

At The Crossroads with Rev Luke Powery

[00:00:05] And we meet and we come together at the crossroads and hopefully at the crossroads, we might see each other as people who are created in the image of God. They are you are we are human beings together.

Linda [00:00:27] Hi, everybody, it's Linda Lorelle. Welcome to a new episode of Our Voices Matter podcast. My guest today is the Reverend Dr. Luke Powery, dean of the Duke University Chapel and associate professor of homiletics at Duke Divinity School.

Linda [00:00:43] We have a wide ranging conversation that includes giving us all a little bit of hope in this chaotic, crazy time that we're living in. He offers a perspective not only from that of a theologian and someone who ministers to his congregation on a regular basis, but also as a black man in America. He happens to be the first black dean of the Duke University Chapel and the First Baptist dean of the Duke University Chapel. A bit more about his background. He received his Bachelor of Arts in music from my alma mater, Stanford University, his master of divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary, and his doctor of theology from Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto. I hope you enjoy our conversation as much as I did. I'll see you on the other side.

Linda [00:01:36] Well, Luke, it is such a pleasure to have an opportunity to talk with you, I'm so thankful that we were recently introduced to each other by a mutual friend. And I just am in awe of what you are doing at Duke as the dean of the chapel. Give us just a little bit of a bit of an understanding of what your mission is as the Duke of the chapel and what's what is the message that you're trying to get out to people today?

Luke [00:02:08] Sure, in that role as the dean of Duke University chapel I serve as the religious figurehead at the institution, so people would often see me praying at commencement and other university ceremonies. But I think it's at Duke. The chapel itself is at the center of the campus and it is at its heart. It is in many ways represents the spiritual center of the university, not only its sort of historical roots, but its actual life today. Our motto is bridging faith and learning. We have many students of a variety of faith traditions, a variety of religious traditions, and what we hope is that students in particular, but faculty and staff would also find a way to integrate their spiritual life with their intellectual life and ethical life. So ultimately, people are whole human beings, that they're living integrative lives, which really ends up being lives of integrity. And so we do that through our various services, through the through student engagement, community engagement out in the community with nonprofits. We do it through our sacred music and the arts programs. And then all of our religion, what we call religious life at Duke, are all of the chaplaincies or campus ministries from the Buddhist chaplaincy, the Hindu chaplain, the rabbi, the imam across the various Christian spectrums to help students in particular really become whole, find meaning and purpose in their lives and to say, you know, I can't compartmentalize my life. I'm this, I do this and the chemistry lab and I'm this outside of the lab. But how do you bring your whole self together?

Luke [00:04:15] And ultimately, our vision is to respond what we say, respond to God's all inclusive love. And ultimately, we hope to bring a message of love. Hope, hope is one of our values in our strategic plan and bring hope and love and and ultimately a sense of working to bring people together. The the the chapel itself is cruciform. Obviously, it's it's within the outside of within the Christian traditions, but it's at the crossroads is what I like to say. We are at the crossroads, meaning that's the place where all kinds of people meet all kinds of traditions, meet and we meet and we come together at the crossroads and hopefully at the crossroads. We might see each other as people who are created in the image of God. They are you are. We are human beings together. So that's that. Yeah.

Linda [00:05:19] Yeah. I was just going to say, I love that imagery of of being at the crossroads. So much of what you said resonates with me, because I think that regardless of whether people who are watching and listening to this consider themselves to be quote unquote religious or they might be other faiths other than Christianity. But I know what you're talking about, this universal message of unity and recognizing each other in God's image as as all being the same as members of the human race and trying to find connections and ways of bringing us together, which seems so increasingly difficult right now with everything that is going on in our world from

the pandemic to social justice and racial unrest, the list goes on and on. What are what are you seeing and hearing from those who are seeking your counsel and guidance? And at this time, how are how are people? Are they are you getting different vibes, different questions than you were, say, this time a year ago?

Luke [00:06:43] That's a wonderful question. I will say this. If I if I ponder even within the last week or two and really phone calls from across the nation and literally from around the world just in the last day, people are hurting. And and this may not even have anything to do with the covid-19 pandemic. There are people who are who have died, loved ones who just they had cancer. I mean, these are the things we were dealing with before, other people who have attempted suicide, others whose marriages have been broken apart. It's like real life is still happening. But the pandemic in some ways, these little deaths, what I call the brokenness that we may experience, not even sort of dying and being buried in the grave, the pandemic has heightened awareness of our mortality in some ways, our brokenness, our yearning for hope, our yearning for healing, our yearning for meaning. What is my life about really?

Luke [00:07:59] What am I like these questions because of the loss, because of of the pain that people are on the flip side of that, seeking answers, seeking like hope and peace in their life. Because the pandemic, I think, has heightened our awareness that what we are in some ways, we're dying every single second. And even as we speak, someone is somewhere dying. That is the reality. But I think that reality of our dying should help us in our living. I mean, for me, it's sobering, but it's also inspiring in the sense of it's a call to ask myself, what am I really about? Who do I want to be? What do I want to do or what should I be doing as I engage others in society, wherever I may find myself on Duke's campus or out in the community or or elsewhere, what do I want to say? How should I be engaging my children and my wife at home? For me, the pandemic has done all of that kind of reassessment of my own life on Earth. And and what I have heard, I think people the masks mask wearing that many are doing is a visual sign of more of our mortality. A year ago, we didn't have that. And I think there's a level of of seriousness, perhaps, that I that I hear of of people's sense that, you know what, I have this one life on Earth, a mortal, and what do I want to do with it? One of my how am I going to spend my time and my resources? That's what I hear coming through stronger than a year ago.

Linda [00:10:03] And for those who are are hurting and really struggling to just survive, what do you say to give them hope? What what are what are the how do you find the words? Because there's so many people right now that are literally hanging on by a thread and they don't know what to do or how to feel that things are going to get better.

Luke [00:10:35] Yeah, you know, for me, I mean, that is a word that has come up much during this year, hope and sense that people are looking for hope. And what I've discovered or maybe I've been reminded of is how deeply communal hope is. I mean, ultimately, obviously, I'm an ordained minister and I hope in God like the psalmists, you know, ultimately. But if I think about what generates hope in me, it often has to do there's this deep sense of community. And what I mean by that is if we think about music, I turn to listening to music during this pandemic more and more, I have a music background. But in terms of listening to reggae or listening to gospel music or other genres, even jazz music is something that is often outside of us. These are other musicians. These are the community of people from. A different part of the world or from our town, but it's outside of me and their sounds and their instrumentation inspires me in some way, or if I think about the book or what I think of as the Book of nature creation trees, the birds singing again, it's outside of me. It's a deep sense of community or if it's something I read in a poem, I'm one of James Baldwin's poems or Howard Thurman, Howard Thurman, The Growing Edge poem. Again, it's someone else who's inspiring me or generating a sense of hope. My family relationships, our families, our friends, our colleagues that that are there to encourage us. Again, it's someone outside of us. So for me, I've come to this deep awareness again of how much hope is generated outside of me from the community. I call it the community of creation. And and so for people, I also help remind others not only the deep communal sense, but I would say it's like Pauli Murray, who was from Durham the first I believe she was the first African-American woman, Episcopal priest, a civil rights lawyer. Pauli Murray has this wonderful quote in a poem, and she says, Hope is a song in a weary throat. Or Japheth Smith, who was the retired pastor from Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland. He has a sermon he says, hope as a tiny sprout, growing and cracked concrete like the imagery of the weary throat. The imagery of the cracked concrete tells

me that hope does not delete our hardships in our hurts. But hope rises out from the weary throat, from the cracked concrete, from the valley of dry bones, from the ashes of despair. We can say it in so many ways and that hope in and in those two phrases. Think about how small hope is. I mean, the tiny sprout growing in cracked concrete, like the vast suffering that we've seen, the devastation, all of the debt deaths from covid-19 is huge. It may even be bigger than the hope we sense and feel, but there are tiny sprouts growing all around us. The birds are still singing. Leaves may be falling off now because it's the fall, but they will grow again. And and so for me, it's this beautiful understanding that whole if I take St. Augustine from the confessions, who says after his mother died because he didn't want to cry and weep for her death because she was a woman of faith.

Luke [00:14:46] But on the next day after he buried her, he said that his tears flowed so freely that on that they formed a pillow and on them his heart rested. And I think in so many ways, the tears that have been that have flown the trail of tears historically, the tears from lift every voice and sing that hymn, we have come over a way that, with tears, has been water watered, that there's a sense that the tears, it's on them. They form a pillow and on them hope. Our hope rests the foundation of our human existence. And there's something honest and truthful about the pain and the challenges that we've been enduring. But yet I remember the spirituals. And sometimes if I think about what the boys did in the souls of black folk at the beginning of each chapter, he has an epigraph at the beginning of each chapter. It's just the melodic line of a spirituals, no words.

Luke [00:15:51] And I think often maybe that's all we have are the melodies, are the tunes, are the growns, are the sounds. But that we still sound something is a sign of hope.

Linda [00:16:07] The whole idea of feeling the pain and allowing the tears to flow is if I'm understanding what you're saying correctly. And I think it's what I believe to that. You you have to you have to confront the pain. You have to experience it and allow it to do what it does to. Feel whatever it is your feeling, if you hold the tears in as opposed to allowing them to flow. It's so much more difficult to get to the point where you actually have hope. Am I right?

Luke [00:16:51] I believe so. Yeah. The tears. I mean, there are people who have done research on this UCLA psychiatrist, I believe, about tears and the different kinds of tears and basically how it's healthy a physiologically and emotionally. And and I do think there is something. And what's interesting about tears, the Eastern Church, even the ancient Eastern Church world, would talk about the gift of tears. And and and what I think I've discovered again is how the tears you know, I'll just take one little piece of literature from the prophet Jeremiah. There was a spiritual there is a balm in Gilead because they straighten out the question that Jeremiah asks, is there no balm in Gilead? But in that story, Jeremiah has so much sorrow over what's happening to his people that he he tears up, he says is his tears flowed. So is tears. His head was like a spring of water, his eyes a fountain of tears. What is interesting to me is earlier in that whole narrative, there's the image that says that God is the fountain of living water. And here we have Jeremiah, whose head is a spring of water, his eyes a fountain of tears, it's that the divine presence. Is in our tears. And so which the tears are not just a sign of sorrow necessarily and of the pain in the struggle, but they are also a sign of the hope. There are also a sign of someone who can cry, and it might be they might be celebrating something. There might be joy, right?

Linda [00:18:58] Right. I used to tell my daughter when I would she say, Mommy, why are you crying? I say, happy tears, baby. Happy tears.

Luke [00:19:04] Right. And so there is a sense that our tears might actually be an expression of hope. In an odd way, it's what Al Raboteau told the Princeton historian wants in his little memoir called Sad. He called it sorrowful joy, but he was talking about African-American spirituality in particular. And he talked about the sad joyfulness. And I and I and I think in many ways, for all people, that is often true, right?

Linda [00:19:36] Yeah. Yeah, I, I hear what you're saying. And I think there's another another element. And just across my mind, thinking about something that that Brene Brown says I'm a huge Bernard Brown fan, OK. And one of the things that she says is that, you know, if we if we don't confront our own stuff, although she says a little bit more colorfully, so I won't say. But if we don't confront our own stuff, OK, we end up working it out on other people. And so if we're not

allowing ourselves to feel the pain and then deal with it, whatever that means to work it out. Within ourselves, we end up projecting it and working it out on others, and I think that that is such a powerful way to look at where we are as a society, because we right now, it appears to me that we are projecting our own stuff onto other people. And it's that person's fault and it's its blame. It's the blame game.

Linda [00:20:56] And so we're blaming each other for whatever we haven't worked out in our own lives. And we're projecting it onto them and saying it's your fault that my life isn't what I want it to be, blah, blah, blah. I think that's a component of where we are. What what is your take on that?

Luke [00:21:16] Yeah, I mean, there is something about this. I have a friend years ago, 20 years ago, he said, check yourself before you wreck yourself. Thank you. And and before you wreck yourself or somebody else. Or somebody else. Somebody else. That's right. Right. And so it's like you're bleeding over others, right. Your pain, your wounds spill over to other people. And I and I do think that there is this is a time. For the inner work. Or the introspection that people talk a lot about self care during this time, and I think maybe that's a part of this self care right to care for ourselves, enough to love ourselves, enough to do the work that is needed to seek the healing even for ourselves, so that the brokenness that we have experienced would not lead to breaking other people up. And so, you know, there is there is a sense that, you know, we can point fingers at others. But again, we're all mortals. We don't see our own the log in our own, our own. And so there's a recognition. I mean, to me, I always come back to this, and this is really thinking about extending the grace to others. The same grace you want extended to yourself.

Linda [00:22:54] Exactly. Thank you. That's one of my favorite words, is Grace. You know, we have to give each other grace. And one of the things that that I'm trying to do with this podcast is to help people see glimpses of themselves in others and in someone that they consider to be the other right, because we're all somebody else's other at one time or another for whatever reason. But the thread of humanity is is always still there. It's just that we don't see it or we don't choose to see it. And so that's what I'm trying to figure out. OK, how do we how do we help people understand that that I am you and you are me? We want the same things. And, you know, we all bleed the same way. And, you know, this skin color thing that we got going on and that, you know, I don't like you because you you believe that, you know, and I believe this and I demonize you for this and you demonize me for that. And what. Help me. Help me, Reverend. Help me. Please. Help me understand. Where do we go? How do we deal with this?

Luke [00:24:13] I mean, for me, where I'm at today and where I have been, I think in the last several months with everything stirring and and I was on sabbatical before coming back in July to do is really coming to remember what it means to be human and meaning human humous from the Latin, meaning from the earth, from the soil, from the ground. Religious folks might say during the season of Lent after Mardi Gras on Ash Wednesday to dust you've come and to dust you will return. So it's for me, it's coming back to the fundamentals of recognizing we're all human beings, meaning we are all dust, actually. And when we talk about common ground, the common ground is that we are all from the ground. We are all humans. Before any of the categories, the the adjectives, the the adjectives that other people, whether it's your political party, whether it's your race, whether it's you, denominational affiliation, you know, it could be your sports allegiances. These adjectives are often used to objectify people and to categorize people and then to place them into a group that you can either accept or reject and and then when you are otherized, that you're often demonized and then historically, you're destroyed, you're wiped out. You're you're written off as a non-human. And so it's a reclamation for of our common humanity as you as you the thrust of your work. And often we miss that. It's it's it's often humans who are like me, who think like me, who look like me. Those are the people that I will accept rather than those who actually might give me a larger sense of what it means to be human or what it means to be a child of God, that somehow we see the. Beauty of God in our collective humanity, and when certain people are taken off, the human, you know, are seen as dehumanized or you don't have the fullest sense of beauty.

Linda [00:27:04] Exactly. OK, so here is someone I want to pick up on on that, because I want to talk about race. So you are the first black dean of the Duke University chapel, correct?

Linda [00:27:23] Yes. I just want to make sure. OK, OK, it's black, Baptist, First Black and First Baptist.

Linda [00:27:30] OK, so I was reading a post on LinkedIn the other day and someone had posted something about a black woman who had been elevated to I don't even remember now exactly what the title was, but she was the first black woman to be in this role. And one of the comments from I assume it was a white gentleman who said, well, her accomplishments are her accomplishments. So why why does the color why does it have to be the first black and then OK. And so then the black people who were part of this this conversation were trying to explain to him why it's important to acknowledge when someone who who previously or when a race or a group of people who have not previously achieved a certain level of success for whatever reason, but especially for reasons of race, it's a big deal. And so that's why when you talk about being the first it is, people want to say that. Right. So I want to ask you about being the first black dean at Duke University Chapel and what that experience has been like for you, been there for six years now and whether you have seen a difference in how you were first accepted and treated six years ago when you were brand spanking new versus now six years later. And then I got a whole bunch of follow up questions after that.

Luke [00:29:13] Yeah. And I've been there. I've been there eight years, actually.

Linda [00:29:17] Eight years. I'm sorry I said no, no, no, no. That's I want to correct me, OK?

Luke [00:29:20] It feels like six, but it's been eight years. You know, there's so much to talk about. And I'm actually writing and some of my writing that I'm working on, I'm kind of weaving in some stories and different episodes because a lot has happened at Duke beyond my during my eight years there that are related to race. I mean, the Robert E. Lee statue was removed from the front of the chapel. A noose was hung in twenty. I forget what a few years ago when President Brodhead was still that was a it. This place was going crazy. Other incidents that have occurred a lot circling around race.

Luke [00:30:05] And so I had come in thinking, look, I've been at these institutions like Duke and Princeton Seminary and the University of Toronto, and it's like I'm coming in. And I had to remind people sometimes because of so much of the first language, I am human. I am a human dean of the chapel. Thank you. So there's that. There's that. Because what happens is I'm racialized when somebody if that's all I'm getting used to. First, he's the black dean in the chapel or the first black I'm I'm a racialized witch for some will dehumanize me or with the stereotypes it makes. Well, he's only going to he's only going to dove into black literature or black stuff interests or something that happened all over and in the academy, most certainly. But at the same time. So what exactly to what you pointed out, I have lived it in the sense I get it. I had someone when I first got here, literally first couple of days leaving the chapel, going to the parking lot. Someone jumped out of their car. African-American woman says, you don't know me, Dean Power, but you don't know what this means that you are here. This is somebody from the black community in Durham, grew up in Durham, all her degrees are at Duke. And I don't think I had the sense of all of that. But I had different people say to me, this is amazing that, you know, that for that building and and all of that. Because of the history and what I realized is I understand it, but it's also look, I'm Luke. I'm but there's a responsibility that comes with it, right? Because this is not even about me. This is about the larger story. I put it this way. It's the largest story God is writing. It's and to the point, people can say, wow, in the sense of, look, people from a people that were oppressed and dehumanized. Right now you're a leader is placed at the center, the spiritual center of this major research university. For folks who have the long view, it can be seen as amazing. But the question becomes, what do I do with the resources we have? How do we leverage the resources right for the common good? And it's not about me in the end. It's it's basically how do I serve with any kind of power? Dean power? What do I do with it? How do I wield it? But I think at first there was a lot of to your question, a lot of questions. First black, but also First Baptist. So that brings a lot of baggage in the south and all over because there's all kinds of Baptist. Let's be honest. So I was I'm ordained with the progressive national Baptists from a church in New Jersey, which is the the denomination that Gardner Taylor and Martin Luther King Jr. really spearheaded and spun off from National Baptist Convention because there was disagreements around how the civil rights movement was to be handled and all of that. So I think early on and being in the south, which matters, I mean, there was just a level of trust had to come over time, but there were questions

about what is he doing in the pulpit? Why is he singing? Why is he doing this with words? And, you know, a lot of that was it was a new cross-cultural experience for many, let's call it that, because people had not been exposed to certain kinds of preaching, certain ecclesial traditions. And so for me, it it could have felt in some ways like an interrogation, you know, a cultural interrogation, a hyper interrogation even, which sometimes happens of blackness. Let's be honest in our institutions of higher learning. But I took that grace is a good word because it was Grace that helped me to recognize it was the support, to be honest, the people from the Durham community that I wouldn't even see on a Sunday morning. But they were cheering me on. I knew I would see them. And I'm praying for you. We're proud of you. And and then, of course, my wife would say, but there was a sense that this is not even about me. Right. That's what helped me has helped me stay here now. And I'm really here now. And what I mean is with any leader and organization and people, it takes time to build trust. It takes time to understand one another's voices. Listening becomes a key. And learning and loving listening is a posture of loving, actually and and to be able. And so through that eight years. Wow. I mean, so much has transpired. I've learned so much. I've grown so much. And I would say there's a greater understanding and and there's an alignment with how the university somebody can look now say, wow, the university is going in these directions, which has been a gradual Power is here now. And there's a real alignment with some of our values as the chapel under my leadership and where the university is going and so things. That's a good word. Things have come into alignment. Yeah. At this moment.

Linda [00:36:10] So you talked about where the university is now and the direction that it's moving in. Talk a little bit about the anti-racism institute and the effort that's happening on campus. Sure.

Luke [00:36:23] President Price, in the wake of of of the death of George Floyd, President Vincent Price, president of Duke, put out a statement. Presidents normally put out statements at these kinds of national atrocities. And in this statement, it was either the first one or the second one. He made a commitment. He put it in writing. About Duke becoming an anti racist institution, and that's across the board and curriculum, thinking about faculty, thinking about processes, systems across every unit, across every school, and what has transpired from that is there's a website where it's supposed to keep track. It's going to put out what each school or unit says they're going to do and then hold have some accountability. I mean, those of us who report to him have now been asked in our fiscal year priorities for our organizations to include antiracist priorities, anti-racism and equity priorities, because it's about accountability. And so it has to do its multipronged. His last statement kind of lays out the themes. There's a level of students that have to do with students, a level of governance, a level of engaging the community. And so there are all these layers to the approach, multilayered approach that that Duke is taking. And it's just beginning. I mean, it is now and then. It's not just beginning. Let me correct Duke from its beginning, which is celebrating its centennial in twenty twenty four. There has been a gradual move. I mean, this is not like just coming out of nowhere. It is built on the story. Right. My coming other people coming to Duke has moved throughout history. This is building on that and now being more strategic, more explicit, I would say, and much more university wide initiative and commitment around anti-racism and equity.

Linda [00:38:45] In the wake of George Floyd and Barbara Briony's, etc., etc.. So so I'm curious, before the president announced this initiative, were you involved in any behind the scenes talks with him about this, with the university or others, or how did it come about? Do you know?

Luke [00:39:07] You know, I was on sabbatical. So this is our.

Linda [00:39:11] That's right. That's right. You were on sabbatical during this time.

Luke [00:39:14] And some of the some of the I started kind of slowly joining some meetings and a senior leadership group, but I was still on sabbatical. And so that would have been with his executive leadership. I'm sure you know, that that and his some of his his communications team. But it's clear that these deaths were the impetus. But once again, I think the heightens, the covid-19 pandemic brought us everything.

Linda [00:39:46] Yeah. So I'm curious about what your personal reaction was, aside from the obvious horror of George Floyd as not just as a as an ordained minister, but also as a black man in America, because when you are driving down the street anywhere in America with your black

skin, nobody knows your Stanford education. You are all the all the degrees and who you are, what you do, that you're an upstanding, nationally recognized leader in this in this country, because to many, you're just another black man in America. So what what does all of this mean to you on a personal level? What we have been going through these last several months,.

Luke [00:40:43] When I when I saw the George Floyd episode, you know, I thought it's like Will Smith said, it's this is nothing new. It's just being filmed now. So that reality came like it's another one. And to be honest, the George Floyd episode, I didn't have any words. I went the funny thing is I started writing poetry for the first time and I wrote a couple of poems to myself, not not to get out what was in me. I didn't I couldn't I couldn't just do it in prose. I had to put it in poetic form to try to express the inexpressible. And so for me, it was. I mean, it was the inhumanity on display.

Luke [00:41:55] It was I think it's part of what's driving me towards the human, this move toward the human, because I did have people reach out to me, like text me from different friends or colleagues from across the country and post George Floyd. And I can understand that in a certain way. But why are you texting me now? Right. Why not text me just any time and I should be texting you too. Because a human being died unjustly, not just because he was a black man or a human man died. And so I had that's why I turned to poetry. I had so many things that I felt like I just needed to get out on the page.

Linda [00:42:43] Is there's something that you can share with us that you would be willing to share or that you have posted at the top of your head.

Luke [00:42:55] Yeah, but I have one that I believe they said George Floyd and that just one that comes to mind that he was was it that he was there was something about eight minutes and forty six seconds was the time of. What was that exactly was.

Linda [00:43:15] That was the amount of time, that was the length of time that the officer had his knee on George's neck.

Luke [00:43:22] So I wrote I wrote a poem related to that, you know, about I can't breathe, but I wouldn't be able to quote. But there were a different one line from a one I called space. I will say this is one something and I called it space because it was around the same time that NASA was sending some sort of spacecraft. It was the first four spacecraft around the same time that the protests. It was after George Ford was killed. But protests were happening. I mean, it was and it was the irony. You have all the protests, you have buildings being burned, set on fire, and you have the celebration of a spacecraft. Yeah, I mean, this thing was called Space, this poem. And I have a line in there about about our technology has outpaced our humanity and that we can go to space, but we can't make space for one another.

Linda [00:44:34] Oh. Oh my gosh. That gives me chills. Just say that again. Say that whole line again.

Luke [00:44:41] Our technology has outpaced our our humanity and we can go to space but can't make space space for one another, each other.

Luke [00:44:56] So where all of this brought me a kind of place of mourning, I would call it, not even thinking about myself. I mean, just the collective reality of what is the United States of America, which is really the divided states, divided, you know, in splinters, which maybe has been the case. Things are now just out there. But, you know, their deep sense of mourning and, you know, I you know, that somebody would take a knee. I mean, that's the other thing is some of the poems pointed to take a knee on a man's neck and then all of the talk about taking a knee related to the flag. Exactly. And then other people take a knee to pray like just this whole idea of why do we kneel? And, you know, there's just you know, so I called forth so many things for me in a poetic way, but a kind of sadness and melancholy about the realities of that. We're still here in twenty twenty. And and I would say talking about being here, you know, there's one story of early on. I have it in a chapter of a book that should be coming out hopefully in the next year or so. But I'm a man. What you said with all the pedigrees, this is the other piece, a man I went to have lunch with who was very senior. I mean, you see maybe in his nineties or eighties in a wheelchair and this was early on. And this was someone who really adored Princeton Theological Seminary,

which is one of the oldest, if not the theological institution in the United States of America, 1812 and esteemed theological institution. He was a graduate from the early days and then loved Duke Chapel, all of that. But he lived in a senior home. And I went to see him. And as we were eating lunch, this man out of nowhere, I mean, he knew the biography.

Luke [00:47:24] He said, Do you think you would get into Stanford today or do you think the first question was, do you think you got into Stanford because of your color then? I couldn't. Then I'm eating. I didn't I did not say anything. I couldn't believe it, he says. Do you think? Then he asked, what were your SAT scores? And he said he did not. Yes, he did. Yes, he did. Yes, he did. And then he said and I didn't even answer him, but he said, oh, you probably wouldn't get in today.

Luke [00:48:02] So for me, here I was for some who prize this this pulpit in this university chapel, for whatever reason. For some, it is the apex of whatever their hopes and dreams are. You come. It doesn't matter that this is the other piece. People can say, you know, a generation, a certain generation, because he was much older. And I don't buy that. I think young people, younger generations, you know, the you're always suspect. You're often suspect, let's put it that way, often regardless of the pedigree. But you're a suspect because of the color of your skin. Exactly. And I think that was a sobering experience and reminder that no matter what you may do and no matter who you may be, you know, those kinds of things will happen, you know?

Linda [00:49:15] So I think it's an important story to share. I mean, my gosh, I was saying this something very similar to this, you know, relating an incident and just saying, you know, in the eyes of some people because of the color of my skin, I'm always going to be and I'm going to use the word [Unrecognized] because I've been called it before. And, you know, even in my role as a news anchor. So what you know, I mean, a skinhead started writing me these very defamatory, threatening letters and I had FBI, you know, a whole bunch of escorts and stuff for months because this person was threatening me just because I'm black. It doesn't matter that I went to Stanford. It doesn't matter that I have a have a masters degree from Missou. It doesn't matter that I have worked my butt off to get where I am. Doesn't matter that I've done everything that society says I'm supposed to do. Right. To be accepted and successful and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And you do all of that. And still it's not enough. That's right. Now, what are we supposed to do? So I have to ask you, how did you respond?

Linda [00:50:50] What did you say?

Luke [00:50:52] No, you know, I didn't say a thing.

Linda [00:50:54] You said nothing.

Luke [00:50:56] Because I didn't have anything to say. I just wanted that lunch to be over and we were because I could not believe it. I was the irony is I basically was doing a pastoral visit. I was doing him a favor because someone asked me because of the connections with Princeton Seminary and Duke and, you know, OK, I'll go I'll go visit him. Why not? I mean, or who? And the for that to come was really a sobering experience and a reminder, you know, and but I don't you know, I will not it's what Bob Marley says. Emancipate yourself from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds. And I think that's how I live. I don't I'm going to do what I sense God's calling is and I'm going to be who God wants me to be, and I'm just going to do my work and do the best work that I can. Many dangers, toils and snares. We're talking about grace. That's that's how I you know, through it all, Andre crouch through it all, you know, and I think that's at all the reality.

Luke [00:52:21] When I think about the spirituals and my work on the spirituals, I get inspired because I think about what the ancestors went through. And yet those songs, those pearls of wisdom still are being sung all over the world. Like to teach us the unlettered you know, the folks that untaught unknown unnamed James Weldon Johnson says are still speaking and teaching. So I get inspired by their sense of resiliency, perseverance, faith, one of those before me. And again, it's the communal hope. It's that long view to know that I'm not just here for Luke. I'm not here because of me. All of the folks that have come before me that have paved the way to keep me reminds me that I'm not alone. All of the cloud of witnesses that have surround me that that helped me wake up the next day to move the next step forward on the next day when things like

that happen. Because I know again, it's not about me. It's about the larger narrative that God is writing for the ultimately the redemption of the world. And I am I'm inspired by that. And that's why I pressed forward.

Luke [00:53:51] And maybe I'm just the kind of glass half full kind of guy that's not glass half empty in the sense of even the anti-racism language or or it tells you what you're against. Right. And then you are being defined in your energy within the rubric of racism or even within the rubric of race, which is a social construct. I'm more about, OK, what you're against, but I want to know, what are you for? What are you for? And that's where I'm leaning. I'm leaning towards what am I for? And I'm going to go ahead and write it, sing it, preach it, do it, work it.

Linda [00:54:31] That's I, I'm right there with you and I am right there with you. Absolutely. Oh my gosh. I can I can have a conversation with you every day. All day. My goodness. Promise me you'll you'll come back on the show. I really there's so much more I want to explore with you. I would love that man. So what what would be the the last thing you want to leave our audience with as we are approaching the how we're in the holiday season and this pandemic is raging. And, you know, the president's refusing to concede the election and, you know, people are still like this. And what what can you leave us with? Just just a no small ask. Tell us something right here to help us get out of bed tomorrow morning and keep a foot in front of the other.

Luke [00:55:29] Oh, well, I'm going to leave with a quote from Emily Dickinson, the poet, OK, on Hope. Hope is a thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all. So for me is hope is still singing through it all. Hope is still rising. And so I hope that we all can tune our hearts and our ears to that melody in the days ahead.

Linda [00:56:07] Amen. Amen to that. Reverend Luke Powery, thank you so very much for this just wonderful, enlightening, inspiring conversation. I so appreciate you taking the time. And I look forward to continuing this conversation for sure.

Luke [00:56:29] Thank you so much for having me. And it's great to be with you.

Linda [00:56:33] Thank you so much. You be well, ok.

Linda [00:56:35] OK, thank you so much.

Linda [00:56:38] If you'd like to learn more information about the Duke Chapel and Dr. Powerit and if you'd like to follow him and hear more about the work that he's doing you. And find the links to everything in the show notes on Our Voices Matter podcast, Dotcom. In the meantime, thank you very much for giving him permission to speak and for having the courage to listen with an open mind. We will see you next time.