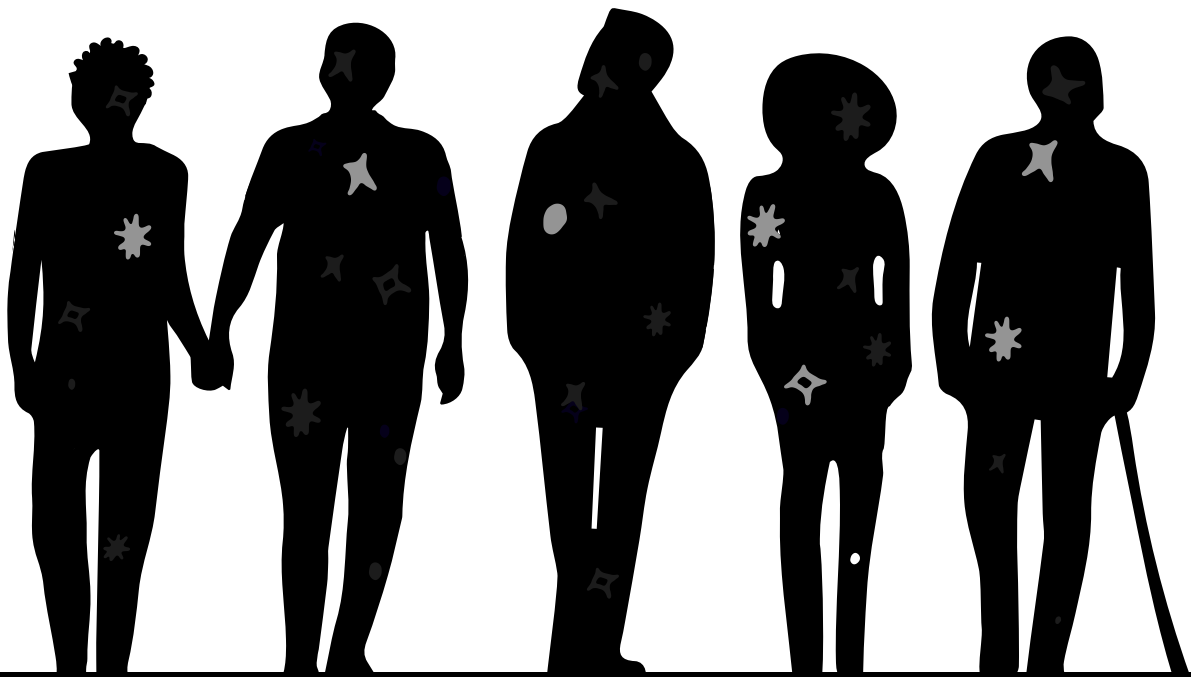


THE COSMIC WE

Consecrating Chaos
with Rev. Otis Moss III

hosted by:
Dr. Barbara Holmes and Dr. Donald Bryant



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

- Otis Moss III: Chaos is a part of nature. Entropy is a part of the cosmos. And there is this idea that chaos functions in a way outside of any laws, that even chaos must bow down to the laws of the cosmos. And it is our responsibility. You may not be able to control the chaos, but you can harness and learn the laws to be able to navigate the chaos.
- Barbara Holmes: This podcast explores a mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.
- Donny Bryant: We are trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country, or kinship through science, mysticism, spirituality, and the creative arts. I'm Donny Bryant.
- Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes, and this is The Cosmic We. Listeners, we have a treat for you today. We have the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, a native of Cleveland, Ohio. Dr. Moss is an honors graduate of Morehouse College. He earned a Master of Divinity from Yale Divinity School and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Chicago Theological Seminary. He's the author of *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair*, published in 2015. And most recently, *Dancing in the Darkness: Spiritual Lessons for Thriving in Turbulent Times*. Dr. Moss is part of a new generation of ministers committed to preaching a prophetic message of love and justice, which he believes are inseparable companions that form the foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Welcome, Dr. Moss. Do you mind if I called you Pastor Moss?
- Otis Moss III: Whatever you choose is fine with me, Dr. Barbara Holmes. I'm a part of the fan club of the Barbara Holmes Fan Club. I think I'm the secretary.
- Barbara Holmes: It's a mutual society. I grew up in UCC, a child in New Haven, Connecticut. So Trinity is and was the mothership for us growing up in New England. So what was it like taking over a flagship church like Trinity from the iconic pastor, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright?
- Otis Moss III: It was an extraordinarily unique, powerful, beautiful, challenging experience. All of the above, every aspect of that. And so it was so many wonderful lessons. And people who poured wisdom into myself and my wife and to my children, became prayer partners, I can't say enough about all of the unique aspects of making the transition to Chicago.
- Barbara Holmes: Maybe my memory fails me. But you were assuming leadership at Trinity when the press was castigating Rev. Wright in an effort to derail the Obama presidency. Am I right about that?
- Otis Moss III: That's correct. Actually, I took over... The story is Dr. Wright had already retired and I was working out at what was called Ballys then. I think it's LAFitness now. They bought it out. And I was doing a warm down and someone tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Hey, Rev." I said, "Hey, man. How are you doing?" And he pointed at the television, and he said, "Is that your church there?" And I looked up and there was Sean Hannity just going in on Dr. Wright and on Trinity, and I said, "I got to go."
- Barbara Holmes: That's a good time to get early.

- Otis Moss III: Yeah, had to leave. The workout was done, finished abruptly. And that was the beginning. That was the start of my ministry. I was serving as senior pastor. And during that time period, Dr. Wright was retired and was not present a good portion of that time.
- Barbara Holmes: Part of the issue at the time was that the press had no idea what the Black church did. Nobody in America except other Black folk knew what Black people did in church on Sunday morning, and it's called prophetic preaching. What is prophetic preaching, Dr. Moss?
- Otis Moss III: Prophetic preaching is facing tragedy without falling into despair and being able to communicate the tragic nature of the human experience, but yet point to an eschatological hope. And the prophets were consistently doing that. They were calling out those who were in power and how they were treating those who were marginalized, who were poor, who were the visible invisible people of Israel. And the Black church tradition always had a wing, a remnant of prophetic preaching, whether you are talking about the prophetic communication that comes from [inaudible 00:06:09] and Ida B. Wells, or Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, or Rev. Ransom, Frederick Douglass. I mean, the list goes on, that remnant. And then there was always a remnant that was more concerned with the personal and not necessarily the prophetic. And then there were those who were concerned with the personal, prophetic, and the pastoral. And Trinity, and Dr. Wright in particular was one who though was lifted up as prophetic, but was also deaf in his communication along the personal, the prophetic, and the pastoral.
- Barbara Holmes: I was just telling Donny that your preaching styles are pretty similar. Dr. Donny and I met in Minneapolis because he was one of my pastors. And I love the prophetic tuned in with the scholarship, tuned in with just calling you back to your culture and what's real about your life. I mean, if that only happens once a week, that's how I get through the rest of the week.
- Donny Bryant: Pastor Moss, I got to tell you, we're close in age, but you've been a mentor from afar. I've always appreciated your perspective, your passion, even your approach to the vocation. But as even as a man, just how you move and shake within not only the community, but with your family. So from afar, I've always appreciated how you lived out your faith. But before you, I met your father in seminary, your dad, actually. When I was at Luther Seminary, he came and he preached at chapel there.
- Otis Moss III: I remember when he... That was probably about 15 years ago?
- Donny Bryant: Well, about 10. It had to be about 2015.
- Otis Moss III: I remember when he was... That was the first time I think he had spoken there. I remember he had mentioned that he was going... He was very excited that he was going to have the opportunity to go to Luther to speak.
- Donny Bryant: For me, to meet your father and what he has accomplished and what he stood for in the civil rights movement. So I would just like you to share from your perspective as a son of, to me, a legend, how was that growing up in the home with your mom and

dad.

Otis Moss III: It was extraordinary. I will just say that flat out. Pop and I are extremely close. Mom and I are extremely close. But what I've always admired about my parents and admired about my father as a man is he never made being a pastor and a father an oxymoron, where there are so many people in ministry who have a public ministry and they have a private hell at home. That was not the case for my father. My father was very clear. He loves his partner and his wife, my mama, he loves his children, and he has no problem speaking that love privately or publicly. That's just the person he is. I was joking with my wife, I said, "Dad can affirm an ant. If an ant is not doing well, he says, 'Let me talk to you, and let me let you know it's going to be all right.'" I mean, he'll make an ant feel good. And that was like, "I feel better now. I can make it across the street."

He has that ability and it is inherently who he is. It is his depth of spirituality, deeply influenced by Howard Thurman, but he will tell you the Southern Africanized spirituality that sees other people as family. So he believes in that village idea. So if he meets you, he's talking to you, he's not just talking to you. He feels as if he just connected with someone who's a part of his family, and it's his responsibility if you share with him that he wants to see you soar. So his approach is... I've never seen anyone who gets so elated about other people's success. He adores witnessing, especially younger people do well. It makes his chest swell. He's just excited about it. But he grew up in the kind of Black community in Georgia where they celebrated his success. So he's passing on that tradition.

Barbara Holmes: And you've been that kind of father to your children. I can tell that by reading your new book, *Dancing in the Dark*. I mean, I know you've told this story a number of times, but I know my listeners want to hear about where the title of your book comes from.

Otis Moss III: Well, I'm so glad that you asked that question. The title comes from my daughter, Makayla, who is now 19. And when she was about five at the time, we were new to Chicago, and it was the beginning of what we called the gauntlet. And the gauntlet was the media gauntlet where we had 40 outlets that would show up to the church every single Sunday looking for some type of quote. We had protesters outside of the church who were these conservative right wing, no nice way to say it, nut jobs-

Barbara Holmes: Okay.

Otis Moss III: ... outside of the church. And then we started getting the death threats. So the death threats came written, they came by email, they came on the phone. The phones were filled up one day on the voicemail of all these people who were making claims of what they were going to do to the church, what they were going to do to Dr. Wright, what they were going to do to me, what they're going to do to my family. And it was in the midst of all this where my own spirit is struggling, trying to remain grounded in the midst of all this external

noise, external hate, and hearing the sounds of people who essentially said, “We’re coming to get you.” And I had gotten so paranoid that it was very difficult to sleep, extremely difficult. I mean, I’d walk down the street and I’m always, if I went running or something of that nature, I’m wondering, “Is this car coming by, is this it? Is the person running toward me, my gosh, is this it?” I was consistently prepared to defend myself, and that is no way to live.

We’re trying to get some sleep. I heard some noise one evening. Monica heard it too, and she’s like, “You need to go check that out.” I was like, “All right.” So I went and grabbed my rod and my staff that comforted me. And my rod and my staff made in Louisville sluggard. And so I’m walking around the house trying to find where this noise came from, and I’m thinking in my mind, “This is it. I will have to defend my family from someone who has been listening to this right-wing conspiracy theory social media stuff that is proliferating about Trinity and about, at the time, Senator Obama who becomes President Obama.

And I hear the noise again, and the noise is coming from my daughter’s room. And so I go into the room and there’s my daughter and it’s 2:00 AM or something like that. And she’s dancing in the middle of her room saying, “Look, daddy, I’m dancing,” and it’s 2:00 AM and I’ve got to go preach in a few hours at church. And I get that fatherly voice, “Baby, you need to go to bed right now.” And she’s like, “No, look, daddy, I’m dancing.” Pigtails are swinging around back and forth. And that’s when as I was about to say something again that the Spirit was very clear, told me to pause and said, “Look at her. Your daughter is dancing in the darkness. The darkness is around her, but it’s not in her.” And that was the moment when I felt the Spirit speaking.

And I went down and I changed my sermon that day, went into my study, scrapped everything, and started writing about that we are called as a people to dance in the darkness. And I wrote until the sun came up, and literally was writing until I got into the pulpit, and told the congregation that we have been called to dance in the darkness. And I said, “Dance. I say dance in the darkness.” And the beautiful thing about the darkness is not that the sun has ever left us, but the earth simply has turned away. And if you keep turning, eventually joy will come in the morning.

Barbara Holmes: Please don’t make me start shouting up in here. I got a lot of Pentecostal in me. I will run.

Otis Moss III: And that was the origin of the book. And the book title was the lesson from a five-year-old, from my daughter teaching me in the midst of fear and anxiety and paranoia. A little five-year-old girl in the middle of the night decided that she was going to dance in the darkness.

Donny Bryant: There’s so many correlations with the book *Dancing in the Darkness* with Dr. Holmes book *Crisis Contemplation*. There’s this scarlet thread. There’s this theme that centers around the contemplative practices that we have within crises. Chapter two, and I love that the chapter title, *Consecrate Your Chaos*.

For those who have not yet read the book, and we really want to encourage our listening audience to get the book, but I would like to ask you to give us the cliff notes, the essence of your perspective around Consecrate Your Chaos. And you framed that chapter with an experience with your children at your house in a paint-splattered basement. So maybe as you introduce this concept of consecrating our chaos, you could invite us into your home.

Otis Moss III:

I really appreciate that because I sat with that idea because chaos is a part of nature. Entropy is a part of the cosmos. And there is this idea that chaos functions in a way outside of any laws that even chaos must bow down to the laws of the cosmos. And it is our responsibility. You may not be able to control the chaos, but you can harness and learn the laws to be able to navigate the chaos. And I use the example of sailors. Sailors say, "The sea is chaotic. There is nothing we can do about it. We can't control the waves, we can't control the undertow, we can't control the storm. There is nothing we can do." But we can build a ship that can then harness the laws that are inherent within the chaos. We know that there's going to be wind, we know that there's going to be a current, and so then therefore the ship must be built in such a way that it can harness.

And the beautiful thing about sailing is sailors never go from point A to point B. They do something known as tacking, going back and forth to you get to point A. So people who want a direct route to their destination can never be sailors because sailors say, "We need to go left in order to get to the right. We got to go right to get to the left." And spiritually, that's what God calls us to do. And my children, again, taught me that. When I came home one day and they came down to the basement, "We want to show you something." Went down in the basement. They had gotten some paints, they tore up the basement, paint everywhere and all over. And I'm like, "Lord, what's this going to cost to fix this?"

And what, again, the Spirit was saying, it's like, "No, it looks like chaos, paint everywhere." But what I missed at first is that they had put their hand prints on the wall and they were attempting to show the art that they were creating. And even the dog had his paw prints. And they were like, "Look, that is for you and mom." I'm like, "Gosh." And then what I saw, it's one of the most beautiful things I'd seen, but I saw the chaos first. I didn't see the art in the chaos. And often we miss out on what God is doing in the midst of moments of chaos.

And the Black tradition is preeminent in being able to look with, in the words of Du Bois, a second sight to witness art in the chaos. That's what Thelonious Monk does. Thelonious Monk, his music sounds chaotic to some people because he's on time and off time at the same time. Beautiful thing about Thelonious Monk. But he says that the music is not in the note. It is in the space and the quiet between the note. And if you listen to the space and the quiet, there'll be a new composition that will be created, and that's what we're called to do.

Barbara Holmes:

That's incredible. I mean, I'm with you with this consecrating chaos, but redirecting rage. How does that happen when our communal rage is so deeply sedimented that it affects our health and every segment of our lives?

Otis Moss III: I had a conversation with someone else, and I wanted to make sure that they understood what I was saying. I wasn't talking anger, I was talking rage. I said, "There's two differences." I said, "We should have anger. We should be angry. We should have righteous indignation. We should be angry if all that has happened to us, but rage is different. Rage means I have no control and I have no power." And Muhammad Ali was the best example of understanding how to redirect rage. So the rumble in the jungle, I think, was he fighting Foreman? I think he was fighting Foreman at the time, and he knew that Foreman was stronger than he was, that if he got hit too many times by Foreman, he's like, "I'm going down. I'm losing." He was faster than Foreman.

So he came up with a strategy, "How will I beat Foreman?" So he said, "One, I've got to tire him out." But Foreman, he had a very good technique. So Muhammad Ali figured out, he said, "If I talk about his mama, he will go into a rage. He will lose his technique, become tired, and I will do a rope-a-dope and knock this man out." Because rage does not allow you to use your technique. Anger does. You can use your technique with anger, but rage says, "I have to take over." You have no control. You have no direction whatsoever. And the colonizer wants Black people in a rage and is deeply disturbed and afraid of our anger. That's why the colonizer doesn't like to hear Malcolm because of his anger, because it's controlled, it's directed, it has passion, and it has a strategy. Rage doesn't. Rage shoots indiscriminately at people who look just like you, because I can't get to the person who calls this. So I'm in a rage, so I'll just find somebody.

And I love what Nipsey Hussle said when he said he realized when he was looking for somebody who did something to one of his crew, he said it dawned on him. He said, "I passed by one brother." He said, "I knew that that brother didn't do. He wasn't involved." He said, "It dawned on me that I was looking for someone who looked like me." He said, "At that moment," he said, "I realized all that," out of his Ethiopian Orthodox tradition that his daddy had been trying to tell him that, "you are fearfully and wonderfully made, and the work that you're involved in now is not going to elevate your community."

Barbara Holmes: And so the contemplative approach, the ability to hold your anger without shifting into rage is a way to survive, to be resilient spiritually. You see this rage, and not just with communities who are oppressed, but those who are part of their oppressing group. I mean, I was reading about the Westboro Baptist Church who came to Trinity and you gave them the chronicles to one-two punch. You sent the choir out before the army. That's an amazing story. You had a choir confront them so that they would not be heard as your people were coming into church.

Otis Moss III: That was an interesting experience, you're bringing that up. The Westboro Baptist Church, their primary focus is to provoke people because they understand their position as being White. They want to surround someone and say these horrific things because they want on camera a person of African descent striking someone White. And they know how that will play. And then they sue you. I mean, that's what they do. They sue you, say, "We got them on camera. We're not going to sue you. You assaulted us." And we got to church and they said, "Westboro Baptist Church." I was like, "Westboro is on the South side of Chicago." I said, "Lord." So a whole lot of stuff

could jump off-

Barbara Holmes: That's right.

Otis Moss III: ... at this point. And so the choir was about to march in. We had a tradition where this choir would march in. And I stopped the choir before they marched in and asked them. I said, "Look, let me tell you all. We got these protesters out here, this Westboro. They're saying horrific things. They're going to say horrific things about you, they say horrific things about Dr. Wright, about your church, about President Obama. They got signs, but there's more of us than there are them. So what I need you to do, I need you to circle around and I just need you to sing so they can't be heard saying what they're trying to say." And we're Chicago. Our folks are like, "Come on, let's do this."

Barbara Holmes: That's right.

Otis Moss III: It's hilarious because it was like some people, they were younger, and then there were some people who were seen as like, "We aren't going to let nobody roll up on our church like this." So they roll out of church in their choir robes, and they surround these protesters. But what they did, which was so brilliant, and it was organic that it happened, I didn't put it in the book. So I'm trying to remember this. 12 or so protesters. What the choir did is they broke off in two smaller groups so that they isolated the protesters. Instead of surrounding them collectively, they surrounded them individually. So they did a divide and conquer move. It was the coolest thing. It was really the Spirit working this thing out.

And so you got like 10 elders around one angry white man singing this little light of mine. He can't get anything out. He's falling off the tree lawn into the street. The bullhorn he had, it stopped working. Somebody's like, "See, it's the Spirit working right now." And they eventually got in their van and they drove away. And then when the choir came back in the church, Lord have mercy, we shouted for all of 45 minutes. I mean, they just couldn't stop because the power sonically of their Spirit-inspired voices chased away that which sought to do damage to our spirits. We were so empowered at that moment.

So here's the second part of the story. They came back months later. And when they came back, I have still to this day don't know who it was, but somebody who works in the city, works in an office somewhere, it might've been somewhat secretary, came across the... They have to apply for permits to do protest. Somebody called over to the church and says, "I can't tell you who I am, but somebody have applied for a permit to come over there and mess with your church. I'm just telling you, I'm keeping this message so you all know. All right, I love Trinity. I don't go, but I love what you all do."

Barbara Holmes: Right.

Otis Moss III: And so we had then time to prepare. So I met with the men of the church and I said, "Hey, Westboro's coming back. So we're going to be prepared this time. We're not going to have the choir, we're going to have the brothers. I want you to surround the

church from every parking lot point, from the sidewalk. I want brothers on both sides of the sidewalk. So you won't be greeted by the horrific signs and the sounds. You're going to be greeted by proud Black men." It was really quite funny Dr. Holmes, I got to tell you this. It was really hilarious. And I'm not going to call their names because I know who they are. Several of our elders, they said, "I like this. All these handsome men." They walked out of the church, went in one door, and they came back out another door so they could just do it again. They kept doing circles. It was the funniest thing.

But when the men came in, the men stayed out of church. It was almost toward the end of church. They came in roughly about the altar call time. And when the men came into church from outside, the church exploded. I've never experienced anything like that. In my life, I don't think I'll ever experienced it again to witness a Pentecostal moment when all these Black men who had been standing guard over the village and they came into church. You're talking about shouting. And we just had them come to the altar. And so it was like 300 men just filled up at the altar. And I don't think I preached that day. I don't think I did. That was the sermon, men standing around the village and protecting the church.

Donny Bryant: It is really amazing when the Spirit takes control, right? It's amazing where... I mean, but the wisdom that was used in the beginning to engineer this approach, I think this is a really good transition to one of the chapters, later chapters in the book where you entitled it Practicing Prophetic Grief. There's some wisdom in the practice, the plan, the strategy that was implemented there, but it is connected to a deeply rooted grief. It is connected to societal injustices, right? As you already alluded to earlier. You lead up this chapter with a quote from Gandhi where he says, "Forgiveness is a virtue of the brave." That could have went down a lot of different ways. I mean, the encounter, the engagement, right? I mean, I don't know if I would've had the patience and the wisdom that you had in that moment, pastorally speaking.

Otis Moss III: There's a funny little story in reference to that. I have to say this, Rev. Bryant. There are other people in our neighborhood who were not educated on the strategies of non-violence. Let me just put it that way. And it was very interesting that people in the community, they never step up to Trinity, never came into church or whatnot, but they were real clear. They said, "These White folk are not going to terrorize our church." I mean, they're not members, but they made it real clear. I just heard what happened in the street. They chased them out of the neighborhood because some of the brothers in the neighborhood was like, "You're not going to roll up over here and terrorize our church. We got something for you." And from my understanding, they moved rather quickly in their rented vehicle after we were done.

Donny Bryant: There's a lot of wisdom, there's a lot of layers in the concept of practicing prophetic grief. Can you articulate a little bit more about just where you were going with this chapter? I mean, it is connected to a certain courage and a certain bravery, right? From the perspective of being able to practice this. But what do you mean when you say practice prophetic grief? And what do we take away from this principle, this lesson?

Otis Moss III: Well, it begins with learning how to grieve in a very different way. My father says,

“There is pathetic grief,” grief that just sits in the moment and sees and views the world from the perspective of, “I’m only a victim.” And then there is prophetic grief, just like the prophets who mourn, but say, “We are about to change this thing. We’ve been damaged, we’ve been harmed. We in no way are going to sweep under the table or under the rug the harm that has happened, but we will build a better world.” And it connects. And I really think that we need a different word than forgiveness because forgiveness has been weaponized on so many levels of asking Black people to forgive without any context work in all of this. And I used the situation at Emanuel AME to talk about... We misinterpret when people say, “I forgive.” We assume it’s forgive, forget kumbaya, all of that. No. And what they’re really saying is, “I refuse to allow you to define and hold a place in my soul. I refuse to allow you the thought of you to define me completely.”

And when you do restoration work, you find that that is the position that people move through when they talk about forgiveness. This is prophetic grief. I’m grieving, but it’s also prophetic forgiveness. You got to take some responsibility and there’s got to be accountability. And even if you don’t, I’m still not going to allow you to define who I am. I’m not sitting in this space every day. I’m scarred, but guess what? I’m going to put a balm on this and I’m going to keep moving, but I’m not going to forget.

There’s this foolish statement, forgive and forget, which one is not biblical, it’s terrible theology, and it does not exist in human nature. You cannot forgive and forget. You remember. That is what our indigenous community in America has been doing. It said, “No, I’m going to remember what Manifest Destiny did to me.” So what the Jewish community does, “I remember what the Holocaust was and what it did.” That’s what South Africa says, “I remember Nelson Mandela was, ‘I believe in forgiveness, but I’m going to remember what P. W. Botha did.’” And there’s going to be responsibility and there’s going to be a truth and reconciliation committee because the only way that there can be any reconciliation is you got to speak some truth and speak to the injury. So the church and those who claim to be preachers must root forgiveness, not in a Westernized weaponized forgiveness, but in a rich, biblical Africanized idea, forgiveness that demands accountability, it demands restoration, it demands reparations. That kind of forgiveness.

Barbara Holmes: That’s very powerful because there’s often confusion between what the martyred theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls cheap grace and mercy. And when the family slain by Dylann Roof forgave him almost immediately after the incident, it was difficult to tell the difference because it came so quickly after the murders. Can you help us to just understand a little bit the difference between cheap grace and mercy?

Otis Moss III: This idea of cheap grace that Bonhoeffer does so beautifully that it requires nothing. To borrow from the writer, there is no pound of flesh that is connected to it. There are no scars. It’s the grace that allows you to go to the plastic surgeon so no one can see your scars. But then there is the mercy that carries the scars. I’m reminded of... What’s the gentleman’s name out in California? I can’t think of his name. But he works with people who have been street organizations and gang members. And they have a tattoo removal program for people who were involved in the life and were involved in injuring other people. And these tattoo removal programs, they can never fully

remove the tattoo. There's always a remnant that reminds of what they were involved in. And many of them say, "I don't want the scar removed because I need to be held accountable for what I did. Every time I look in the mirror, I need to know that what was a teardrop on my right eye now is a scar that looks like a permanent tear for the life that I took."

But the mercy says, "I deserved something, but I didn't receive it. And in the process, I have been restored so that I can be a part of an intervention unit so that someone will not only repeat, but I will not birth someone like myself." That's a powerful thing that someone says, "I don't want to birth someone like myself. I want to birth someone who's like the restored self, not the person I was before this restoration. And even in the process, even though I've been restored, I'm still working this thing out because my humanity keeps bumping into God's divinity. And when I hold the divinity, my humanity still corrupts that which is divine. But because it's divine, it still has beauty in the midst of the ashes that I'm holding in my hand."

Barbara Holmes: That's just beautiful. Pastor, you say that our deliverance comes when we can listen, that each needs to hear the cry of the other, each needs to respond, not to surface accusations of despair, but to the underlying source of pain. Listening of this kind, this liberation, listening turns dialogue into spiritual practice. Sounds like you're a contemplative pastor. Can you describe this practice for our listeners, liberation listening?

Otis Moss III: Yes. I think that that is the key factor in reference to the development of our spirituality. There is a preacher, Fred Craddock once said that when he first started out, he wanted to be a great preacher. And then he said, "I wanted to be a great pastor." And to borrow from Gardner Taylor, as he pitched his tent closer to the river Jordan, he just said, "I just want to be a good Christian." He said his evolution, it changed over time. And Howard Thurman talks about the power of listening, the power of silence.

When I was at Morehouse, a person by the name of Roswell Jackson, who knew Howard Thurman who was on faculty with Dr. Jackson, and I remember when we were asking him one day. I was like, "You knew Howard Thurman. Tell us about Dr. Thurman." And Dr. Jackson was a character, number one, great gentleman, but he was funny. And he said, he had this rough voice, "Hey, look at that tree out there. I saw Dr. Thurman one day. He was staring at the tree for about 30 minutes. He got more sermons out that tree than the rest of you all will have the next 10 years." But he talked about he would spend time listening, time in silence. We were birthed in this quiet, and we will return to this quiet. That's what Thelonious Monk talked about, as I mentioned earlier, is that you can't create unless there's the quiet and the space between the notes. That's what makes music. It's the quiet that makes the music, not the sound. And we forget that. We think it's the sound, but your brain is computing the silence to be able to understand the sound.

Donny Bryant: It's the Selah in the Psalms. It's the pause in between.

Otis Moss III: Yes, it's the pause, it's the Selah. That is the moment. And we are called to listen.

Let me put it this way. I did a lecture for the Festival of Homiletics, done a couple of them, but I did these two, a series talked about being homiletical DJs. And one was use, obviously, the imagery of DJ, but I also use the metaphor for those who are movie nerds talking about Star Wars. If you don't know anything about Star Wars, it's essentially about an empire and a bunch of Jedis who are rebels. That's all you need to know. That's the introduction. You got that, you pretty much got the storyline. And I was saying, as preachers, the majority of us, we think we're Jedis, but we are really evangelists for the empire, and we have to learn to remove the empire-ness from us. And that can only happen when we choose to listen.

And in the second lecture, I talked about a person by the name of J Dilla, who's my favorite producer, hip-hop artist and whatnot. And J Dilla was from Detroit and studied music and whatnot. And J Dilla, his beat machine is in the Smithsonian because he changed music. So in the last 25 years, pretty much what you listen to as music now has been defined by this young man who died at 36. And he had this debilitating disease, and it took his life eventually, but he changed the way music was done because he listened to old-school stuff. And this is what Dilla did. Dilla says that the majority of the world claps on two and four, but the West claps on one and three. And he said, "It's my job to be able to find spaces in between the two and the four and spaces between the one and the three so that the spiritual thread can be heard throughout the music. And this is just absolutely this brilliant idea.

And so he is listening to all this different type of music, Indian, African soul, blues, and he's a hip-hop producer. He's producing it, but he's creating this music borrowing, and it was in the silence. What he would do is he would spend time in silence so he could understand the music. He was a contemplative producer, and that's why he was extraordinary. And every musician, every artist who we have great respect for, they're contemplatives. Gardner Taylor, contemplative. Vernon Jordan, contemplative. Martin Luther King Jr., contemplative. Howard Thurman, contemplative. Frederick Douglass, contemplative. If you go to Sojourner Truth, contemplative. [inaudible 00:46:37], contemplative. Fannie Lou Hamer, contemplative. They had a deep practice of listening in the quietness, and they could hear the Spirit moving in spaces that other people could not.

Barbara Holmes: Pastor, you began and closed your book with a letter you had written to your son. I think you published it in Sojourners. And some of your liberal friends thought you were out of touch with all the progress that we've made in race relations. So why do you think there's such a disparity between the reality of Black life and liberal presumptions of progress?

Otis Moss III: Because liberals live within the mythos of the empire because to recognize Black pain, suffering and anger means to destroy the myth, privilege, and narrative that you've been living all of your life. And that's what liberals do. And the interesting thing about conservatives, the one thing I have to... They get on my nerves, can't stand them. But on one level, the conservative is, at least, honest to say that, "I don't want to leave this myth." That's why I want to get rid of books by Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison because I'm terrified, I'm telling you. It's not American. They're telling us, "I don't want to leave this myth."

And if I may borrow from the movie *The Matrix*, they like living in the matrix and they don't want to leave the matrix. And there's some of us who want to leave the matrix, we want to blow up the matrix because we are tired of living a particular myth created by someone else. And that's really the challenge that liberals and conservatives are these Western empire creations that are two sides of the same coin, because they have an investment in a system that gives them power and privilege.

Barbara Holmes: Pastor, we're going to close out. And, Donny, unless you have something pressing, I want to ask Pastor Moss, where does your hope lie?

Otis Moss III: My hope rests in the power of the spirit. My hope rests in, and this may sound strange, but in being Black. And why do I say that? Is because as I have delved more into our history, it has absolutely blown me away and causes me to shout what our people are able to do when not only were their backs against the wall, but they were considered to be not human and a little threat to the American project. Frederick Douglass fascinates me, this self-taught person who becomes the greatest articulator in reference to abolition. The story goes that Frederick Douglass used to have pieces of bread that he would give to some of the Irish children he played with in and around the Baltimore area and say, "I'll give you some bread if you tell me what that word is." I mean, that's power right there. Or Robert Smalls who steals a Confederate warship with his wife and 11 other Africans and gives it to Abraham Lincoln. That's a bad mother... right there.

Barbara Holmes: That's right.

Otis Moss III: I mean, it's unbelievable. And the commonality with all of these individuals is that I am... And Howard Thurman says this so beautifully. He says that something happens when people of African descent recognize that God loved them and they are loved by God, and that becomes a central piece of their theology. And all these people that I've mentioned, they recognize that, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." When that becomes the crux of your theology, philosophy, all of that, something happens that is utterly extraordinary, that cannot be contained in the human vocabulary and cannot be written adequately by poets, framed by people who write prose, painted by those who are artists, are played with the right chords by people who are musicians. That gives me hope. The artist gives me hope.

And the artist is not just the one who paints, but is the one who preaches, is the one who writes, the one who teaches, the one who loves, the one who raises children, the one who designs clothes, the one who hugs you and is 89 years old and says, "Baby, I believe in you." That's the artist, the one who can change the way you feel by making some homemade biscuits. And when you smell it, all of a sudden your depression leaves and joy shows up. That's the artist. Black artistry is something that we need to study because it's connected to Black resilience and also to Black empowerment and thriving. We don't just survive. We have done things that we've learned how to thrive. And that, to me, gives me hope.

Barbara Holmes: Thank you, Dr. Moss. This has been a wonderful conversation.

Otis Moss III: It has been my joy. And I've been looking forward to this. I've been so excited be on this podcast.

Donny Bryant: Thanks for listening to this episode. I'd like to leave you with a reflection from our conversation with Dr. Otis Moss III, affectionately known as OM III. One of the primary themes that came from our conversation is this theme of consecrating chaos. This theme is explored in Dr. Moss's book, *Dancing in the Darkness*, where he focuses on navigating challenges and finding meaning in seemingly chaotic situations. He uses the analogy of sailing to illustrate how we can learn to harness the inherent laws within chaos and build resilience. Two subtexts that come from this theme of consecrated chaos is inter-grounding and finding joy. Dr. Moss emphasizes staying grounded in spirituality. He encourages us to find practices or routines that bring stability and inner peace amid life's difficulties. With finding joy, he encourages us to identify small day-to-day areas that spark joy and cultivate those sources of joy as anchors of resilience and strength. Going forward, when things feel chaotic, what practices or perspectives help you to find meaning and purpose? Consider journaling, spending time in nature, or even engage in creative expression as ways to process and transcend challenging experiences. Thanks for listening.