

Thanks to everyone who took time to join me tonight. When Randy texted me to do Supper and Stories... Having recently celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday Randy and Adam have asked that I share some of my experiences with race in America and in the CRC world.

### **FIRST YEAR OF LIFE**

I want to begin with a story about a little baby. The year was 1974. The place was Hackensack, NJ. A baby, ½ African-American and ½ Italian, entered the world in August as a surprise. Her parents were no longer together at the time of her birth. Her life was hidden from her grandparents because they wouldn't approve. The mother was all the baby knew for the first three months of life. Then, three months after arriving into the world, the mother put her own feelings aside and made the decision to give her child a better life. The little girl was moved to live with strangers in foster care. During the next two months in foster care, the baby's health declined. In February, she entered the hospital and was evaluated as a Failure to Thrive. She was not being taken care of properly and her health was compromised. The future for this baby was unknown. As the baby was being monitored in the hospital, the baby's mother signed Surrender of Custody forms. She ended her rights as the baby's parent. After only 6 months of life, would this baby survive?

The year was 1974. The place was Grand Rapids, MI. A Christian Caucasian couple with two children felt the desire for one more child to complete their family. They contacted an adoption agency, walked through the steps, and waited. Who would God choose for them?

The year was 1975. The place was Grand Rapids, MI. In April, the couple received a call from the adoption agency. A child needed a home. An African-American child needed a home. They could have turned it down. They could have had too many concerns about adopting outside of their race. But the couple, centered in Christ, heard His call. They didn't accept the call with worry or reservation. They accepted His call with open arms and hearts overflowing with excitement. The baby, enduring yet another transition, was brought to Grand Rapids, MI and placed in yet another foster care home. After many medical tests and evaluations, the baby was finally declared healthy and cleared to be adopted in June. On July 3, 1975, (just one month shy of her first birthday) the baby was placed in a stable environment with parents who loved and adored her from that point forward. They also immersed her in faith and helped her build a relationship with the One who brought them together. The One who protected her, and carried her through her tumultuous first year of life.

The baby in this story is me. In my first year of life, I experienced so many changes and challenges. I look back at my first year of life and am shocked that I survived. But even though I wasn't aware at the time and have no memory of that year, God knew, he carried me through it all. He had a plan for me. And though the stories I'm going to share with you today highlight some of the darker times in my life, I am so grateful for the family he has given me, the path on which He's led me, and His continued faithfulness in my life.

### **CHILDHOOD**

From the day my parents brought me home, I grew up in White America. I was born 10 years after segregation became illegal. Just 10 short years. Growing up in America in the 70's, 80's, and 90's, it seemed that everyone fell into two categories: White or Black, yet I was a mix of the two. The white side of my heritage I've known my entire life. I learned about it at school, I lived with it in my community, I saw it on TV, I read about it in books. Yes, the white side of me may not be evident to those who see me on the outside, but I am very familiar with the White American story.

In the movie "Stand by Me", Gordie LaChance said "In all our lives, there is a fall from innocence. A time after which, we are never the same." I don't remember the exact day of my fall from innocence. I just know that it happened at a very young age.

Last summer there was a popular news story circulating on Facebook about a 9-year-old girl (white) who wrote "Black Lives Matter" in chalk on her street in front of her house. According to the story, an older woman (also white) who lived across the street, came outside and started berating the young girl. The woman yelled at the child, accused her of vandalizing, and called the police.

People who viewed the story responded with their opinions about the situation. (Don't they always?) There was, however, one response that struck me. A woman wrote, "Our children should be able to be kids. Spending summers having a blast not concerned that adults can't come together and live in the world together. There is plenty of time for them to worry when they grow up." Unfortunately, the world I lived in did not allow me the luxury of having a completely carefree childhood. I have so many fun memories and enjoyed many, many parts of being a kid. However, the color of my skin forced heavy things to weigh on me in the midst of what should have been a happy-go-lucky time of life.

As a child, I obviously knew that I looked different. Different from the rest of my family. Different from the kids in my school. Different from the kids at church. Different from the kids in my neighborhood. But when I was with my family, I felt safe. I felt secure. I never had a fear of what others were thinking about me because within the walls of my home, I was never made to feel unsafe. I was never made to feel less than others. I was never made to feel hated because of what I looked like. I was never made to feel like I was an unworthy being. I was just me. And as far as I knew, that was all I needed to be.

But, that security changed when I stepped out of the safe shelter of my home and naively entered a society that was built with little concern for people like me. My family couldn't protect me from what I was about to experience. And the innocence I had for a very brief period of time, was shattered into a million little pieces.

Kids who were complete strangers out on the street calling me a "N-----". Laughing and mocking me when all I was trying to do was walk home from the bus.

A boy in my class telling me I should be the "Black"smith when we had to choose someone from the Colonial times to do a project.

A girl at school telling me I was ugly and didn't belong because I had darker skin.

A group of older boys from my school at a football game asking the boy the boy I was dating if he was going to "dress up as a n----- for Halloween" just because the boy was sitting by me. He broke up with me.

Excitement that I was going to a dance with my friend and a group of her friends. But then the phone rang, and the boy who was supposed to be paired with me canceled when he found out I was black.

My “carefree” childhood innocence was taken from me at a very young age. From the first episode, I carried with me the heaviness of knowing that at any point my joy could be invaded by a hate that would always be there.

In Grand Rapids as a child there was no “Bi-racial”, there was white and there was black. I clearly didn’t look white but I was living the white narrative as an outsider looking in. I talked the “right way”, I had an excellent private education, standardized tests suited me and my background, and yet, my skin color did not allow me to fully “fit” into the white narrative.

To add to my already difficult perception of who I was, I had to continually answer the awkward question I’ve been asked my entire life: “What are you?” I’m sure the look on my face as I pause to think of an intelligent response to such an idiotic question says it all. Because typically, within seconds, the questioner responds with “No...I mean, like, *what* are you?” I am a person. I am not a “what”. But some humans decided a long time ago that we should be grouped into categories, and those categories didn’t include one of people who were a mixture of races.

## **ADULTHOOD**

When I reached the age of dating, boys of color told me, “You only date white guys, don’t you”. Boys who were white told me, “You only date black guys, don’t you”. Again, I was forced to determine which category I was in. I was told, “You talk white.” What does that even mean? When out and about with my friends, strangers would approach me and say, “You look so exotic! Where are you from?” I never knew how to respond to that one. It made me feel like an alien from far, far away visiting the planet. Or a unique zoo animal out on display.

The pressure to commit to one category felt like watching a ball during a tennis match. Am I white? Am I black? Am I white? Am I black? Back and forth it went. In the end, I figured out how to play the game of living in a white world.

Imagine this: You walk into a room. You look around and realize that you are the only person who looks “different” from everyone else. How do you make yourself fit in? What do you do or say that gives you a sense of belonging?

How many of you have you ever experienced a situation like this? For me, it happens daily. I’ve had to learn how to ease the discomfort of others I have interactions with. Can I somehow find a way to insert the fact that my family is white? Is there a way to nonchalantly talk about my education at an all white Christian school? It always helps if I mention that I am college educated and have a career as a teacher, should I bring that up first?

I’ve come up with a variety of taglines that seem to put others at ease when meeting me for the first time. Things that I can talk about to avoid assumptions. Parts of me that show the other person that I do belong in that space. To prove to them that I am an okay person to interact with. Sometimes it works. The person opens up a little more and a pleasant conversation takes place. Sometimes you can physically see them relax and begin to loosen up. Other times, no matter what I say or do, my skin color is a barrier that can’t be overcome. Their mind is already made up about who I am.

When I walk into a room full of new people, the first thing I do is scan the room to see if there is anyone else that looks like me. If there is even one other person of color, my anxiety eases a little. Next, I smile politely at everyone I see. I say “please” and “thank you”, probably more times than necessary. When I

speak, I make sure I am talking clearly and intelligently. I am very conscious about my words and my actions because my goal in situations like these is to try to reform people's ways of thinking before they have a chance to assume things about me that aren't accurate.

I want you to think about your answers to the following questions. How many times have you been mistaken for another race because of the way you talked and then made to feel inferior when your true race was uncovered? How many times have you consciously made sure to say and do things a certain way to feel accepted in spite of your race? How many times have you had to prove that even though your skin is a certain color, you are worthy of belonging? How many times have you looked in the mirror and wished God made you a different color? How many times have people made you feel guilty when the color of your skin is your only crime?

It is common for members of society to think that people of color have a chip on their shoulder. That we make up assumptions about how people are going to perceive us and react to us. That the idea that racism still exists is an overreaction. But, when you go through experience after experience being judged and treated differently because of your darker shade of skin, you begin to realize that there isn't any situation you can enter into without first preparing yourself for the multiple scenarios that could take place. This is not a chip, this is a reality. I can't count the number of times I have spoken to people on the phone and then met them in person. The shock on their faces when meeting me says it all. In fact, I've often heard, "Wow! You aren't what I pictured at all" because someone who talks intelligently or is a professional couldn't possibly look like me. Or the times when someone whispers to someone else, "I didn't realize she was black" as if that automatically changes who I am as a person. These aren't situations where I assumed people were going to react the way they did. These are situations I've had to learn from and change my way of thinking for, so that I wouldn't be disheartened and saddened because of the perceptions other people have about me that change the minute they see the color of my skin.

When I was younger and would go to the mall with my white friends, they would charge ahead without realizing that the sale's person had stopped me to ask if I needed help with anything. I have constant interruptions by store clerks just to make sure I am "finding everything okay" while my white friends shop uninterrupted. When I am in line at a checkout a person ahead of me will use their credit card with no issues, yet I am asked to show my id to verify that the card is mine. My white friends didn't have to worry about meeting boyfriends' parents for fear of not being accepted because of the color of their skin. My white friends don't ever have to explain "what" they are. My white friends don't have to take pictures down when trying to sell their house because someone might not want to buy it when they see that a black person currently lives there. My white friends don't have to worry about shielding their children and preparing them for the negative encounters they may have because of their race.

As a black child growing up in America, I would look in the mirror and shout at God in anger asking Him why He made me look like this? Why does he allow me to endure such negative experiences throughout my life when I've done nothing to deserve them? Why am I made to feel guilty and ashamed of the color of my skin and have to prove that, in spite of it, I am a good person with a good heart who has a lot to offer this world.

The color of my skin is an everyday obstacle for me. It affects every situation I am in. It is something I deal with from the minute I wake up in the morning to the minute I lay my head on my pillow at night. I can't take it off. I can't take a break from it. It is a part of who I am. It has been a long (sometimes painful) journey to this point. And yet, I feel like God has brought me to a place in my life where I can say that I am okay with how I look. I am proud to be who God has made me to be. And I want to use my experiences to

help others who look like me know that they aren't alone and to help those who don't look like me gain a new perspective.

### **WHAT CAN I DO?**

We just celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. He once said, *"I came to the conclusion that there is an essential moment in your life when you must decide to speak for yourself; nobody else can speak for you."* And that is where I am. I chose to tell my story to give people a glimpse of what it might be like in someone else's skin. Someone else's darker skin.

With everything going on in our country today, it is evident that racism still exists and society is still far from equality. The division between races that seemed to slowly lessen as I lived my life, has once again widened and now brings back many hurtful and devastating memories. I chose to share my story after hearing and seeing so many people say and write so many ignorant things about people of different races. I wanted to bring some honest first-hand experiences to light. People have shared with me how my stories have encouraged them to think about race in a completely different way. I know that this is God's hand turning bad into good as only He can do. He is hard at work turning my experiences into a message to open people's hearts and minds.

As they gain a new perspective, people ask me how they can help? What can they do? How can they make a difference?

To answer those questions, I return to the story of the little girl writing Black Lives Matter on her street and the response of the woman that said "kids should just be kids and have a blast in their childhood". The problem with the idea that there "is plenty of time for kids to worry when they grow up" is this...we don't have time to wait. The problem is now, and the problem starts very early on!

What can you do to help? To start, let's not put off talking to our children about racism. We are not weighing them down with "grown up" talk. They know. They see it. They hear it. So let's educate them early. And please, let's not sugar coat it with the many, many books about "We are different but we are all the same" or "Make sure you accept everyone and include everyone". Yes. Those are good lessons; but let's give our kids a little more credit. Let's be honest. Let's be real. Let's talk to them not only about racial differences, but about the discrimination that results from those differences. Let's talk to them about inequality. Let's talk to them about standing up for others who don't have a voice. Believe me, black families are having these discussions long before many white families are. If our kids don't hear it from us, they will hear it from other kids and in other places. And what exactly will they be learning from those sources?

Our children need to hear about it before they've been influenced by others who pass on their biases and stereotypes. I see it happen all the time as a teacher. Kids say or do something hateful to children of another race, and their parents often respond with surprise and disbelief. Parents can't believe that "their child" would do something like that! They assure everyone that their child knows better. But do they? Were their eyes really opened to what it all means? Have they learned about the gravity of such actions? If we aren't the ones to address it with our kids, someone else will.

And, what about adults? How can we change the developed, hard-set minds of adults? I've seen how adults respond to conversations about racism. Just the single word "race" sends people into hysterics. The defenses go up. Out comes the battle gear and preparation for a war of words. We shout from the rooftops and demand that we aren't racist. And often with this proclamation come the common words "I don't see color" or "I'm color blind".

And here is where those looking to help can start. Start by not saying those words. I get it. The words “I don’t see color” sound good. I know those words are said in an effort to show other people where someone stands on the issue of racism. But, I’m not sure this is the best way to address the problem. First of all, it’s impossible not to see a person’s skin color when they are standing right in front of us. Color is one of the first traits we see in everything. The question isn’t about whether or not we see a person’s color (of course we see it), it’s about what we do with the knowledge of their color.

Some people use the color they see to assume a person’s status. Some use the color they see to decide where they will live. Some use the color they see to choose what stores they will go into. Some use the color they see to label a neighborhood as safe or unsafe. Some use the color they see to give our kids approval for whom they can and can’t date.

My friends tell me that the fact that I am black doesn’t matter. They say that they don’t care what color I am. And I know it doesn’t make a difference to them. I have been blessed with amazing friends who have carried me through some very dark times in my life. However, I want my color to matter to them. I want them to care about it. I want them to acknowledge it. Because if it matters to them that I am black, then it would shake them to their core to see what is happening to people like me. I want them to see me in the faces of the people taken away from their families too soon because of police brutality. I want them to see me as a face who white supremacists and hate groups target and threaten with violence. I want them to see me in the faces of those who live in poverty because of the way the systems of our country are set up.

Not acknowledging color leads to silence, avoidance, and excused unawareness. For too many years I chose not to acknowledge my color because I wanted so badly to be like everyone else in my life. I was silent and I was trying to avoid talking about it in the hopes that the pain would just go away. But as I finally began to let my guard down and share about my life, I realized my acknowledgement of who I am led to conversations, bridges, and crucial awareness.

When someone sees my color, I want them to acknowledge it by being a presence that openly welcomes and accepts me. Someone who makes me feel comfortable even when surrounded by a sea of white. When someone sees my color, I want them to acknowledge it in a way that helps them better understand how and why their perspectives of what’s going on in the world might be different from mine. When someone has a conversation with me, I want them to acknowledge my color by spending time genuinely getting to know about me and my experiences, so that they can broaden their own view of the world. Differences need to be acknowledged and valued in a way that bridges the gap. Because acknowledging differences in this way, results in true understanding...the kind of understanding that leads to change.

Part of the reason I’ve kept so many of my experiences hidden deep inside is because I didn’t want to burden my family and friends with my struggles. I am a “take care of things myself” kind of person. On top of that, I’ve heard many white people say they are tired of hearing from people of color. I hear people say they are sick of hearing the complaining. People wonder why we keep bringing up “things from the past”, now that things are “so much better”. If people are tired of hearing about it, think of how exhausted we are living it.

When you look at the history of our country, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke so many wise words uttered not far enough in the past. One of his well-remembered quotes is, “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.” Racism is still very prevalent. And it isn’t just a black or brown people problem. It’s an all of us problem. Certain benefits in

society are still not readily available to all people. Life experiences are still different based solely on the color of a person's skin. The effects of the horrible injustices of the past continue to linger. Racism is preventing each of us from being what God intended us to be. United as His children. It is affecting us all. Jesus asks us to go beyond just saying we are Christians. He asks us to show we are Christians by our love. In order to be part of the solution to racism, God calls us to action.

So how can people help? Black voices are ignored far too often. Our pain is covered up time and time again. Black cries for help are snuffed out by the sounds of a negative narrative that has been embedded in all of us for too long. I can't tell you the number of times I have shared an experience only to be brushed off and told I must have misunderstood, or maybe my perception of what happened was wrong. These types of responses rob us of our value. They mute our voices and disregard our feelings. People can help by taking the time to really listen. To learn. To hear the stories. Read the books, watch the videos, talk to others about their experiences. And then stand up, speak truth, and be a voice for those of us whose voices have been silenced.

The words might not always be perfect. Friends have called me to apologize for something they said or did when they were with me that has been weighing on them, because they thought what they did might be offensive to me as a black woman. My response is always, "It's okay". I appreciate the fact that they are trying. I appreciate that they are being mindful of the racial divide. And, if they are thinking more deeply about their words and actions when it comes to issues of race, it means they are trying and wanting to learn. And what they learn can and will make a difference.

Dr. King said "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." He also said, "The time is always right to do what is right." As someone resistant to share my stories for a very long time, I realize that the time is here. That the time to break our silence is now because there is hope. The stories I've shared are difficult to talk about, yet I have hope for the future. I have hope because for 8 years there was a President of the United States who has the same skin color as I have. I have hope because a few days ago a woman with the same color skin was sworn in as the Vice President of the United States. And I have hope because if God can carry out His plan to save a little baby girl during a turbulent first year of life and beyond, He can do so much more. Because of Christ, we will always have hope. Our hope lies in the Lord and in His faithfulness to each and every one of us.