

In-Sacred-Spaces-1

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

historic black churches, ballroom scene, civil rights, queer liberation, spiritual experience, St James Presbyterian, abolition history, Shiloh Church, African American congregation, Reformed theology, grace concept, LGBTQIA rights, music and spirituality, community healing, personal journey

SPEAKERS

Aya Labanieh, Derrick McQueen, Colby King, Milan Terlunen

- C** Colby King 00:00

[Music starts.] Welcome to In Sacred Spaces, a three episode podcast series in which we visit spaces around New York City that are sacred to specific communities. These include historic Black churches in Harlem as well as the Chelsea Piers, a gathering place for members of the ballroom scene. There are many kinds of Black churches in the United States, with hundreds of years of history. Ballroom is community of mostly queer and trans performers from Black and Latinx backgrounds, originating in Harlem
- A** Aya Labanieh 00:34

Join us as we walk around these sacred spaces with the people who love them. We discuss their personal journeys with spirituality and how the spaces they've chosen to inhabit connect to longer histories of civil rights, women's equality and queer liberation.
- M** Milan Terlunen 00:56

We hope these conversations will connect with your own experiences, whether you identify as LGBTQ+, as a Christian, or as part of any other religious or spiritual community - or none at all. If you can, we encourage you to listen to this podcast while walking around a place that is sacred to you.
- C** Colby King 01:19

Our podcast team includes people with diverse religious backgrounds and a range of racial, sexual and gender identities. You can find out more about the team and the project at our website: insacredspacespodcast.com

M Milan Terlunen 01:35

We hope these episodes will inspire you to reflect on your own unique relationship to spiritual experience. Throughout each episode, we've included musical interludes composed by Stone Butler that give you some private moments to meditate on what you've heard.

C Colby King 01:58

For this episode, we're at St James Presbyterian Church, and talking with Pastor Reverend Derrick McQueen. Derrick explains how spiritual grace can give oppressed people a sense of their own sacred value. We begin the conversation outside the church on St Nicholas Avenue, a busy main road running through Harlem, New York. We're looking up at an elegant building with bright red doors, arched stained-glass windows and two Gothic-style towers. There's a constant stream of traffic rushing by as we talk. Don't worry, it'll sound a lot better once we're inside! [Music ends.]

D Derrick McQueen 02:37

It actually was a church that started downtown. It actually started downtown in 1895, St James, the congregation actually did. And it started because it wanted to have another black congregation in New York City, because the other one, Shiloh, had just closed down, and that was the original one, that was meant for abolition and the freeing of slaves and the resettling of black people in the north. So when that closed in 1893 people fought for another black church, and here we are at St James. But we bought the buildings, which is incredible for an African American congregation. To outright buy the building and the property meant a great deal in 1927.

M Milan Terlunen 03:20

Yeah. So shall we go in?

D Derrick McQueen 03:23

We can go in.

M Milan Terlunen 03:24

All right.

A Aya Labanieh 03:28

[Music starts.] As we mentioned in the intro, this podcast features musical interludes, And here's the first one

here's the first one.

C Colby King 04:02

We're now inside the church. We're in a small room with glowing stained glass windows on one side and a doorway into the main church space on the other. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 04:18

So, I mean you said outside that, you know, the, sort of, the origins of this church, and Shiloh that came before it, were in abolition, and then also this pastor talking about, you know, civil rights and race. So is that, just like a really fundamental part of the history of Saint James?

D Derrick McQueen 04:38

I'll tell you, I've wrapped it into my message as pastor here. St James has always been about liberation. Abolition is about liberation. Civil rights is about liberation. And our goal now is to figure out: where do people need to be liberated? LGBTQIA persons, this is another one of the frontiers where St James is actually fighting for the liberation of people, because that's really important to understand: that the freedom of everyone is important. You know, I'm not going to quote King, but I will say that I do agree that if we're not free, nobody's free. If you're not free, I'm not free. So the liberation aspect of it and building community among people who need to be healed from the hurt and the oppression of being oppressed is what we're all about.

M Milan Terlunen 05:25

And have been since the beginning.

D Derrick McQueen 05:27

It's what we strive for, right?

C Colby King 05:51

[Music starts.] Now we've entered the main church space and are walking past the wooden benches that every Sunday are filled with members of the congregation. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 06:21

I sort of have questions that I want to ask going in two directions. Maybe just first, could you say a little bit more about Shiloh Church? Just to give us that real, like, sort of, origin story?

D Derrick McQueen 06:36

Shiloh Presbyterian Church was founded in 1822, by Samuel Cornish. And Samuel Cornish is an abolitionist writer, newspaper writer. He wrote about freeing slavery and so on and so forth. And when he got to New York, he founded this church, not just to be a church for African Americans or the colored Presbyterian Church, but to be a home for runaway slaves. Okay, runaway slaves coming not into, you know, a white person's home just to sort of be on the Underground Railroad, but if they wanted to settle, they could settle in community.

M Milan Terlunen 07:14

And why did that church end up getting shut down? Or what happened?

D Derrick McQueen 07:18

You know, as I look through the history records, I believe it's more because slavery ended. There were some churches that never wanted an abolitionist church to begin - to begin with. And the Presbytery of New York City, the larger body of churches in New York City...

M Milan Terlunen 07:33

So some Presbyterians in New York were for slavery?

D Derrick McQueen 07:38

They were slave holders.

M Milan Terlunen 07:40

Okay, so they were definitely for...

D Derrick McQueen 07:44

Yeah, yeah. We're doing some research and finding out that that's why. It's so powerful, this story, because it's not just that the white church allowed a Black church to form. People fought and fought for the right to, number one, be a church, be a Presbyterian Church in a space where the rich people were the slave owners, and they still started an abolitionist ministry in the city of New York in 1822.

C Colby King 08:56

[Music starts.] As we look towards the front of the church, we see a grand piano to the left, a gold organ towering above and soft pink walls that frame the raised stage. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 09:15

The other question I wanted to ask was just more about, like, your personal history with this church. Like, how long have you been coming here? What was your journey to becoming pastor here?

D Derrick McQueen 09:26

I became a member in 2006. I was at Union Theological Seminary as a student, but I walked in the door that we came in, and I looked into the sanctuary and said, "This is home".

M Milan Terlunen 09:38

Yeah...

D Derrick McQueen 09:39

And I've never left. I went to church the next day. The next Sunday, I was singing in the choir. I joined, and then I became part of the leadership, and I was also going through the ordination process. So I realized that I wanted to be a minister, and I'm, and I'm actually the first out African American Presbyterian male pastor here in Harlem and...

M Milan Terlunen 10:00

And let's list that: the first out...

D Derrick McQueen 10:02

First out, male, African American pastor of an historic church in Harlem. First out pastor of an historic church in Harlem, and Presbyterian, yeah.

M Milan Terlunen 10:13

Yeah. That's historic!

D Derrick McQueen 10:17

Yeah, keep it quiet! But yeah, it's a... they're on record, there have been a lot of firsts that have happened here. You know, at this church, it was the first African American Presbyterian Church, the only African American Presbyterian Church in New York City to become open and affirming and to do the process to make that happen.

M Milan Terlunen 10:34
Open and affirming of...?

D Derrick McQueen 10:35
Of LGBTQIA persons. And that was in 2005 before I came.

M Milan Terlunen 10:42
Okay, yeah, so it was already on this journey of, I think, as you were saying, like liberation, and then...

D Derrick McQueen 10:50
And not denigrating to people that that gave service here. You know, this is an arts focused church Harlem School of the Arts started in our basement, to be next door. And you know, we know that there's a large LGBTQIA contingent in the arts, and many of them sang here. Many of them do sing here. We had people from the Met singing here when I was here, yeah, it's just you cannot have people doing things for you and not love them and accept them and hold them. It's usury.

M Milan Terlunen 11:23
Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 11:24
So yeah...

M Milan Terlunen 11:25
Yeah. That sounds like, yeah. I mean, you can do those things, but you shouldn't.

D Derrick McQueen 11:53
Well, people do do those things, right. We've made a decision not to.

M Milan Terlunen 12:00

Yeah.

C

Colby King 12:01

[Music starts.] Our voices echo in the sanctuary space as light streams from the stained glass in a rainbow of colors. It's raining heavily outside, but from in here you can't tell. [Music ends.]

M

Milan Terlunen 12:21

Um, should we, sort of, walk towards the front? And I want to ask a bit about more, sort of, the theology of this church, and, yeah, just kind of, you know, we've talked a lot about, sort of, the history, the space, the building, but also, yeah, I'm curious about the spiritual side, like, what are the defining features here?

D

Derrick McQueen 12:45

One of the wonderful things about Reformed theology, which is part of the reason why I'm a Presbyterian - because I grew up in another denomination that focused on salvation and confession and baptism, and I grew up Baptist. And I'm not denigrating that denomination. But it's saying when I realized that there was... I didn't have to look at myself as as flawed, broken and an abomination in order to be loved by God. I never felt that anyway, but talking in the larger scale... But when you study Reformed theology and you hear the understanding of grace. Grace is that notion that what happened with Jesus on that third day, that that moment symbolizes that we have been... that our sins have been cleaned, and everything is clear, the slate is clear, and that through God's mercy, that grace covers us and helps us to become whole and better people. And there's nothing that we have to do for it. That's the caveat. That's the caveat about grace. God's like, it's your gift.

M

Milan Terlunen 13:50

So this is to do with with Jesus and His crucifixion, and... Because there's that saying of like, "He died for our sins", right?

D

Derrick McQueen 13:57

Right...

M

Milan Terlunen 13:58

This is what you're talking about?

D

Derrick McQueen 13:59

Right, that's a whole other... You know, there's a whole other notion of Jesus being our substitute, which can be hurtful for some people: saying that I still don't want that on my conscience, right? It's like someone else suffering because I did something bad, right? And for African American women, especially, how often have African American women been asked to substitute, you know, be substitute mothers for their slave masters? You know, be substitute this and that for other persons. And womanism, there's a theology of Black women who talk in their understanding of God. They articulate that really, really beautifully. But this notion of grace: that there's nothing that we can do. God, God, God's grace is so powerful, so rich and so valuable, that there's nothing that we can do to even think about earning it. And what joy that brings to us.

M Milan Terlunen 15:31

Yeah.

C Colby King 15:31

[Music starts.] We turn to look up at the balcony. The choir used to sing there, but the structure can no longer support their weight. Worshiping in a historic building has its limitations. [Music ends.]

D Derrick McQueen 15:52

So we've been walking through the space. Can you hear the difference in the sound quality?

M Milan Terlunen 15:58

I can hear it in your voice, like there's much more of an echo here.

D Derrick McQueen 16:00

That's the architecture, okay? So when we were in the back, right...

M Milan Terlunen 16:04

Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 16:04

... and we moved through the space...

D Derrick McQueen 16:06

... and I'm sure that you can hear, even in the recording, that our voices will have changed. And when I filled up this space more, because now we're down in the front of the church...

M Milan Terlunen 16:06

Yeah.

M Milan Terlunen 16:16

Yeah, it resonates.

D Derrick McQueen 16:17

Isn't it resonating much more? It's really powerful, isn't it?

M Milan Terlunen 16:20

Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 16:21

I love this space for that very reason.

M Milan Terlunen 16:25

So, yeah, so, so I wanted to ask a bit more about what you're saying about grace and the, sort of, you know, at least for you and for this church, like it's, it's not something that is, sort of, Jesus substituting for us, but that it's something that's very... it's like a gift that keeps on giving, and that...

D Derrick McQueen 16:50

You, you put it absolutely beautifully.

M Milan Terlunen 16:52

I put it in a very cliched way, but...

D Derrick McQueen 16:53

 DERRICK MCQUEEN 16:55

But the whole idea about reacting to grace that is given freely: it shifts your mindset and your spirit, so that you start moving in another direction, and you start doing things differently. You start working towards towards higher goals and more ethereal things for your heart and your spirit, in a way, just because of grace. And it's not, it's not anything like hocus pocus

 Milan Terlunen 17:21

Yeah...

 Derrick McQueen 17:22

It's just sort of like you feel a little bit better, right? So you're a little bit nicer. [Laughs]

 Milan Terlunen 17:26

I mean, it sounds like... So like, in the, like, everyday meaning of the word "grace", I think of it as being about, sort of, you know, like, elegant, skillful movements, right? Or sort of, you know... But what you're describing is almost like a sort of spiritual, psychological equivalent to that, where you're thinking more, you know, gracefully, that you're sort of, you know, moving through the world and interacting with people...

 Derrick McQueen 17:52

You're moving Grace-filled.

 Milan Terlunen 17:54

Grace-filled.

 Derrick McQueen 17:55

Instead of graceful, you're Grace-filled, Grace f-i-l-l-e-d. And how that plays out, this is what's really important, is that it makes you see the importance of fighting for the end of slavery, of fighting for civil rights, of fighting for LGBTQIA rights. It makes you see that all of us are worthy of this great gift, and this great gift is so good you want everybody else to have it.

 Milan Terlunen 18:23

Yeah.

 Derrick McQueen 18:24

D Derrick McQueen 18:24

If, if God, if God has imbued this beauty and, and wonder in me, and I know that it exists in you, how can I watch your child starve?

M Milan Terlunen 18:34

Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 18:35

So it spurs you. Grace spurs you on to do things. It's not, it's not even quiet. It really moves you. It can be a revolutionary force when you recognize that everybody is deserving of it. [Laughs]

M Milan Terlunen 19:32

Yeah, yeah.

C Colby King 19:32

[Music starts.] The old beams and peeling paint of the vaulted ceiling testify to the generations of people who have made this place their spiritual home. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 19:51

Do you have any memories of you know, being in this space and feeling filled with grace in that way, like whether it was you experiencing it or other people in this space?

D Derrick McQueen 20:01

There's a song called "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine".

M Milan Terlunen 20:05

Yeah?

D Derrick McQueen 20:05

Everybody loves it. We sing it, and I do all these riffs on it, you know, because I love the song as well. And there's a little boy, when he was about four years old, his mother sent me a Facebook message of him getting ready for bed one night, putting on his pajamas, and he's

singing this song at the top of his lungs. And she's like, "What is he singing?" And he was imitating me

M Milan Terlunen 20:28
Oh yeah?

D Derrick McQueen 20:29
Here in the front of the church, like singing and riffing away. And then we had a service where we ended, we ended the service with that song. He was way over there in the sanctuary, like about 12 rows back in the corner, way across from the church, and he stood up on the bench and started singing at the top of his lungs every single word to the song. And this time he was about four and a half, and I just lost it, because he had this sense of being about this joy, about singing this song about his assurance, because we had had a conversation about it. That was Grace. It let people know the power of love, the power of joy, the power of what it means to be community with one another.

M Milan Terlunen 21:15
Yeah, and just that it's not just this kind of gentle, like warm feeling inside, but that it can have this real power and sort of move people around you. Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 21:47
Yeah.

C Colby King 21:48
[Music starts.] We step up onto the raised stage at the front, and Derrick leans on his podium, smiling. We imagine this is what he looks like when he's delivering his weekly sermons. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 22:13
I wanted to also ask a bit more about the word sin, which you used earlier, and which I feel is kind of we've been talking about this in a really kind of like positive, empowering way. But I'm just curious what role sin plays in relation to grace.

M Milan Terlunen 22:31
I define sin in a very unique way for my ministry. For me, sin are the... sin is the things that we... are the things that we do that separate us from the Divine. I don't...



Milan Terlunen 22:46

Wait I wanna repeat: things that we do that separate us from the Divine. So, yeah, what, what do you mean by that?



Derrick McQueen 22:53

Adam and Eve. We hear that the sin was the fact that they disobeyed God and they ate the apple and listen to the... God's feelings weren't hurt because of the apple. God's feelings were hurt because they hid from him. They hid from God.



Milan Terlunen 23:08

So this is that kind of classic image of them covering themselves with leaves...



Derrick McQueen 23:11

It's not even, it's not even hiding and covering their bodies. It's not even about body.



Milan Terlunen 23:16

Yeah...



Derrick McQueen 23:16

God says, Where are you Adam, where are you Eve?



Milan Terlunen 23:20

Yeah.



Derrick McQueen 23:20

And they are hiding from God, okay? And that is what breaks God's heart. And we do things that keep us away from from wanting to be near the good things. And that, to me, is sin, okay? So when Grace says you don't have to separate yourself from God, because God already knows. God is, God is just looking for you.



Milan Terlunen 23:47

Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 23:47
God's just looking for you. You don't have to hide.

M Milan Terlunen 23:50
Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 23:50
And we do things and the things that we end up doing... And I remember when a professor said this to me in a class in seminary, and I was literally in class, and I balled up and I cried. Because it was such freedom!

M Milan Terlunen 24:05
Yeah, this way of understanding.

D Derrick McQueen 24:08
You know, even though I'm, I'm an out gay pastor, right? Even though that's that. There's always that notion in the back of your head, like, is this, am I still a, am I still a sin? Not in what I do, am I a sin? Because that's the language, right? And when I realized that I'm not hiding from God and that God loves me, it brought me to tears.

M Milan Terlunen 24:30
Yeah, yeah, that is powerful, because it's like, I mean, I think a lot of queer people who have interacted with religions, you know one of the things is being told, like, you know, who you are, or like, what you do, is a sin.

D Derrick McQueen 24:46
"An abomination to God", is the language.

M Milan Terlunen 24:50
But the way that you're understanding sin just completely cuts through that. And it's like, if... It's whether you are separating yourself from the Divine or accepting that you are connected to
:-

IL.

D Derrick McQueen 25:25
Yeah.

C Colby King 25:25
[Music starts.] We approach the piano and admire how it gleams. If you didn't know better, you'd think it was brand new. [Music ends.]

D Derrick McQueen 25:53
This nine-foot baby, foot grand piano that you see here was a gift to Dorothy Maynor, the woman who started the Harlem School of the Arts, who was an opera singer, a concert singer, so you know, music was really important to her. This... We take care of this piano very well.

M Milan Terlunen 26:03
Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 26:09
Yeah, it's about 70 years old now, but it is just something about hearing the music from this piano and singing with it. There's something about it that lets you know that there is this grace and that that flows through this space, which is why I mentioned the sound before.

M Milan Terlunen 26:29
Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 26:29
Music enables you to say without saying, and you feel it. You just feel it because of the music. And there's so much great music in the church. It's... Whether it's classical, whether it's jazz, whether it's blues or gospel, it's all, it's all an effective way to bring Grace alive as a spirit. It's almost like a spirit that goes through people.

M Milan Terlunen 26:54
Yeah. Um... I'm curious to know whether you've experienced some of that feeling of grace through music outside of a church, like in other contexts that are not religious. And thinking

about like, you know, listeners who maybe don't attend church, but they have a relationship with music, you know that this is resonating with them, but it might not be religion.

D Derrick McQueen 27:20

You remember the story I told you when we first met about the way music moves people in their spirit. And on one of my birthdays, my friends took me out to a club, and we went to this gay club in the 30s, and it was a jam packed night, and around one o'clock in the morning the music shifted, and all of a sudden, everybody was up on the dance floor. We went out, we started dancing. And I was like, why am I singing the lyrics to these songs?

M Milan Terlunen 27:43

Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 27:43

And we were... it was all gospel music. And people were on the floor dancing and singing because it was their church.

M Milan Terlunen 27:57

Yeah.

D Derrick McQueen 27:57

It was a place where they felt comfortable, where they felt grace. And if they felt that they couldn't be in church on Sunday morning, they had it from one to three o'clock before the drag star came. [Laughs]

M Milan Terlunen 28:09

So, yeah, a gay club as a place where you can, you can be filled with grace.

D Derrick McQueen 28:16

That's like the ballroom community is the same thing. Yeah, it's the same thing in the ballroom, the quote-unquote "ballroom" scene in the 70s and the 80s, it still goes on, but it was an opportunity for, for queer folk, whether they were, whether they wanted to be drag, wanted to be trans, wanted to be drag, but it was all contests of different dancing and different, different ways of performing, and they had different categories of different, different ways to be queer.

The ball community was all about that: finding grace, finding power, finding presence, finding identity, finding mercy. You know, all the things that church was supposed to do for the queer community was happening in the ballroom.

C Colby King 28:56

[Music starts.] We're almost at the end of the episode, but it's not the end of the conversation. We'll now leave you with a little more Music to reflect on what you've heard.

M Milan Terlunen 29:46

We'd love to hear your response to this episode. If you have thoughts or stories to share, please send an email or, even better, a voice note to team@insacredspacespodcast.com

C Colby King 30:04

In Sacred Spaces was produced by Olivia Branscum, Colby King (that's me), Aya Labanieh and Milan Terlunen, with musical compositions by Stone Butler and technical support from Evan Li and Ana Maria Rodriguez.

A Aya Labanieh 30:18

Thanks to our speakers and to the church and ballroom communities for inviting us into their spaces. Thanks also to María González Pendás and Chris Chang for their mentorship, and to Humanities NY and Columbia's Heyman Center for the Humanities for their support.

M Milan Terlunen 30:35

And most of all, thank you for listening. [Music ends.]