

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH REV. DR. EMILIE TOWNES

Monique M.: Let's begin recording. My name is Monique Moultrie and today is May 15th, 2018 and I'm here with Reverend Dr. Emilie Townes. We're conducting an oral history for the LGBTran website and for my research project, entitled, "Hidden Histories: the faith activism of Black, lesbian religious leaders." We will begin early in life and hit milestones along the way. Feel free to skip any questions, to choose what to elaborate on, what to comment on, to say, "Pass."

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: And that's perfectly okay.

Emilie Townes: Okay.

Monique M.: So I know you were raised in Durham, North Carolina. Can you tell me about your early life? What type of neighborhood you grew up in? What were your neighbors like?

Emilie Townes: Well, I grew up in the late '50s and '60s and early '70s in what we call a "trans-class community", black community except for one white family, who was Lutheran minister and his wife and children who we didn't quite understand what they were doing the neighborhood, but you know, there they were. And by "trans-class", that meant both my parents were college professors at North Carolina Central University, beside us was a family that was kind of mysterious, we never really did know what they did and they weren't always living in their house, so that was a mystery from childhood. Beside them was a family of a father and mother, all their adult girl children, and all their girl children's children from various fathers. And then beside that was a retired tobacco factory worker and his wife, who I believe worked as a domestic. And so we had lawyers, we had a high school principal, grade school principals, daycare workers who were what would now be called "an illegal daycare center."

Monique M.: Mm-hmm.

Emilie Townes: That's where I grew up, part of my time, going to Mrs. Wynn's daycare center. And soldiers, well really the families of soldiers. And let's see. What else? Secretaries, grade school teachers. So we were all this mishmash of income-earning people in various levels of the class structure, but we didn't talk about it. The kids just played with the kids.

Monique M.: Mm-hmm.

Emilie Townes: So that was my neighborhood. It was only about five blocks from North Carolina Central University, so I grew up in the shadow of what I thought was the biggest university in the world. Little did I know, until fourth grade, that there were even White people in Durham because the Black community was self-contained.

Everything we needed, we could get in the community and it wasn't until urban renewal destroyed that by bringing a major interstate right through the community, which killed it, actually, really. I had no idea that there were White folk there or that Duke University was in town. I didn't know that there was any university other than my parents' school until fourth grade. So I grew up in a really contained Black community that prided itself on being able to sustain the members of that community and I didn't realize that until I was an adult, in a way. It was just, "That's the way it is, that's what we do."

Monique M.: Tell me a bit about your siblings and extended family. What did y'all do for fun? What was a typical Saturday?

Emilie Townes: Well we were a small family, nuclear. There was just one younger sister, who's nine years younger than I am. And we were not a family that played together. Both my sister and I were encouraged to go out into the neighborhood and play with the kids in the neighborhood, but my parents were homebodies. They really enjoyed, they poured everything they had into their teacher and, later in life, in their administration. And when they came home, they wanted to rest.

Monique M.: Mm-hmm.

Emilie Townes: So we didn't play games together as a family. We didn't go out, and that wasn't so unusual in that era because it was just the beginning of desegregated restaurants and even being able to move in bigger spaces. And my father was never comfortable going out to dinner. Just he was twitchy the whole time, he used to drive my mother crazy. But my sister and I did not realize what historic demons he was fighting until we were much older because he grew up in an era where Black folk just didn't do that. If you couldn't do it in your neighborhood, you didn't get it at all. So if we had a vacation, it was going to visit relatives. And that, a real vacation, didn't happen. It was always going to see somebody in the family. Our extended family was also somewhat small. My father didn't really spend a lot of time around his family. He was the youngest of seven kids. His parents died when he was younger and none of his siblings would take him in, so a woman in the neighborhood raised him.

Emilie Townes: And his attitude was, "I'll be there if you need me," but I never really knew any of his people. And even when he died, his surviving sister, who I didn't even know was alive, she had dementia. Her sons brought her down, but they got there right as the memorial service was ending. So it was a real disconnect with that family. My mother's siblings, she was the oldest of five. She was also a twin, but her twin died at about six months, of something that today would never have killed a baby. I cannot remember what it was. And my grandparents on my mother's side were divorced, for good reasons. My grandfather was a bit of a Lothario and a moonshiner. And Nana had enough of that. And he got run out of the state, so they divorced. And I probably saw him a couple of times before he died and he was only allowed to come back in the state in death and he and my grandmother were buried beside each other, which was interesting, given their history.

Monique M.: Were they also in North Carolina?

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm (affirmative). My grandmother lived in Southern Pines, which is about 75 miles from Durham, my hometown. US Route 1 was the major road at that time. And my mom had two brothers, two sisters. So my only surviving aunt or uncle is my aunt, who was the baby of the family, and she is now 84 and lives with us because she has Parkinson's and really can't do for herself, which is a bit a change for her because she's lived by herself for most of her life and she's come and taken over the house. She says she hasn't. That's not true. And people sometimes act like this is some kind of noble thing we're doing, but for me, that's what you do. I was raised to do that. You take care of the old people in your family. So she'll be with us as long as it's safe for us to keep her at home. She does not appear to be waning, so ...

Monique M.: Excellent.

Emilie Townes: Yeah.

Monique M.: What kind of family values were imparted to you and your sister?

Emilie Townes: Well, my parents were, I didn't realize how progressive my parents were, for Black folk, around religion, until I was an adult and looked back and would talk about it with folks and people would be looking at me like, "Your parents did what?"

Monique M.: I have to say the story about you driving while they went to church was like, "Y'all didn't go together?" I had the same moment.

Emilie Townes: Nope, nope. They made some commitments to each other and one of them was that their children, however many it was, they didn't specify a number, but their children would always be brought up in a church that had the best Sunday school, no matter what denomination it was. So I was raised in our family church, Ashbury Temple, United Methodist Church, which at the time had the best Sunday school. Nine years later, the best Sunday school was Covenant Presbyterian Church and that's where my sister went to church. And there you have the makings of the Calvin-Wesley split lived out between the two of us, most of the time, unknowingly. But their point was you raise your child up with the values that lead you to a good, upright, moral life and then, at a certain age in teenage- dom, you let them go and let them find their way from that point forward. And that's what they did with both of us. So hence, when church became irrelevant or not answering my questions, I was allowed to take the car and go to Duke Forest and sit in nature and talk to God on Sunday mornings because they trusted that whatever I was doing up there in the woods was something that would lead me into a closer relationship with God. And it did.

Emilie Townes: My sister, totally different journey for her. She stayed involved, right up until she left for college, in her local church. And my parents, my mother used to call

my father "Mr. Methodism" because he was the kind of layman who opened the church up on Sunday mornings and turned the heat on.

Monique M.: Mm-hmm.

Emilie Townes: And knew all the things that you needed to do to get the church warm or turn the fans on in summer and took under his wing all the young pastors, mostly seminarians, and then when that dried up, it was all the rejects, I think, or problem pastors in the United Methodist Church at that time. Take them under his wing and try and help them. He was going to church meetings all the time, both in our local church, but also within the region and conference. And Mom usually stayed home to clean the house and she also had the Duke University Chapel Sunday worship service on. And she would listen to the radio while she cleaned and when I asked her about it once, she said, "Your grandmother had us in church so much when we were children, I have a backlog of church attendance and I'm just fine sitting here, listening to the service on the radio." "Okay. That makes sense." That attitude used to just confound some preachers, though. "You need to try and save your mom." And I'm thinking, "Mom is saved. You may be the problem, but ..." And both were proud of being regular tithers.

Emilie Townes: Even though Mom didn't go to church and Dad was there every Sunday, it was still important to both of them that they tithe and tithe regularly. And that is something they did as long as they lived. Well, that's not quite true. Mom stopped when the pastor of the church, when Dad died, turned the eulogy into something that none of us recognized my father in. And it became a stewardship sermon, actually. She almost got up and walked out. If my sister hadn't been patting her thigh and telling her, "It's going to be alright. It's going to be over soon." She would have walked out on him. And at that point, she said, "You're getting no more of our money." And that was it.

Monique M.: Yeah.

Emilie Townes: So I use that story with young seminarians on, "When people tell you X, follow it when it's a funeral."

Monique M.: Yeah. I've read some of your early formation in the church being rooted in social justice was important.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: Can you speak a bit about that and how that then connected with what you were doing in the woods?

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique M.: As you were seeking.

Emilie Townes: The pastor, the strongest memory I have of all of our pastors was Doug Moore and he was the one that I was a little girl growing up right in the midst of the sit-ins and the civil rights movement hitting Durham. And he was in the thick of things, but what Reverend Moore preached, or at least what I learned is you have to have a strong spiritual base if you're going to have a strong justice base. And if you're going to have a strong justice base, you better have a strong spiritual base. So that's how I was raised, that you don't choose one or the other. Both of them are needed for a whole and healthy Christian. So when we started having pastors, most of who were on the spiritual side and not wanting to be involved either in the neighborhood or the world around us, just even in Durham, it didn't ring true. So I guess I escaped to the woods. It didn't feel that way, but it probably looked that way. That was where I got centered and because, by that time, I'm in high school and we're undergoing court-ordered desegregation, that was just tearing the schools apart and we students were pawns between the Black Panther Party, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Communist Workers Party.

Emilie Townes: Those three groups were in the school, in my high school, actively recruiting students. And so I needed to have some anchor and it wasn't happening at church for me, so I figured, "Go to Duke Forest." A White friend of mine had shown me this spot on the bluffs and I thought, "Well, let me see if I can go back there some." And it just became a regular Sunday. By myself, I'd sit there for probably about an hour or so and talk to God. "What is going on? How do I do this?" But what that also fostered in me in high school was a sense of outrage when I saw the inequities, that it wasn't so much around race. My high school had been predominantly Black and White Flight took off like crazy, so it remained predominantly Black, but there were a few White students there. And you would think that the dichotomy would be between Black and White, and it was to a certain extent, but what I saw more of was class.

Emilie Townes: And I didn't really know, understand class dynamics. But what I saw consistently was the students who came from poorer backgrounds or less socially prominent backgrounds, no matter where they were, Black or White, were the students who got the short end of the stick on a consistent basis. And I was taught that that wasn't right so I became a student activist, trying to right the injustices of the system. My mother used to always say, "You're out there trying to save the world." I said, "No, I'm just trying to make it right because it's wrong, what's going on." You know, my parents couldn't dispute it when I would describe what I'd see. But I know that where I got that from was from church. You stand up and speak out when you see wrong happening and you don't let people suffer without saying something and trying to change it. So those times in the woods were a time for me to recenter and reflect, as much as one's going to as a teenager, on what was going on in my life, how God was that one constant in the midst of turmoil. And to be present with my classmates, even if no one else could articulate what I was seeing and feeling, it was important to me to stand up and say something and try to do something.

Monique M.: And what were those activities like? Were you advocating for better after school tutoring?

Emilie Townes: We were advocating better teaching, more representative teaching, stopping warehousing the poor students. We wanted some equity. I knew, I mean we were enough politically astute that we knew that when we did surveys, student surveys about the school, and the school declared them illegal, that they should be returned to my locker or someone else's locker whose parent was a professor or a lawyer or a doctor, rather than somebody whose parents were tobacco factory employees, because we knew they wouldn't do anything to us because our parents would be down at the school in a hot second. Even if they were doing the cussing under their breath at us. And so we had that much of a sense of analysis that we needed to use what privilege we had, what "pull" we had probably was the world we used, to do those things. And for years, I had months of the surveys up in my closet, in my mom and dad's home. Until Mom got tired of them and threw them out, but that was the sort of thing that we did was try and make our education more consistent across the spectrums that made up the school.

Monique M.: So what else was high school like? What were some favorite classes?

Emilie Townes: Well I played in the band, both marching and symphonic, and that was a big, big space in my life. I loved being a part of a group that could make beautiful music.

Monique M.: What did you play?

Emilie Townes: It was the symphonic band. Or could put on a really good show if it was the marching band. I played the baritone horn. Now that was the biggest social area of my life. And then sports became the other. That was when I messed up my knee the first time playing basketball, and continued to do that far too long, but that's another story. So we didn't have girls' basketball, but we did have girls' tennis and track and field. So I did both and really settled into track and field and did the shot put. So it was ... The extracurricular stuff sustained what was going on in all the other areas and I was a good student, so. I don't know that I had a favorite class or even a favorite teacher in high school. I just like learning. So it was tough, but it wasn't impossible. I don't feel as though I survived something, I feel like I learned a lot, not only in terms of coursework, but also about people and what makes us tick. It was a good school. I have really mostly good memories about my high school years. I mean, it wasn't perfect. Falling in and out of love with folks, not quite sure what to do about ...

Emilie Townes: Well, no. I take that back. I did know what to do with my attraction to girls. I decided, when I realized in eighth grade that I had an attraction to girls, I decided I was too young to make that decision. And so I would give boys a try out, through college, and if I still felt that way after college, well there you go. So I tried. And still thought that way, so that's okay. It was only probably somebody who doesn't know much could make a decision that flat footed about

her life, but it really just seemed to be the most natural thing. It was like, "Okay. If this is it, this is it." So I didn't have a great deal of drama, just some.

Monique M.: Did you talk with your family? Siblings?

Emilie Townes: Oh no.

Monique M.: Friends?

Emilie Townes: No, no, no, no, no. That was not a conversation topic until college. And that then was within my friendship network, which was mostly on sports teams because I went to University of Chicago as an undergraduate and my first two weeks there, no it was my first week there, I watched two students being taken off the dorm hallway because they had flipped out because they were no longer the smartest person.

Monique M.: Aw.

Emilie Townes: And I thought to myself, "I am not going to let this place drive me crazy." So I took myself down to the women's gym and said, "Y'all need some help?" Because I had just intuitively knew I needed to have an alternative to that kind of pressured academic environment. And I did sports for the next four years to keep my balance, get off of campus, and ,through the process, become more and more aware that what the objects of my emotional and sexual passions were women and not men.

Monique M.: What led you to U Chicago?

Emilie Townes: Flattery. I grew up in a high school where people got scholarships for sports. I had no idea that colleges recruited you because you have a mind and that's ironic given both my parents were college professors, but it wasn't anything they ever talked about in the house, until I started getting ... I drew attention because I did really well on the PSAT, which is the last time I've done well on ... First and last time I've done well on a standardized test. And Chicago did the best flattery job and I thought, "Okay." But it also had what I was looking for. I didn't want to be in a huge university. So that ruled out Duke and UNC Chapel Hill and Boston University, and there was one other huge school, Georgetown (well it's a medium school). It ruled those out. Those were the schools close to home. And going to North Carolina Central was just not an option. I would not go to a school where my parents taught. No way, no how. So Chicago started sending letters and had a Chicago alum in the area interview me. Small classes taught by the professors, not graduate students. And they just flattered the hell out of me. And I said, "Okay. I'll come." So by the time the acceptance letters came rolling in, I wanted to go to Chicago. I didn't want to go anywhere else. So when the package came, I ran all over the neighborhood, acting like a silly child.

Monique M.: No concerns from going from North Carolina to Chicago?

Emilie Townes: I didn't. My parents did and my grandmother just started praying. She was the only one who voiced her fears because she, before I left for the first time, "Why are you going up there to that big, evil city. You keep your legs together and you stay out of corners." "Yes, mam." It was only at graduation that my parents told me, "We weren't sure about this one, but you did it." I said, "What do you mean?" And it was at that point Mom said, "Well we were very fearful for you." But they did not show it the four years I was at college. And I will give them props for that. So ...

Monique M.: What was your spiritual practice like in college?

Emilie Townes: Almost nothing. Almost nothing. I did a little bit of casting about. For a time, I wondered if Judaism might not be more reflective of who I am. And because I eventually became a religion major in college, I was then able to process, from an intellectual side, and realized, "No, this is not Judaism, this is back then more theocentric than Christocentric." I poked around a little bit with Unitarianism, but I was just like, "How do you sing a hymn that I know has Jesus in it, but they're taking Jesus out of it? What is up with that?" So that didn't work. And then, for a time, I was working with a couple of friends of mine in a United Methodist Church, just to the neighborhood of the north, working with the youth group. And it was in that church that I decided that I wanted to be re-baptized. And that's so against the book of discipline in the United Methodist Church, but I had a renegade pastor, didn't know it, and he did it. So there was that moment, those moments, but by and large, sports were much more foundational for me than religion or religious practice. And as I became more involved in being a religion major at Chicago, which simply meant if you could justify the course you wanted to take had something to do with religion, you could take it and it could count for your major, which meant the whole curriculum was your oyster. And so I was able to go here, there, everywhere, explore and take classes at ...

Monique M.: So our contemporary interdisciplinary degree?

Emilie Townes: It was. It was. They didn't call it that then, but that very much was what it was. And it was perfect for somebody like me, who had lots of questions and was not satisfied with a dogma or dogmatic approach to the study of religion. So it was great. I had a fabulous time, but it freaked my sports teammates out. They were just sure I was gonna start condemning them and calling them blasphemers because a lot of them were lesbians. And I'm like, "So?" They said, "What do you mean 'so'? You said that ..." I said, "Look, that's not the God I know, I don't know who this other god that people have showing up condemning people, who are good people, because of who they fall in love with and decide they want to try and spend their life with, but not the god I was taught."

Emilie Townes: So it took a while for that to settle down and then realize that I'm still me. I just was so thrilled to finally find a major that I knew I could stick. So ...

Monique M.: So you described, in other interviews, the clear moment you felt called to the divinity school.

Emilie Townes: Yeah.

Monique M.: But I've yet to read your clear call into ministry, so was that at divinity school or ?

Emilie Townes: It was during divinity school. I was in my field education placement at Hyde Park Union Church and really my father in ministry, David Bartlett, was the senior minister there. And they had ... I had asked to be in a field ed site that wasn't United Methodist on purpose because I knew Methodism, I wanted to see what other denominations did. And so I was placed at Hyde Park Union, which was a Union of American Baptist and United Church of Christ, and they were being more American Baptist at that point. And I actually felt like I had come home, which was interesting because I had never been in a predominantly White church before Hyde Park Union. I was like, "How am I coming home to this? Well let me just sort of sit with this and see."

Emilie Townes: Well, I was assigned a minister of social concerns and one of my key ministries in that was the golden diners program. So I worked with the old people and just loved it because I'd rather spend time around old people than folks my age any day. But Hyde Park had also called a young seminarian, well, graduate of Colgate Rochester Divinity School to be the assistant minister. And within the first year or so, if I'm remembering this correctly, Steven was ordained. And I had never seen Baptist ordination because I had only seen the Methodists, where a whole group of people go up and things get said and they go to sit down. But the idea of an individual ordination, I was like, "Really?" So I was there for his ordination and he would tell me about what it was like for interviewing and I was like, "That don't sound like me at all. No, buddy." Because when I went to divinity school, I was not going to be ordained or serve a church. I started out wanting to do a joint degree in religion and social work and then use that as a social worker.

Emilie Townes: But within the first quarter or so, I realized I was much more interested in religion than I had fully appreciated, so I dropped that and focused exclusively on the religion degree. And so I thought, "Well that's interesting." Because it was special. I could see that that was meaningful for him and he had lots of questions, going into the ordination process. It wasn't one of those slam dunk things for him. So that was good to have as well. So several of the golden diners, who were not members of the church, but liked Steve, came to the ordination service and I was talking with one of the women, sometime that next week, she was a former librarian. You gotta stay away from old librarians, they'll mess you up. So we were sitting, talking and so she says, "Well, when are you going to be ordained?" I said, "Oh, I'm not gonna do that. I'm not called to that." And leaned over me and said, "What do you think you've been doing with us?"

Emilie Townes: And I went, "Huh." She said, "If this isn't ministry that you've been doing all these months, I don't know what is." And so I was like, "Oh." So I went upstairs to David's office and recounted the conversation and he just burst out laughing. He said, "We were wondering when you were going to figure this out." I went, "Oh." So it took me a while, even after that, to say, "Okay." But I still knew I did not want to serve a church full-time. I wanted to have my religious beliefs front and center in making communities better. That's what I knew and had assumed that's what I would do. So it was not the profound call that I had with the wind picking up and voices beckoning and all that to go to divinity school. But it was more, maybe an angel. Maybe we could call it that. Jerking my chain and he went, "Would you wake up and smell the roses about what you are doing and who you are?"

Emilie Townes: And I said, " Okay. You've got me."

Monique M.: But you did go on to serve as a full-time pastor, so how did you ...

Emilie Townes: Well not full-time. No, no, no, no. Never full-time.

Monique M.: Never full-time.

Emilie Townes: Never full-time. Both my pastoral assignments were as interims and part-time. As much as that's not an oxymoron.

Monique M.: Yeah.

Emilie Townes: But ... Yeah. No. And it wasn't as profound as the call to teach either. It was sort of a gentle nudging for ordination. And I think that's part of the reason why, much like ... I can't remember who now once said to me, "You know? I wear my ordination loosely." And I thought that was an apt description.

Monique M.: So you said something about the individual ordination process worked for you.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: And you were okay with the freedom of the Baptists.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I felt like I had come home. Even when I was a kid, I wanted to know why we had to do workbooks about the bible rather than just read the bible, like my friends who were Baptists, down the street. I mean, I would just pester, you know, "This is how we teach bible." "Why don't we just pick up the book?" So there was always a little bit of a rebellious thing going on and I also knew, in my years at U of C in the div school, that I clarified I really didn't like what I saw as what I view as the worst of United Methodist polity, and that's moving people every four years or dumping people into churches that actually they need more help than just somebody who they can't place anywhere else, and that was my home church. It was a small mission church in the North

Carolina Conference and so it was a holding station for a lot of folk a lot of the time. And I saw how that just slowly eroded the church of my youth. And I came to really resent it and I also started to realize I didn't believe in infant baptism. So I dealt with that by making it one of my field exams for my DMin so I could intellectualize it and understand what was going on for me.

Monique M.: That's a good segue. I was next going to ask you about the DMin and what pushed you in the direction of the DMin first.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: And what you feel you gained from it.

Emilie Townes: Well, at that time, the DMin was the first professional degree at Chicago. They didn't have an MDiv, like they do now. So that was the only thing available.

Monique M.: Oh so did you do a DMin and not an MDiv at the divinity school?

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique M.: Ah.

Emilie Townes: Well, the master's I got at the divinity school was an MA in religion. And now there is no such thing as a DMin at Chicago. It's now just an MDiv, that's the first professional degree. So it was really the quirk of the degree programs and what I could do and also what I was interested in doing. The faculty at Chicago was honest enough to say, "We don't have the expertise to do anything Black church with you on a doctoral/PhD level. We've got nobody here that knows anything about it, but what we can do on the DMin level is have you explore that." And so that's what I did. And so my DMin thesis, and this was the kind of academic DMin, Claremont School of Theology had it, several places had it at one time, is I think we took one less field exam and wrote a shorter thesis. We didn't write a full-blown dissertation of hundreds and hundreds of pages. I think mine was like 150 or something like that. And it's title, because I went back to look at it after the death of Jim Cone a couple of weeks ago, the title was "The Kingdom of God and Black Preaching: An Analysis and Critique of James H. Cone."

Emilie Townes: And so they felt they had the chops to direct that, but what it would have taken to do that on a PhD level, they didn't. So I was like, "Fine."

Monique M.: Okay.

Emilie Townes: I didn't really care about what kind of D it was. I just wanted to get on with it, so.

Monique M.: So then, that's what led to Garrett was completing the project that they couldn't help you do?

Emilie Townes: Well, no. What led to Garrett was I had gone straight through to my DMin from kindergarten with no stops in education. And so I was tired and looking forward to being out of school for the first time in my life. And remember, I wasn't gonna teach, so ...

Monique M.: And you weren't going to preach, so what ...

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm. I wasn't going to do either. And was doing one of them at the time that Garrett Evangelical and Henry Young called and said, " We've got a lot of Black women who have come to Garrett now and they've been agitating for a class on Black women in ministry and we have no Black women on our faculty and we don't know anything about it, but you have a DMin and that would be acceptable to us if you would like to come up and teach a class on Black women in ministry." And I'm like, "Oh sure, that sounds like it's interesting." I was running the bookstore, the branch of the seminary co-op bookstore that's based in Hyde Park. They tried a branch out in the suburbs at Northern Baptist Seminary. That didn't work, but I was the manager of that store and I was eager to not have to be there every single day for hours on end.

Emilie Townes: So I met with Henry Young and Rosemary Keller and we crafted a class together and it became "The Black Church and Feminism." That was the title of the class and I was driving up to Garrett and realized that I really didn't know with a thing about teaching and that might be a problem, but I knew I couldn't turn around and so I just kept driving and I started praying. So I got to Garrett, walked in, there was about 25 students, mostly Black women. A couple of Black men, a couple of White women. No White men. But they were all just excited because most of them had never had a Black woman professor. And so I went, "Oh my god." I sat down and got myself set up, looked up at the class, and just opened my mouth and said, "Let us pray." I wasn't intending to do that, but that is now how I start almost all of my classes, in prayer.

Emilie Townes: Not so much for the students as it is for me, to bring myself present to the task. So I finished the prayer, because people don't pray long and looked up, opened my mouth, started talking, and within seconds, I knew this is what I'm supposed to be doing and was pissed because I knew that meant I had to go back to school because a DMin was not enough. I had missed that era. So that was the call to teach, was in that moment. It was just, bowl you over, this is what you're supposed to be doing."

Monique M.: Okay. So then why choose Garrett to do that?

Emilie Townes: Well, I was going to wait five years because I really liked not being in school, and well with ... Let's see. That was '83. So I started being asked to do adjunct work because the class went well, so they were like, "Oh, we need Black women down here. Can you come teach our students as an adjunct?" I'm like, "Sure." I needed the money, but I also was enjoying teaching. And then I ran into Katie Cannon at a Women of Color in Ministry Conference sponsored by the National Council of Churches. And Katie was, still is an icon. She was, for my generation,

she was the first Black woman to get a PhD, which was not true, but that's the only we knew about. And she had graduated from Union and was just known as like, "The idol has come to the conference."

Emilie Townes: So she was sitting outside her cabin. We were up in the woods in Wisconsin. Don't ask me why they put a conference of women of color up in some woods, but they did. And Katie has a habit of interviewing people, just want to know what you're doing, what are you thinking about, where you're going, where's the lord leading you. So she was doing that and I was standing off to the side because here's this woman I've been hearing about my whole theological career, such as it was at that point, and she was in the flesh and she actually was nice. You know? Because I'd been around enough to know not everybody who's famous is nice. And so she gets to me and she says, "You know, you've been my driver. You helped me go get some fruit, but you don't talk much. So tell me what you're up to." And I said, "Well, I know I want to teach, but I'm gonna wait five years and then go back." And she gave me what I call "The Katie Cannon Look." She didn't know she had it, but when I told this story once, she started to say, "I didn't have a look." And people around us said, "Oh yes you do."

Emilie Townes: And it's a look you really don't want her to give you because it's one of those, "You have lost your last bit of sense. What is wrong with you?" So she gave me this look and then she said, "Do you realize that as we sit here in 1984, there are only five women in the world who have earned PhDs in religion?" And I'm think she saw me going through the list in my head.

Monique M.: Uh-huh.

Emilie Townes: I didn't realize that the five I knew were the only five in the world. I just assumed there were more I didn't know about. And so when it became clear that it had clicked, she just looked at me and said, "Do you really think we can afford for you to wait?" So I took the GRE the next month and was in school in the Fall.

Monique M.: Wow.

Emilie Townes: What I had decided, though, was that I was not ready to leave the Chicago area. I wasn't done with Chicago. And so I only applied to two schools; the joint Garrett-Northwestern program and the University of Chicago. And in both, I wanted to focus on ethics. But what I liked about Garrett was its interdisciplinary focus in its courses and that fact that you had to take half your coursework in one of the graduate departments in Northwestern and half at Garrett and the Northwestern part, you had to be focused in a field. And so I had pretty much decided I wanted to go to Garrett because I knew I could ... But initially, I wanted it to be anthropology in Garrett, but I knew that's what I wanted to do. I wanted that kind of exposure. When Chicago got in touch and said, "Well, would you consider moving to ..." Oh what was that? It got popular for a while, it has now died out. I can't even remember what the concentration was.

Emilie Townes: Oh, practical theology, which for me was warmed over ethics. And I knew I wanted to work with the ethics faculty, not the practical theology faculty, so I said, "No, I'm gonna keep my application in ethics. Thank you very much." So so I waited and Chicago said, "Well, no. We're not going to admit you." With great disappointment, I found out later that some of the ethics faculty were pissed, but it's okay because I had already decided that Garrett-Northwestern was where I really wanted to be at. So that's why Garrett. That program no longer exists. It is the program Jim Cone was in when he was at Garrett and we used to talk about, "We have our degrees from something that no longer exists. What does that mean for our degrees?"

Monique M.: So I'm gonna try to collapse a lot in a couple of questions.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: Because we're at an hour and 15 and I want to be, I want to honor your time. So talk to me about your academic trajectory in whatever framing you want. Whatever highlights. What were significant moves for you?

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: And what led you to those spaces?

Emilie Townes: My interest in ethics, I backed into. When I looking at my transcript at the divinity school one day, I noticed that I had all these ethics courses on it. In fact, I only had ethics courses on it, beyond the required DMin courses and so I thought to myself, "Oh, I must interested in ethics, so maybe I should get a little more intentional about that and pick up an intro course or something that would help that along." So I did that and by the time I entered the Garrett-Northwestern program, I was very clear that that was my focus, but I was also interested in history and as it turned out, the ethicist on the faculty had just become the academic dean and Rosemary Keller, who's a historian, had just joined the faculty and been approved to work with graduate students. And so they decided that she would be my advisor and Dick Tholen, the ethicist, would be the secondary with an understanding that the focus from me really was going to be in ethics.

Monique M.: Mm-hmm.

Emilie Townes: So when I started my coursework, I took an anthropology class, first one I'd ever taken, and I knew I wasn't getting it. I knew I was missing the point and I had bought all these secondary source stuff trying to understand what I was supposed to be understanding. And that wasn't working either, so I went in to see the professor, who was an older White gentleman. And I said, "This is what I've done. I don't think I am getting the foundational stuff. I read these books. And this does not seem to be helping either. Would you suggest some material for me to read?" And he looked at me and said, "Well, you're just not working

hard enough. I think you're lazy." I said, " But professor, I just told you all that I was doing to try and understand what was going on in this course." And he repeated himself, "I think you're just lazy and you don't want to do the work." I said, "How could you say that when I've told you the books I've read, the attempts I've made, all I'm coming in to ask you is to just point me in the right direction and I will follow through."

Emilie Townes: And he said, "No, you're just lazy." So I stood up, I don't even know if I thanked him for his time. And as I was walking out the door, I turned around and said, "Asshole." And left. I thought, "Well, I guess that means I'm not going back." So I was sitting in my student carrel and Rosemary Reuther happened to walk past. And she's not warm, fuzzy. She's just not a warm, fuzzy person, but she sensed something was wrong and she said, "You alright?" And I told her what happened and she said, "He doesn't want you in his class. Don't go back. You've got other things. You don't need that." I said, "But ..." She said, "Mm-mm. He does not want you in that class with him. Don't give him that." "Okay." So I had to go find something else and I realized that my other love was history, just like a pig in slop, I had such a good time with that. I worked with Sterling Stuckey, Joe Barton became my major professor in the secondary discipline, social history. It was a perfect marriage and you see that Conination in my work, even today.

Emilie Townes: There's always some sort of historical contextualization and then I'd work on solving. Tell me what else you asked me because I have lost ...

Monique M.: For you to talk about your career in whatever space and way you want

Emilie Townes: So that was the beginning, really, of the old white men, who I think pretty much was a racist, kicking me out of his class or making it clear he didn't want me there and having Rosemary Reuther walk past and say, "Don't go back. Just do it. It's not going to be educational." And me having the good sense to listen to her instead of getting bull-headed, which would have been my normal pattern, but something told me she was right. And so I started, then, consciously blending history and ethics as a methodology for me. And very clear social history because I can't imagine doing ethics without understanding the context of whatever it is I'm looking at and social history has given me the best entrée into understanding that. Other people can use other things, I think that's just beautiful, but it doesn't work for me. And so what I entered the PhD program to do was I thought I was going to work on African women and development, which is why I was taking anthro to get context.

Emilie Townes: And so when that door was closed, I started casting about and was in a PhD seminar, taught by Rosemary Keller, on ... I don't know. Biography as practice or something like that. And we read several biographies of people, one of them was Ida B Wells Barnett and I was struck in the biographies that the biographer either loved her or condemned her. Nobody sat in the middle. And I thought, "What's going on here?" So I decided she would become my project, not really knowing much about her until I took that class. I had never heard her name called, she was an unknown person at that point. And that is what launched me

into my dissertation research was I knew that University of Chicago had her surviving papers. I didn't realize how few there were until I got down into special collections and learned that there had been two fires in her family home and a lot of her stuff was just lost. So all that remained were five folio boxes of this woman who wrote a lot.

Emilie Townes: But one of them was her diary, written in her own hand in 1885, before she became the public figure she eventually would become. And I'm reading this diary and seeing this whole religious worldview emerge that was never addressed in any of the biographies I had read about her. And I thought, "That's it. This is what propelled her. Folks just have not paid attention to what made this woman tick and why she could be so frustrating to so many people, which she was, but she had this high sense of calling that she was not willing to back down from." So that's what got me started on Ida B Wells and trying to understand, and this is where my upbringing kicked back in, how one Coneines the prophetic the pastoral. And in many ways, that's what my work has been about, even though I may not be talking about it consciously. But always trying to understand, whoever we're looking at, how do we recognize the humanity of the people involved and also realize that we can do better than this. And how do we get ourselves there.

Monique M.: In looking at the whole expanse of your CV ...

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: You're full of firsts and notables and these distinctions.

Emilie Townes: Yeah.

Monique M.: So if you were to summarize the markers of your leadership or some of the vision boards for your leadership style, what do you think those various positions hold in common? What propelled you to want to say yes to the opportunities that came your way?

Emilie Townes: I think more than anything, it's been a two-step of, "I think I can learn something, doing this." And, "I think I can help, doing this." Because it also has been about call. Very reluctant as an administrator. Again, I was gonna the family business, I was going to teach, ended up teaching. I wasn't going to preach, ended up preaching. Wasn't going to be an administrator, ended up administrating. And my parents were administrators at the tail end of their careers, both of them. But again, it has to be a sense of call and at Yale, my dean waited me out because I told him, when I first got there, because I had said it to the president and Harry Atrich was then dean at Yale. Harry was up for reappointment and the president wanted to interview all of the senior faculty. I had just gotten to Yale and I said, "I've got no dog in this fight. I don't even know the man. So I don't think I need to come in." But the president said, "No, you have to come in."

Emilie Townes: So I went in and we were talking and he said, "You know, your colleagues have said that he has a tendency to micromanage." And I sort of thought, I'm like, "Yes, he does, but that's because he doesn't have help from his academic dean." His academic dean is a wonderful scholar, but he's not helping as an administrator so he really needs some help and because he doesn't have it, he's got to do that job and be a dean. And I really hope that he finds someone who's better suited to the administrative side of being an academic dean. And since I had said that to the president, I thought I'd better tell Harry to his face that I had said that. So I did and he smiled and always someone who usually played his cards close to his chest and he said, "Well, who would you suggest?" So I had two people ready for him, named them both, and he said, "That's interesting. What about you?" And I said, "I gave you two names."

Emilie Townes: And he said, "Well, just think who else could do it." And I thought about it, I went through the faculty as I knew them and I went, "Hmm. I see what you mean." He said, "Why don't you think about it?" I said, "Well, if you will check with these two people that I have given you names for and they don't want to do it, get back to me." He did nothing. He just sat and waited. He took two years, but he's a patient man. And the same was true here, I had gone through, when Harry retired and they were running the search for the dean at Yale, folk assumed I was a shoe-in. I knew that wasn't true because Yale wasn't about to employ a Black, lesbian woman as dean of its divinity school. I knew that. The lord Jesus knew it and a few other people, mostly Black women, knew it too.

Emilie Townes: And so even though I was one of the two finalists, I knew during the interviews, for me, it was not serious consideration. They have thought they were being serious, but that was not what they communicated, to the point where the president didn't even tell me he had chosen the other candidate, I had to learn about the through the grapevine. Oh lord. Anyway. But in that process, I realized, "Oh, I could be a dean, but I actually like being an academic dean. I like moving people to where they need to be and doing stuff and I was pretty good at it." So I had made my peace with that. I was fine. Here comes Ellen Armor, when we were here for a conference, we were out to dinner and she said, "You know, our dean is retiring." I said, "Yeah, I heard that. Y'all gonna stop fighting now?" And she said, "Well, we don't fight so much anymore." I said, "Oh, okay."

Emilie Townes: So she said, "Would you be interested in putting your name in?" I cussed her out. I really did. I cussed her out. I had the pottiest mouth one could have in saying no. But Ellen is stubborn and she kept coming back and Laurel worked on me. She said, "You know, you need to explore." And so I did. And then it became a call, in the midst of the search process. I thought, "Aw man." Because I wasn't unhappy at Yale and I enjoyed my colleagues at Yale very much, even the ones I disagreed with theologically. But this became a call. So here I am.

Monique M.: And as alums, we're very glad, happy glad, as they say in my tradition, that you are here. I read in one of the interviews you did about taking on the deanship, you were asked what advice you gave to students who were thinking about leadership.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: And you said that you thought it was important that they know who they were and that they work with integrity and consistency with people.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: And it struck me, but I also, as I was thinking about this book project, I'm wondering what that advice is grounded in. Is it a, you used the call language a couple of times.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: Sort of being asked to apply, but then being called in that process, but I also realize that everything one is called to may not also end up with you being appointed to.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: So once you have a sense of who you are in a position or who you are as a person, how do you mate that, marry that with the position itself and being integrous with the position?

Emilie Townes: I have to be able to look myself in the mirror every day and reasonably like what I see there. I was raised to be a Christian woman. I don't often use that language, but that's how I was raised and that means you tell the truth, you do right by yourself and you do righter by people you work with, you recognize that you don't get anywhere in life by yourself and that, for me, I can't think of a single first or a single second or third or any of those that I have achieved all by myself. I have always had people who were engaged in the process with me, guiding me, calling me into account, telling me to back off. I mean, you just ... So I think it is that strong Christian upbringing. You tell the truth. That's one of the reasons why the current occupant of the White House drives me crazy. How do he just bold face lies. So that's really what is the foundation, is really, really trying to live out, in my life and in my work, how one models and lives a Christian life.

Monique M.: Wow. You spoke somewhere about your feeling compelled as a citizen to be an active woman of faith.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: To speak on such issues, moral issues in public.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: Does this sense of what you define as being a Christian woman, is that what motivates your public witness? Or where would you find the courage? Where do you seek the courage to be public about your convictions?

Emilie Townes: Yeah. I think it is this Christian witness that does it. And to be clear about when should I be speaking because some people, they've got something to say about everything. I don't have that kind of confidence. I have to actually have thought about it a good bit and feel that I have something to contribute to the public dialogue. I was raised by English teachers who did not believe that learned language had a uh or ers in it. You have to be able to speak with clarity, precision, and power and you don't get up there and go, "Uh, Uh er, or hm." Unless the hm is for emphasis about something. So yeah, I do. And I may not always talk about everything I'm thinking about, but when I think I have something to say or a viewpoint to suggest, then I will.

Monique M.: Do you view your scholarship as a form of activism?

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique M.: And if not, what do you see it as?

Emilie Townes: No, it is. I view the way I act as a academic dean, or well even as an academic dean and certainly now as a dean, is a form of activism. My job is to bring a whole bunch of people along with me in this journey, not just faculty, and not just students, and not just staff, but all three of those groups. And if they've got some kin, they can come along too, but I really do understand that the work of me as a dean, I won't lay this on any of my other colleagues here at this university or anywhere, my work as a dean is to open up doors. As many doors and windows as I can for folks to be able to have their say. When Jim Cone was dying and it was clear he was not going to bounce back this time, early last month, he was talking to folks at Union and one of the last things he said to them was, "I've had my say." I want to create a structure and opportunities for people to be able to say that about their lives and their witness and I'd like to have my say too, but I'm never prouder than when I watch many of our students at commencement because I know they're going to go out and change some part of the world.

Emilie Townes: Or my PhD students, I know they're going to make an impact on the academy. That, to me, is activism. And they can do things I can't, so we have a bigger impact.

Monique M.: Talk to be a bit about your work in Brazil and how that fits into what you were just talking about and other aspects of your journey.

Emilie Townes: Well, I was reluctant to go to Brazil at first. When I was being asked by Peter Nash, who was at that point a Lutheran Missionary in Brazil appointed to the Lutheran seminary in Sao Leopoldo, in the south of Brazil, he knew of a group of

Afro-Brazilian women in the north, who were interested in Womanist thought and really wanted someone to come and talk to it. Somehow they had translated some of my work for them and they wanted it to be me and I kept saying to Peter, "I don't know Spanish." He said, "It's Portuguese." And I said, "That proves my point. I don't even know what language they speak. This is not ... I'm not going down there as a colonizer. No." So finally, he agreed to be my interpreter for a short visit. The airport was under reconstruction and so we got off the plane, we walked down the gangplank onto the ground, the tarmac, and when I hit that bottom step, I thought, "Oh I've come home."

Emilie Townes: I thought that was strange. Why would I be coming home to Brazil? Well, what turned out was this was a group of people that was just a close connection, almost immediately, and so I agreed that I would come down every summer and teach a class because they were trying to get accredited by the government and they needed PhDs teaching. And I did that for seven or eight years, and in the process, tried to get other folks to come down with me. So at one point, a small delegation of Womanists went with me. I did a couple of travel seminars; one students from Union and one from students at Yale. I'm trying to get a conversation going around North and South Black Diaspora in the West, and that's finally taken off with the work that Rosetta Ross is doing now with the Daughters of Africa Project.

Emilie Townes: And so I can just say, "Thank you and my work is done here."

Monique M.: So in our fifteen minutes left, I'm gonna try to put together seven questions.

Emilie Townes: Okay.

Monique M.: So excuse them if they are disparate and nonsensical, but they actually serve a purpose for me.

Emilie Townes: Okay.

Monique M.: So I'm interested in identity formation and how we hold various identities at all times and how those identities impact our activism and motivate our activism. So for you, which identities push you forward in what you say yes to? For example, when you said you were going to wait five years and Katie Cannon said, "There are only five of us. Why are you waiting?"

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: That's a Black woman identity being pushed forward.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: We need Black women in religion. So you said yes to that.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: Where are there other moments and what pushes you in those moments?

Emilie Townes: Now, as I think about invitations that come in, and now it's not just, "Would you come as a Black woman or an angry Black woman or Black anything." The last invitation that came in, recently was, "Would you come and talk about pedagogy?" Just that flat. One, is it something I'm interested in? And that actually is the big one. "Is this something I'm interested in talking about and think I have something to say worth people listening to?" And now that the invitations are no longer sort of a mono-focused one because I've talked about enough different topics, it's spreading itself out, thank God. It's really much more, "Is this something I think is going to feed me as much as I'm going to be trying to feed other people?" I need it to be reciprocal because I am, by nature, shy and an introvert. I can be an extrovert when I have to be, but it comes at a lot of energy expense and so if I'm going to expend that kind of energy, I want it to count as much for others and for me as possible.

Emilie Townes: I do think it needs to be a reciprocal relationship.

Monique M.: Keeping with the identity question, right now I'm tagging the book sort something on Black, lesbian identity and I have a section in this never ending intro where I'm trying to land a plane of what it is I want this book to do.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: About the various categories, for some same-gender loving works, for lesbian works, for some ... I did an interview last week with Cari Jackson.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: And Cari says she identifies as someone who never felt a call to maleness.

Emilie Townes: That sounds like Cari.

Monique M.: And I said, "Okay. That's a new one. That'll be its own chapter. I don't know how many are going to fall into that category." What identities speak to you?

Emilie Townes: Black lesbian. I'm old school. What I do find freeing is the different ways that folks now are naming themselves. And although none of them really speak to me as something I would want to use for myself, I really, really like the fact that folks are saying, "You know, this black body has a lot going on in it and don't try and put it in a box because you can't capture magic."

Monique M.: As activist, as an intellectual, as a spiritual practitioner, where do you go for nourishment? What sustains you?

Emilie Townes: Almost every morning, I spend time in meditation. When it's the Fall, Winter, and early Spring months, I tend to wake up around five and it's still dark out and so I start my day in darkness. I'm the first one up almost every morning in the house and so it's quiet. I go out into the family room, we have a bank of windows that look west. And I sit there in meditation and silence and watch the day break and that centers me. That nourishes me and when I don't do that, I can tell it. It's like, as I said just recently at a conference, "I have to do that so I don't snap somebody's face off during the day" Because people were, "Oh!" But I said, "No, I'm serious. How many of us have been tempted?" And they were like, "Oh yeah. That is a problem." That sustains me. That's the most regular thing I do that sustains me.

Monique M.: Is that new?

Emilie Townes: No.

Monique M.: It ain't a lot of sunshine in New England.

Emilie Townes: No, that is new. Although, I had a version of it, kind of, in New England because my condo was on the water in the Sound and so I would get up and I would start working at my desk and water would be over here and I could watch the sun rise and that was a very comforting way, there, to start the day. But this is something I started really consciously doing here. Because the job is demanding. I need to get it together.

Monique M.: Yeah. What brings you fulfillment or joy or happiness? Whatever phrase works.

Emilie Townes: Laughing and telling stories with my family, both biological and extended. I love nothing better than sitting, listening to folks, and retelling stories. And some of them are a little made up, but it don't matter. But the laughter and the joy and the wordplay, I love it. Love it. Absolutely love it.

Monique M.: So we are so excited, so thrilled that you have accepted another appointment.

Emilie Townes: Mm-hmm.

Monique M.: So that means retirement is still a little ways away.

Emilie Townes: It is a little ways away.

Monique M.: I read that when you retire, it's going to be on Martha's Vineyard.

Emilie Townes: It will.

Monique M.: So what does retirement look like for a thinking scholar, a thinking preacher?

Emilie Townes: That means I will get at the book projects that have been on hold for a little, since 2008.

Monique M.: So you've got ten year project too? I don't feel as bad?

Emilie Townes: I don't know. I haven't had enough time to sit. And I know people want me to do a follow up to The Cultural Production of Evil. I don't know if that's my next move. I've got a lot of ... I'm able to read now in the summer because I've carved out that time, in June and July, to do that. So we'll have to see. I don't know yet.

Monique M.: Unless you want to tell me anything else, those are the, for the grand scheme, all the questions I have.

Emilie Townes: Okay. Sounds good to me.

Monique M.: Thank you so much.

Emilie Townes: You're welcome.

Monique M.: On record and in person for the time and for journeying with me.