehow flawed or cursed undercuts the beauty in the way that God shaped each and every one of us. This passion led me to a career in writing about black LDS women because I see my fellow black Saints. God sees black Saints. Even though some members don't.

I stay because I believe in the potential for the Gospel in the lives of others. Racism, in all its forms (whether it is in your face like calling someone a derogatory term or connecting stereotypes to black people) limits the potential for people to achieve what I believe who God wants us to be. God has given us the ability to follow the life of Christ in our words and actions towards others. One of my favorite stories in the Bible is the story of the Good Samaritan and the lesson it offers. Often times, those who believe they're the most good are actually doing the most harm by ignoring those who are struggling or attaching certain beliefs to an entire group of people. Despite all those who walked past the hurt man on the side of the road, it was the Samaritan who stopped and aided the man. The Samaritans were a despised group in Jewish culture at the time. However, the Samaritan man saw beyond those differences and aided someone in need. This story exemplifies the dangers of a single story; when we allow outside influences to discourage others potential. Black, white, brown...we are all children of God. Our stories, interwoven in the great narrative of God's amazing creation.

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Janan Graham is an independent researcher of Africana Women's Studies. Her writing focuses on culture, society, politics, and religion through intersectional, Black feminist, Womanist and Mormon feminist lenses. Janan's current research topic is Black/Womanist theology in Mormonism. She writes for her