



Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove stands along Highway 15-501 in Durham, North Carolina, to protest a city ordinance (since rescinded) that prohibited begging on highway medians.

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The Sun Interview

Love Thy Neighbor

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove On Race, Faith, And Resistance

By [Amanda Abrams](#) • [September 2017](#)

A native of rural North Carolina, evangelical minister Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove tries to live by what he believes to be the Bible's essential message: Love your neighbors. Take care of the poor. Be with those who are suffering. He has been active in fighting the death penalty, supporting undocumented farmworkers, and advocating for the homeless. In 2013 he joined other local ministers in protesting an ordinance that restricted panhandling in Durham, North Carolina. But Wilson-Hartgrove, who is white, is perhaps best known for

his collaboration with Rev. William Barber, president of the North Carolina State Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Along with other clergy and social-justice activists, Wilson-Hartgrove helped Barber organize a series of protests called Moral Mondays in North Carolina's capital, Raleigh, following the state legislature's sharp turn to the right in 2012. They also coauthored a book titled The Third Reconstruction: Moral Mondays, Fusion Politics, and the Rise of a New Justice Movement.

At the age of thirty-six Wilson-Hartgrove has written or cowritten more than ten books, including To Baghdad and Beyond, which describes a trip he and his wife, Leah, took to Iraq in 2003, during the lead-up to the Iraq War. They traveled with a group from Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), a nonprofit that sends people into areas of conflict to discourage violence and document human-rights abuses. After returning to the United States, the couple settled in Durham, buying a house in the historically black neighborhood of Walltown and worshiping at the historically black St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, where Wilson-Hartgrove is now an associate minister.

The couple didn't just make their own home in Walltown. They started a Christian hospitality house there, a place where they could share resources with the community and open their doors to those in need. They called it Rutba House, inspired by an act of radical hospitality they'd witnessed in Rutba, Iraq: three American CPT members were badly injured in an accident, and an Iraqi doctor saved their lives even though his hospital had been struck by U.S. bombs just three days earlier.

Rutba House is not a shelter. Some of its residents are formerly homeless or struggling financially; others are simply seeking to live in an intentional Christian community. There is no hierarchy of helper and helped. Everyone — including Jonathan and Leah — is expected to pitch in with domestic duties and join the group for daily prayers and meals. It's "hospitality as resistance," Wilson-Hartgrove says, a way of breaking down the economic stratifications of American life. To find out more, visit jonathanwilsonhartgrove.com.

This interview began in late November 2016, shortly after Donald Trump had been elected president. Wilson-Hartgrove was far less surprised than I was by the outcome and proceeded to give an analysis of electoral politics that incorporated slavery, evangelicalism, the civil-rights movement, and Republican strategies. We spoke again on a spring morning this past April on the screened porch at Rutba House. Tall and dark, Wilson-Hartgrove speaks with a North Carolina accent and displays a firm grasp of policy, history, and social change. As a progressive evangelical he straddles two worlds but seems able to nimbly navigate both.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (right) with Rev. William Barber.

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Abrams: You're from Stokes County, North Carolina.

Wilson-Hartgrove: That's right. I grew up in the rural foothills of the state and still have lots of family there. Stokes County used to be a farming community, but agriculture hasn't been the economic base there for a while. The family farms were closely connected to the tobacco companies, whose U.S. manufacturing has shrunk. My grandfather worked on his father's farm until he eventually went to work at the tobacco factory, which is where my dad got his first job. Those were good union jobs, and they're almost all gone now. Many rural parts of the country are dealing with similar instability and uncertainty.

Abrams: I'm assuming a lot of people from your town voted for Donald Trump.

Wilson-Hartgrove: Yes. I think Trump's victory was primarily a backlash against the Obama administration, and race was a big part of it. There was a huge resistance to the fact that we had our first African American president. It's no accident that Trump initially gained traction in politics as an advocate of the "birther" movement, which played to racial fears by denying Obama's citizenship.

Trump also tapped into the anxieties of white, working-class voters, which have followed similar patterns throughout U.S. history. When I was in junior high school, I had to do a research project on the Civil War. This was the early 1990s, 125 years after the war. Nevertheless I was able to find people in the community who still had letters written by family members who'd fought for the Confederacy with great conviction, though none of them were from families who owned slaves. They were mostly poor white farmers who were ready to give their lives for the sake of a plantation economy that didn't benefit them. Their motive was the myth of racial superiority that had been sold to them.

That continues to be a huge part of the Republicans' so-called Southern strategy. Donald Trump's campaign has been heralded as a phenomenon the likes of which we've never seen, but it was very similar to George Wallace's campaign for president in 1968, in which Wallace promised to give white Southerners "their" country back. Trump, too, promised to restore whites' sense of economic well-being by taking it back from the people who've supposedly stolen it from them — in this case, Mexicans. It's divide-and-conquer politics.

Abrams: So you weren't surprised by the election results?

Wilson-Hartgrove: I was saddened. I had thought it might be possible, because of the demographic shifts in the country, for Clinton to win. But ultimately, no, I wasn't surprised.

I visited my hometown two weeks before the election, and I didn't see a single Clinton/Kaine sign anywhere in the county. But I also didn't see many Trump signs, even in yards that usually would have had a sign for the Republican candidate. Shame may have kept some people from putting up a Trump sign. There was a conversation in the local church community about whether Christians could support someone who was so brazenly dismissive

of morality. Evangelicals may have certain political leanings, but at the very least I think they would all agree that greed, hubris, and abuse of women are immoral. In the voting booth, though, they voted their party over their conscience.

Part of my own journey has been trying to understand what it means to inherit both this history of race in the South and the tradition of Jesus. I mean, I was raised in the Southern Baptist Church. The media would categorize me as a white evangelical. This election is a sobering take on how white evangelicals answered the question of which is more important: their whiteness or their faith. For a majority of that group, whiteness — particularly the way whiteness is expressed through political loyalty — proved to be more important.

A vast majority of Trump voters say they follow Jesus, and a vast majority of them are white. Most black evangelicals didn't vote for him. Most Latino evangelicals didn't vote for him. But 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump.

Abrams: For a lot of evangelicals, wasn't the election also about abortion and the Supreme Court?

Wilson-Hartgrove: I think Christian conservatives sincerely believe that they're voting to defend the unborn and that their concern is real. I know these people. But they're manipulated in the same way that those young Civil War soldiers who wrote those very sincere letters home were manipulated into fighting a war that didn't benefit them or their families and was fundamentally about maintaining slavery.

Evangelicals have been led to believe that when they vote for their whiteness, they're actually voting for something more noble. Political strategist Kevin Phillips, the original architect of the Southern strategy, taught that you can always win if you know who people hate. But Republicans learned from George Wallace's presidential campaign that you can't openly appeal to hate and fear. You need to give people positive reasons to vote their fears. Defense of marriage and defense of the unborn have been the rallying cries that the so-called religious Right has used to make people feel righteous for voting their fears.

Abrams: The word *evangelical* means "conservative" to a lot of people, and to many on the Left it also means "closed-minded." Reading your books, I realized that to adhere strictly to Jesus's teachings is actually radical. Why do you think it's so rare for Christians to do that?

Wilson-Hartgrove: I've spent my life wrestling with this. It seems obvious to me that Jesus stands for love and justice. In all four Gospels he is in conflict with the religious leaders of his day, who were willing to back unjust regimes. That's why, for example, on Palm Sunday the people lay down palm branches for Jesus as they would for a king or emperor coming into town. They are celebrating him as a revolutionary leader of a people's movement.

So how is it that the teachings of Jesus got turned on their head in this election? A vast majority of Trump voters say they follow Jesus, and a vast majority of them are white. Most black evangelicals didn't vote for him. Most Latino evangelicals didn't vote for him. But 81

percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump. And he was championed by the Ku Klux Klan. That's the reality we're facing.

The question for me is: What has happened to our faith? It's not that people don't sincerely believe. I've gone to these churches my whole life. I still preach in these churches. I know and love these people and don't question their faith. But we have to ask why they can't see the disconnect between what they believe and how they behave in the public square.

I've looked back to the nineteenth century to try to make sense of this. In the 1850s, when slavery was being challenged by the abolitionists, some in the Baptist Church offered biblical justifications for it. Thornton Stringfellow, a Baptist pastor in Culpeper County, Virginia, said that slavery had always existed; that Abraham and Isaac had kept slaves; that the New Testament doesn't condemn slavery; that the Apostle Paul says to treat your slaves well and doesn't question the practice. Stringfellow argued not only that slavery was allowable but that if the poor, heathen Africans hadn't been brought to the South as slaves, they would have gone to hell when they died. But because they had come here and heard the gospel, they had the hope of eternal salvation.

A new religion was created that served the slave economy. And that economy never really went away; it just transformed into today's systems of mass incarceration and undocumented labor. The religion that grew up to support it has transformed along with it. Evangelist Franklin Graham held a fifty-state Decision America Tour this past year to get out the evangelical vote. That his crusade was largely overlooked by the news media helps explain why they didn't see Trump's victory coming.

If you don't participate in a religious community, it's hard to understand the power it has to affirm certain assumptions about society. Hillary Clinton has been derided as a "feminazi" in the evangelical community for almost forty years, ever since she was Arkansas's first lady. White evangelical voters in this election were asking themselves, Do I forsake what I've been told about Clinton and vote for her and the liberal pro-choice agenda that she represents? Or do I hold my nose and vote for this person who is immoral but says he'll support a platform that I've consistently been told is Christian? And *81 percent* of them chose Donald Trump. It's deeply disturbing, but I don't think it's about the moral failing of each individual voter. These are faithful people who have been lied to consistently on political issues. A dangerous false religion has been sold to them by those who have a great stake in keeping the economy as it is.

Abrams: How do congregations react when you preach back home in Stokes County? Do you change what you say?

Wilson-Hartgrove: In the aftermath of this recent election the great challenge for any of us within the Christian tradition is to speak the truth even if it's confrontational. I grapple with whether I have dissented enough.

Abrams: You feel that you should do more — is that what you're saying?

Wilson-Hartgrove: Yes. I feel like I should point out the contradictions more directly or more actively support others who are challenging the status quo. It's one thing to say that the gospel challenges blind support for someone like Donald Trump; it's another to show up and put your body on the line as an act of resistance.

Abrams: I saw there's a new Moral Monday demonstration tonight. What do you all hope to accomplish?

Wilson-Hartgrove: For me, as a white Southerner trying to figure out my faith, the Moral Movement has been a way of recognizing what's wrong in my tradition so I can walk toward what's right.

Abrams: How did you meet Rev. Barber?

Wilson-Hartgrove: When I was sixteen, I was trying to get involved in politics. None of the people I grew up around were very political, but since I'd been raised Southern Baptist, the politics that made sense to me was conservative. So when I was in high school, I got a summer job in D.C. as a Senate page for Republican Strom Thurmond [*a longtime South Carolina senator who was infamous for his opposition to racial integration in the 1960s — Ed.*]. Just being there, I saw how politicians would talk about Jesus and morality to appeal to the evangelical vote, yet they wouldn't think much about morality when it came to making policies. I returned to North Carolina concerned about these contradictions, and I met Rev. Barber. He spoke at a gathering at the Democratic governor's office, and I found his words compelling. This was not the sort of politics I had seen in Washington. It was different.

Abrams: So at sixteen you were already aware of a gap between the teachings of Jesus and people's actions in the world?

Wilson-Hartgrove: Absolutely. The experience that really changed me was when I was going out to lunch one day in D.C. and passed a man who held out a styrofoam cup and asked me for change. I ignored his request because I was in a hurry and thought he was an alcoholic or whatever. But when I got to where I was going, I heard this voice. It spoke words I had memorized from the King James Bible: "Inasmuch as ye did not do unto the least of these, ye did it not to me." After that, I knew I had to find some other way.

I keep this picture stowed away, out of sight. [*Takes out a framed photo of himself at sixteen shaking hands with Strom Thurmond.*] I hang on to it to remind me where I come from, lest I start to feel judgmental toward people who are still stuck in that place.

Abrams: So what happened after you met Rev. Barber?

Wilson-Hartgrove: I came to see him as my spiritual mentor. As a teenager I began preaching at his church. We've been friends ever since.

Not long after I met him, I invited him to preach at my home church. I didn't think about the fact that it was an all-white church, but I'm sure he knew. He'd investigated hate crimes for the governor, so he also knew that I was from Klan country. But still Rev. Barber came to this little country church, and he invited those folks to his church, and some of them went. He's for real. He believes in a politics rooted in faith and the possibility of friendship between people who've historically been enemies. Moral Mondays are a public expression of that.

Abrams: And you and he have been partners in this movement?

Wilson-Hartgrove: I very much consider myself a follower to his lead, but I've been his collaborator. We've worked together on books.

Abrams: Your book *The Third Reconstruction* has become quite popular.

Wilson-Hartgrove: Part of its popularity, I think, is that it's sorely needed. When the nation took a hard turn toward extremism with the 2016 election, it was following a pattern that we'd already seen in North Carolina since 2012, when the legislature, the governorship, and the courts all became politically aligned around not just a conservative agenda but an *extreme* agenda, as Rev. Barber insists on calling it.

When he and I first started writing Op-Ed pieces for *The News & Observer* in Raleigh, its editors would say, "You're not using language our readers understand. You're saying 'extreme,' but our readers call that 'conservative.'" We argued back and forth until the editors let us use *extreme*. What's more telling, they started using the word themselves in their editorials about former governor Pat McCrory and the legislature.

Abrams: McCrory lost the governorship in 2016, but the election was very close.

Wilson-Hartgrove: It was, but it's still exceptional that he lost when so many other Republicans won. It means some people were willing to vote for Donald Trump at the top of the ticket, but when they got to the governor's race, they voted for Democrat Roy Cooper. I think this Moral Movement of Rev. Barber's can take some credit for that.

Abrams: Before the presidential election it seemed the country was moving toward more racial equality. Then we went the other way.

Wilson-Hartgrove: We are still making progress, but there's also great resistance. The state's turn to the right in 2012 was itself a reaction to the fact that Obama had won North Carolina in 2008. Republicans became concerned that the "solid South" might be breaking up, meaning they couldn't win in states where they were used to winning. To break up the solid South is as disturbing to Republicans as it was to Democrats when Trump broke the so-called blue wall by winning three Rust Belt states.

Obama's North Carolina win brought huge investments of outside money to support Republicans in state legislative races in 2010, which allowed the GOP to win a majority and gerrymander the whole state. They completed the takeover of state government with McCrory's 2012 election.

Abrams: What about battles at the national level?

Wilson-Hartgrove: Much work needs to be done at the state level first. Any effective movement in U.S. history has started local and inspired other local movements that eventually came together to put pressure on the federal government.

Take the sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960. That protest was an independent action by four students who'd been talking to a Methodist minister about what they could do, and it became a catalyst for others like it. Between February 1, 1960, and Easter weekend that year, just two months later, there were similar actions in some thirty-five other places, resulting in a national sit-in movement.

Abrams: What are the next steps for the Moral Movement?

Wilson-Hartgrove: We have strong single-issue movements in the country right now. Black Lives Matter is one. The Fight for \$15, demanding a higher minimum wage, is another. There's the environmental movement. There's resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline. What the Moral Movement proposes to do is to invite those who are resisting one particular policy into a coalition. That takes time. We did seven years of coalition building before Moral Mondays happened.

Abrams: I didn't realize that.

Wilson-Hartgrove: It takes a heck of a lot of work to knit these groups together and build trust. Rev. Barber is not only a gifted communicator but a deeply committed organizer. Our goal is to raise a nonviolent army that's ready to mobilize whenever action is needed. We don't have that at a national level, but we're beginning to see it in some states.

Abrams: And the backbone of the movement is Christian theology, even though a lot of the folks involved in it are not actively Christian?

Wilson-Hartgrove: Yes. The tradition of Christian dissent has always appealed to those outside the faith who agree with its values, as well as to those within the faith who might not live by those values but can be persuaded. All Christians share a narrative and some basic commitments, however differently we interpret them.

I've been writing a book called *Reconstructing the Gospel*, about distinguishing between the Christianity of the slaveholder and the Christianity of Christ, which is a term abolitionist Frederick Douglass used in the mid-nineteenth century. The Christianity of the slaveholder has been the dominant public voice of Christianity — certainly of white Christianity — in the

U.S. But at the same time there is resistance to it. You can hear the resistance in the spirituals that were passed down. You can hear it in the narratives that enslaved people began to tell once they could speak out. Many great preachers emerged during Reconstruction after the Civil War, and some of them found their way into political office. They picked up where the abolitionist movement had left off. Martin Luther King Jr. later brought their message onto the national stage. The Moral Movement aims to be a part of that tradition.

What Jesus was doing, as a brown-skinned Palestinian Jew under Roman occupation in first-century Palestine, was organizing a resistance movement. But the people in power don't see the Scriptures that way. It's the people on the edges, the people in the 'hood, the people in the barrios who read Jesus's message and say, "This guy's one of us." The wealthy and powerful — and those they have duped — have taken the Bible's message out of context and ended up with some sort of corrupted, upside-down version of what the brother two thousand years ago was trying to do. Jesus, too, was confronting the problem of a religion turned against itself. In first-century Palestine certain forces within Judaism had allied themselves with the Roman authorities. Jesus was crucified because he overturned the money-changers' tables in the Temple and brought a popular movement into Jerusalem that challenged not just the religious authorities but also the political and economic forces of the time. That's what got him killed.

Many people who have genuine faith, who want to entrust their lives to Jesus, have been kept from seeing what Christianity is really about. Instead their religion has been used and exploited by the powerful to maintain control. Let's be honest: Why did Donald Trump, who for his entire public life had flouted traditional Christian values, all of a sudden embrace Christianity when he ran for president? Obviously it was to win votes. The only way you could fail to see this as a crass exploitation of faith is if you have accommodated your faith to such crass hypocrisy for generations.

Faith is a powerful thing; it shapes the way people see the world and themselves. But it can easily be manipulated to serve particular interests.

Abrams: Even though we have a secular government, the U.S. was built on some of the ideals of Christianity, such as helping the poor and loving your neighbor.

Wilson-Hartgrove: I think the challenge for Christians is to inhabit the ideals of Christianity in a way that is not exclusive of others. The current extremist movement among Christian conservatives questions whether Christians can live alongside Muslim neighbors. In Tennessee there was a proposal to make the Bible the official book of the state — the implication being that, if it wasn't, someday someone might make the Koran the official book.

The real conflict isn't Christianity versus Islam or Christianity versus a liberal secular state; it's one version of Christianity versus another. As I've said, the abolition movement was one kind of Christianity; the pro-slavery movement, another. If you don't acknowledge this story, then you end up trying to bring people together without a story, which is sort of what the

secular state has been attempting. And yet the secular state in the U.S. developed very much within the context of Christian values. The challenge for the Moral Movement is how to have a public discourse that appeals to those values without excluding Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and people who don't adhere to any faith tradition.

Abrams: Rutba House seems like an example of those values in action. When was it established?

Wilson-Hartgrove: Leah and I started it when we came back from Iraq in 2003.

Abrams: You must have been pretty young.

Wilson-Hartgrove: We were both twenty-two years old. One advantage of being twenty-two is that you don't know what you're up against.

Abrams: And you just invited people to come live with you?

Wilson-Hartgrove: Yes. We came to Walltown because we had heard about five churches here working together: three historically black neighborhood churches and two white churches from outside the neighborhood. That sort of collaboration between black and white churches just doesn't happen much in the South. We figured something interesting was going on here, and we could join it. Not that we asked if we could; we just did.

Abrams: How many people have stayed at Rutba House since then?

Wilson-Hartgrove: At the tenth anniversary we counted seventy-three people. It's been four years since then, so I imagine around a hundred people now. It's not just one house today; it's two houses. We bought the property next door a few years back.

Abrams: That's a radical way of living, just opening your home and allowing people in.

Wilson-Hartgrove: Sure. We've had a very unconventional extended family, which has been a gift. We've learned things there would have been no way for us to learn unless we shared a household with people of many different backgrounds. It's an important part of how I understand my faith now. Belonging to a community of people who pray together and eat together and share life together has made the concept of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood real for us. We've lived alongside those who've been rejected by our society: the undocumented; the formerly incarcerated; men and women who are sick and unable to work. These people are rarely discussed in public life. Elections are about the middle class. We rarely talk about poor people, but they are the ones who suffer most in our society.

We've also shared our home with people who have a history of considerable privilege — college-educated, Ivy League graduates — but who have been called to live in solidarity with others from different backgrounds. It makes for interesting dinner conversation.

Abrams: So it's not that you're looking to help poor people; it's really just about living in community.

Wilson-Hartgrove: That's right. We're intentionally *not* trying to help people — that is, we're not pretending that only some of us need help. That's a false view of mission inherited from the version of Christianity that accommodated itself to a system of inequality. It assumes that those of us who have wealth are good and righteous, and we should occasionally help those who are not as righteous as we are. But part of being human is that we need each other, and we need each other in different ways. Some people have real economic or material needs, and others have plenty of resources but deep psychological or emotional needs. Sometimes the people with material needs have the spiritual resources to teach the so-called privileged how to heal and grow. I've seen this happen at Rutba House.

I had breakfast this morning with a sixty-three-year-old man who's undocumented. For the past fifty years, since he was thirteen, he's picked food that Americans have eaten. He came into the U.S. through California and worked his way across the country. He's picked everything. When we have dinner at our house, he'll say, "This comes from such-and-such place." He's picked it all for fifty years, and now he has lung cancer and is unable to work. Thankfully in our county there's a program that pays for his medical care. If he were a citizen, he'd also be on disability, which would cover his meager living expenses. But he's not a citizen, and he doesn't have any insurance or a place to live. So the hospital called Rutba House, and he ended up with us. We get to share our life with him.

His story is a profound instruction to me. I mean, we have a garden at Rutba House, but we don't grow nearly all our own food. What we don't grow we can buy cheap from grocery stores because people like him work for very low wages. He's who I think of when I hear Donald Trump say we need to build a wall and send back everybody who's here without permission. How would I have eaten all my life if this brother hadn't picked the food? What is my obligation to him and others like him who've helped feed me?

I can't be in a relationship like that without realizing that the system needs to change — and also that the system won't change unless I change.

Early on we were living with a fellow who'd been released from prison, and he and I got into an argument about chores around the house and whether he was pulling his load. He pointed out that other people often had to cover for me because I was traveling a lot — which was true. I just hadn't thought about it.

Abrams: Is it hard on you as a family with children to live at Rutba House?

Wilson-Hartgrove: We're human beings with limits. There are times when we say, "We're not having this conversation right now." But after thirteen years it's difficult for me to imagine myself apart from this extended family. Our kids have all grown up in this community. They

can't imagine what it would be like to live as a nuclear family. When we visit their grandparents, the kids ask, "Why is there no one else around?"

That's not to say there aren't real challenges we deal with at Rutba House. For example, extreme disparities in access to money, healthcare, education, and so on create different assumptions about the best way to handle finances. Should we save money? To someone for whom that's never been a possibility and who has relatives in prison or friends down the street who have immediate needs, saving sounds like a bizarre idea: you're going to put money in the bank in case the furnace goes out next year rather than help the folks down the street who are cold *tonight*?

People can live fundamentally different lives on the same streets, in the same schools, in the same towns. In conversations at Rutba House about how to spend our household money, we are really asking: What do we value? The household budget is where those of us who come from so-called privilege have to negotiate daily with people who are living on the edge, perhaps recently released from prison, unable to work, unable to get a loan or a car.

Living this way has changed how I look at problems in society. When I talk to my parents, my brother, or my friends about immigration, prison, or homelessness, for me those conversations are always about the particular people I live with: My undocumented housemate. My housemate who got out of prison eighteen months ago and deals with the consequences of a felony conviction every day. Anything I say about these issues needs to be faithful to them and to other people in situations like theirs. It's personal.

Abrams: Most people aren't ready to live the way you do.

Wilson-Hartgrove: I don't think everybody needs to live the way we do. You can broaden your relationships in other ways. You can volunteer at a soup kitchen or visit a prison. But I do think you have to figure out how to pledge yourself to people in such a way that they know you're serious. I don't think most Christians who visit prisons, for example, are pledging to be family to those prisoners when they're released. Rutba House has made it possible for us to say, "We want you to be part of our family. We want to share a life with you."

You don't have to live with someone to share a life, but you do have to make a commitment to be there for that person, because relationships alone are not enough to bring about social change. In the South relationships among people of different races have always existed alongside inequality. It's naive to think that we could overcome racism if only white and black people would get to know each other. White and black people have known each other on intimate terms for as long as racism has existed — certainly not on the terms that black folks would've chosen, but intimate terms nonetheless.

Abrams: What do you mean?

Wilson-Hartgrove: On the plantation some enslaved people were always working in the big house. Black nannies were raising white babies, nursing white babies, literally caring for these people from the very beginning of their lives. And, of course, because white men viewed enslaved black women as property, rape was considered a right. It wasn't even regarded as rape. Racism has never been about keeping people apart; it's been about who holds the power in the relationship.

So relationships by themselves aren't enough. We need some kind of covenant across the divide to create the change we all want.

Abrams: It's hard, though. I used to live in a gentrifying neighborhood, and I knew all my neighbors, many of whom had much less than I did. I felt selfish for not doing more to help them, and yet there was some part of me that didn't want to give half of everything I had. That caused a sense of separation — for me, at least.

Wilson-Hartgrove: Jesus says you have to give to whoever asks. And when you give, you can't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing — which is to say you shouldn't keep an account: "This is how much I can give to charity."

I'm not suggesting that we all live in destitution, but I do think that to live in community means saying, "What we have is shared." We don't have a personal claim to it. Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, taught that voluntary poverty is central to sharing life with others. During the Great Depression she started hospitality houses where the hungry and homeless could come and share life together. Day lived there, too; she raised her daughter there; and she invited other people to live there with her — people who had some means, but also people off the streets. Whether you were there because you were interested in social justice or because you were hungry, she said, "Here's a broom; sweep the floor. Here are some potatoes; peel them." She thought that, because Jesus said to give to whoever asks, the only way to be faithful was to give until what you had was gone, and then you'd all be poor together, and together you would hunger for justice.

Abrams: Is that how you all view money at Rutba House — as something to give away?

Wilson-Hartgrove: It's not radical self-renunciation for its own sake. It's a way of being in a relationship. You can't honestly be in a relationship with people you consider family and not give them everything you have.

The inequality of global capitalism, which is the outgrowth of plantation capitalism, depends in part on keeping our distance from the people who bear the brunt of it. It also depends on the narratives we've created about those people as the "undeserving poor." In the conservative Christian community, the common belief is that they're poor because they lack a "work ethic," but think of the fellow I ate breakfast with this morning who has worked in fields since he was thirteen. I would put his work ethic up against anyone's. Poverty is not a matter of character or choice.

Abrams: What are your thoughts on capitalism?

Wilson-Hartgrove: My objection is to the way capitalism developed in the U.S., always depending at root on bodies — first of enslaved black people, and then of incarcerated and undocumented people. The system doesn't work unless bodies are being exploited. The low value we place on their labor is what's wrong with the economy. The way we allocate dollars for services demands that some people get by without a living wage or access to healthcare. The only way to create an economy in which everyone has access to basic goods and services is to reconstruct this system. Let's stop pretending there aren't enough resources to provide for everyone. Divide the gross domestic product by the U.S. population, and there's something like fifty-five thousand dollars per person. Everyone could have what they need, but the system is not structured to give it to them.

We're intentionally *not* trying to help people — that is, we're not pretending that only some of us need help. That's a false view of mission inherited from the version of Christianity that accommodated itself to a system of inequality.

Abrams: I'm curious about Walltown, the neighborhood where you're living. What's its history?

Wilson-Hartgrove: Walltown is named after George Wall, a formerly enslaved man who was the first janitor at Trinity College in 1892, before it was absorbed by Duke University. It's a neighborhood many white people would be afraid to walk through, but the front-porch fellowship on these streets is the sort of community the wealthy often long for. This is the greatest cost of gentrification in our cities — not just the displacement, which poor people have sadly gotten used to, but also the destruction of communities like this one.

Abrams: Did it take a long time for you to be welcomed here?

Wilson-Hartgrove: Plenty of residents were suspicious of our reasons for being here at first. At the time, this felt a little off-putting, but I understand now that for them it made perfect sense to be suspicious of someone who looks like me. What's more notable is the welcome that so many people offered us. The local church was certainly welcoming. And many neighbors invited us onto their porches or into their homes.

Abrams: The neighborhood has changed a lot since you moved in.

Wilson-Hartgrove: Yes, and I have to acknowledge the role we have played in that, which I think also gives our neighbors reason to be suspicious. We said early on that we didn't want to grow too big. One of the reasons we didn't add a third house was because almost everybody coming to Rutba House from outside Walltown was white, and we didn't want to establish a "colony" within the neighborhood. Even so, dozens of people who originally came here to be part of Rutba House have stayed and bought homes in Walltown. That, alongside the redevelopment of downtown, has contributed to rising land values, which is a main driver

of gentrification. So we have to bear some responsibility for that. Land value has quadrupled since we came here. Many people can't afford the rent anymore. Some homeowners have been pushed out by higher property taxes.

Abrams: What are the new Walltown residents like?

Wilson-Hartgrove: I get the sense they don't feel a need to know their neighbors and don't know how to live in the sort of neighborhood where people look out for one another. Many bring with them an unconscious view of this place as dangerous. Recent arrivals have called 911 more often than longtime residents. I'm not saying the newcomers aren't legitimately concerned that something illegal is happening, but they've called the police on people who were not committing any crime, because they don't know that's so-and-so's grandson or someone who lives around the block. Then the police come and stop those people, or others who look like them. To pursue justice for the community, we've participated in campaigns against racial profiling by police.

Abrams: If Walltown keeps changing — which I assume it will — will you stay here and keep doing what you're doing?

Wilson-Hartgrove: We'll keep doing what we're doing, but I don't know if it will always be here. As you said, this isn't the neighborhood it was ten years ago, and I'm not sure what kind of neighborhood it will be in another ten years. We may follow our neighbors somewhere else at some point. But wherever we go, we're committed to living this way, because living with poor people as our fellow humans changes us. Paul Farmer, a doctor who's done a lot of humanitarian work in Haiti, once said, in essence, that to be a white liberal is to believe you can change the world without changing yourself.

Whiteness is a kind of religion, and the sin of the white liberal is to believe that racism is somebody else's problem. It keeps us from seeing how we, too, have been twisted by its lies. We can't just put that on the "rednecks." We can't just put that on slaveholders 150 years ago. It goes deeper than that. It's the system in which we all live. Rev. Barber says we have a "heart problem." This is not just about policy; it's a problem that goes to the heart of who we are. And we shouldn't pretend that a change in political leadership or a new law is going to fix it.

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