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 Arlington Street Church  
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### **Lunch Counter Sit-Ins, 2015**

African American women are three times more likely than white women to be in prison.<sup>1</sup> When Andrea James spoke to us here two weeks ago about her work as founding director of Families for Justice as Healing, an initiative to end the incarceration of women, she gave us two directives. The first directive was straightforward: Call your legislators. Last summer, a mere 200 calls insured the passage of anti-shackling legislation that had been mired in red tape for more than 10 years. The second directive was more complex: Companion one another. Walk together. Be allies.

This year, in celebration of what would have been Dr. King's 86<sup>th</sup> birthday, rereading descriptions and testimonies from the nonviolent actions that were the heart of the Black Civil Rights movement, I was, once again, captivated by the Lunch Counter Sit-Ins. I'll tell you more, in a few minutes, but first, as a person with white skin determined to face racism and longing to work with kindred spirits to fulfill our country's promises of liberty and justice for all people, I want to share with you part of a reflection by my colleague Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek, titled *Liberty for All Inhabitants of the Land*.

"To talk about race is to talk about a legacy that I don't want," Rabbi Spodek writes. "My family came to this country to escape Russians who tried to kill them; ... my wife's family came to escape Germans who tried to kill them. We didn't come here because we were trying to wield our white skin privilege. I didn't appreciate what it means for me to be white, until I walked into a hotel in Cancun...."

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<sup>1</sup> Please see [americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2012/03/13/11351/the-top-10-most-startling-facts-about-people-of-color-and-criminal-justice-in-the-united-states/](http://americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2012/03/13/11351/the-top-10-most-startling-facts-about-people-of-color-and-criminal-justice-in-the-united-states/)  
 In 2009, the rate of incarceration was 2.8 black women for every 1 woman. Thanks to Kem Morehead for interpreting the study published by The Sentencing Project in 2013: [sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd\\_Changing%20Racial%20Dynamics%202013.pdf](http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd_Changing%20Racial%20Dynamics%202013.pdf)

In a rural village in Mexico,<sup>2</sup> he had led an American Jewish World Service delegation that worked alongside local human rights advocates. Afterwards, they all traveled to Cancun.

Rabbi Spodek continues, “[Still wearing dirty work clothes,] our group walked in through the front door ... [and] were immediately stopped by ... the Mexican hotel security guard....

“‘They can’t come in this way,’ he said to me in English, pointing at our Mexican hosts.

“‘They are my friends and guests,’ I said.

“‘It doesn’t matter,’ the guard replied.

“‘I’d like to speak to your manager,’ I said.

“... I explained [to the manager] that my friends and I wished to go to the veranda and enjoy some refreshments.... He relented, and we all went in and enjoyed a breathtaking view and piña coladas.

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“Ultimately,” says Rabbi Spodek, “it made no difference that I was wearing work clothes ... [or] that I wasn’t even a guest at the hotel. I was a white American man; I expected to be treated with respect, and I was. Unlike my Mexican hosts,

it never occurred to me  
to enter the hotel through anything other than the front door, ...  
[it] never occurred to me  
to defer to the security guard when there was someone higher up ...  
[it] never occurred to me  
... I wouldn’t ... get my way....

“My white skin was, and is,” he says, “my uniform..... Even as a member of a religious minority, my white skin is a backpack of superpowers....

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<sup>2</sup> Muchacuxcah

“[So it’s] on me to grapple with this country’s [legacy of racism]..., on me because, ... whether I want to or not ... I benefit from it....

Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek concludes, “We Americans ... have to wrestle with our painful legacy of ... slavery before we can fulfill the promises conveyed in scripture<sup>3</sup> and engraved on our Liberty Bell:

*Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.*

True liberty is the birthright of all the inhabitants of this nation. Not the white inhabitants, not the English-speaking inhabitants.... All the inhabitants – every ... one.”<sup>4</sup>

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Now I want to tell you about the Lunch Counter Sit-Ins.

On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1960, in Greensboro, four black freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College went to a Woolworth’s five-and-dime. Joseph McNeil bought a tube of toothpaste. Franklin McCain bought some school supplies. Then, along with David Richmond and Ezell Blair, Jr., they sat down at the lunch counter and ordered coffee from a white waitress. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but we don’t serve colored here.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Franklin McCain. “You just served me at a counter two feet away. Why is it that you serve me at one counter and deny me at another?”

They sat at the counter for over half an hour, and were never served. When the store closed, they left.<sup>5</sup> But their courage, widely reported in newspapers and on television, ignited “a student movement across the south.” Soon, signs appeared in store windows:

NO TRESPASSING

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We reserve the Right to Service the Public As We See Fit

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CLOSED – In the Interest of Public Safety.

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 25:10

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek, *Liberty for All Inhabitants of the Land*, Beacon Hebrew Alliance, Beacon, NY, 12/9/14. Please see [beaconhebrewalliance.org/?q=content/liberty-all-inhabitants-land](http://beaconhebrewalliance.org/?q=content/liberty-all-inhabitants-land)

<sup>5</sup> Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, p. 126-127

Diane Nash, leader of Tennessee's Nashville Student Movement, recalls, "We ... made plans to join their effort ... [and] were surprised and delighted to hear reports of other cities joining in the sit-ins.

*We started feeling the power of the idea whose time had come.*"<sup>6</sup>

Eleven days later in Nashville, five hundred students, black and white together, crowded white lunch counters across the cities.<sup>7</sup> In Tallahassee, Florida, "white students joined black students from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, sharing food at lunch counters to show their disregard for segregated cafeterias. In a span of two weeks, there were sit-ins in eleven cities."<sup>8</sup>

In April,<sup>9</sup> more than 200 students attended an organizing conference at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Toward the end of the weekend, following an exuberant appearance by Dr. King, the students stood in a circle at a local church, joined hands, and sang an exalted *We Shall Overcome*. A young white, southern woman recalled, "We all believed. We thought all was going to be okay."<sup>10</sup>

But in High Point, North Carolina, "the Kress' store removed its lunch counter stools entirely.... In Raleigh, North Carolina, when students lined up to go into a Woolworth's, they were arrested for trespassing." And the segregationists' behavior grew more violent. There are photographs showing white people standing behind the seated protestors, pouring coffee on them. They put out cigarettes on their backs.

In Nashville, Diane Nash says, "The waitresses were nervous. They must have dropped \$2,000 worth of dishes.... We were sitting there trying not to laugh, [and] at the same time, we were scared to death.... [People would say] how brave I was for sitting in, ... [but I was] wall-to-wall terrified."<sup>11</sup> At one lunch counter, a group of white teenagers attacked the

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, p. 128-129

<sup>7</sup> Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 145. One of their young leaders, chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and future United States Representative John Lewis, exhorted them, "Remember the teachings of Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. G\*d bless you all."

<sup>8</sup> Williams, p. 129

<sup>9</sup> April 15-17, 1960

<sup>10</sup> Oates, p.149

<sup>11</sup> Williams, pp. 132-133

protestors and pulled them off the stools. The Nashville police arrested not the teenagers, but eighty-one protestors, who were taken into custody for “disorderly conduct.” Diane Nash remembers, “... They said, ‘Everybody’s under arrest.’ So we all got up and marched to the wagon. Then they turned around and looked at the lunch counter again, and the second wave of students had all taken seats ... then a third wave. No matter what they did and how many they arrested, there was still a lunch counter full of [black and white] students...”<sup>12</sup>

On March 2<sup>nd</sup> – just one month after the movement had begun – sixty-three protestors were arrested for sitting in at Nashville’s Greyhound and Trailways bus terminals. But two weeks later, four black people were finally served at Greyhound. They were badly beaten as they tried to eat, and the next day, two unexploded bombs were discovered at the terminal. Nonetheless, it was declared a victory – the first in the nation.<sup>13</sup>

The sit-ins continued, and the violence continued. Z. Alexander Looby was Nashville’s first black councilman and the attorney who had represented the protestors in court. On the morning of April 19<sup>th</sup>, his home was destroyed. The blast from dynamite hurled from a passing car was so powerful that it shattered 147 windows in a building across the street. No one was injured, but blacks and whites were enraged. Later that same day, 2,500 students and community members marched in silence to city hall.

Nashville Mayor Ben West was waiting on the steps. Diane Nash asked him, “Mayor West, do *you* feel it is wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of their race or color?” The mayor did not hesitate. He nodded and then said yes, he believed that it was wrong.

Later, he said, “They asked me some pretty soul-searching questions, and one that was addressed to me as a man. And I found that I had to answer it frankly and honestly – that I did not agree that it was morally right for someone to sell them merchandise and refuse them service. And I had to answer it just exactly like that.... It was a moral question – one that a *man* had to answer, not a politician.”

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, p. 133

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

“The next morning, headlines in the *Nashville Tennessean* read, ‘Mayor Says Integrate Counters.’”<sup>14</sup>

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Several years ago, I agreed to appear on a talk show opposite a fundamentalist Christian. The format was that our host would ask us questions, I would respond, and the other guest would go ballistic. There would be a break for advertisements, and we’d start all over again.

During the second commercial break, the other guest turned to me and began intoning, “You are doomed to hell. You will live for all eternity in a fiery lake.” With every repetition, he turned up the volume. “You are doomed to hell. You will live for all eternity in a fiery lake.” The host, who was seated between us, looked on with an impassive gaze. The hostility on the set was palpable.

Feeling both defiant and unsafe, I looked out into the TV audience. There, in the front row, sat an older, white-haired, blue-eyed man looking for all the world like the good Irish Catholic father and grandfather that he is. And he was mouthing something, saying something just to me. “G\*d loves you. You are a child of G\*d, and I love you.” With every repetition, he turned up the volume, replacing damnation with love. “G\*d loves you. You are a child of G\*d, and I love you.”

Come to rescue me from the fiery lake was none other than Charlie Connors, then president of PFLAG.<sup>15</sup> Sitting before me, Charlie Connors threw me a lifeline across the divisions of sexual orientation and religion, and I experienced an inkling of what it must have felt like when white students sat down with black students or stood behind them at the lunch counters, the power of what Andrea James meant when she said, “Companion one another. Walk together. Be allies.”

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<sup>14</sup> Williams, pp. 138-140

<sup>15</sup> From PFLAG.org: “The idea for PFLAG began in 1972 when Jeanne Manford marched with her son, Morty, In New York’s Christopher Street Liberation Day March.... PFLAG is the nation’s largest family and ally organization. Uniting people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ... with families, friends, and allies, PFLAG is committed to advancing equality and full societal affirmation of LGBTQ people through its threefold mission of support, education, and advocacy.”

Nelson Mandela reminded us, “To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. Where are our modern-day lunch counters?

*Neighborhoods. Schools. City streets. Court rooms. Prisons.*

Dr. King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”<sup>16</sup> None of us is free until all of us are free.<sup>17</sup>

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Beloved spiritual companions,

May we *wake up*  
with our minds “stayed on freedom”  
– love, service, justice, and peace.

May we deepen our resolve,  
find the courage,  
and do our part to bridge all boundaries,  
visible and invisible.

Together, let us walk out of the fiery lake,  
through the front door,  
sit down,  
and feast.

Together, may we feel the power  
of an idea whose time has come.

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<sup>16</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963

<sup>17</sup> American poet Emma Lazarus, author of *The New Colossus*, the sonnet quoted on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, wrote, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.”