



Brittney Jackson Brown

Ethnic Identity: 'What ARE you?'

Video (8:42): Brittney Jackson Brown, student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, pursuing a master's degree in theological studies

Brittney Jackson Brown is chairwoman of the LatinX student organization at Vanderbilt Divinity School, where she is pursuing a master's degree in theological studies. She talks about the challenges she has faced being multiracial, often asked the intrusive question: "What are you?" She emphasizes how the church might welcome new people — especially people of color and multiracial people — to church.

Session 5: Ethnic Identity: 'What ARE you?'

Preparation

Select a room or location to offer the study. Every session needs a room that has the capability to access the video via internet and to project the video for groups of various sizes. Check to be sure the equipment is working properly.

Preview the video then read through the lesson plan. Post the group covenant and select volunteers to read the Scriptures during the session.

Gather the following materials:

- Bible for reading the Scriptures – Ruth 2:1-7; Matthew 11:2-3; Matthew 16: 13-15; Matthew 21:6-10; John 4:7-9; Acts 9:1-5; and James 5:13-16
- Listening & Looking Guide (one for each person or project on a screen)
- Pens and pencils
- A pack of small index cards
- Envelopes (business size)
- A basket large enough to hold the envelopes and cards
- Low- or no-fragrances anointing oil. (Olive oil is frequently used. Other oils such as almond have strong scents, which some may find overwhelming. Check with group members before the session to avoid allergic reactions.)
- Small, shallow bowl or ramekin to hold the oil

Also prepare:

- Read through the Healing Service (It is acceptable for a layperson to lead this service; however, you may ask a pastor or a lay servant.)
- List Scriptures on newsprint (except for James 5:13-16).
- Write/type these directions on a sheet of paper (should be able to fit on a sheet of paper three or four times, so that everyone gets a copy of instructions):
 - » "You are getting to know this person who is 'new' to our class. Ask her/him the question on the index card you selected, or make up a question."
 - » "You have the right to insist that the person answer your question." (Say, 'Hey, you didn't answer my question!' – then repeat it).
- Write each one of these "nosy/intrusive" questions on a separate index card, using one side of the card only (and feel free to add other questions):
 - » "Are you getting fat?"
 - » "Are you pregnant or getting fat?"
 - » "How much money do you make?"
 - » "Are you Mexican?"
 - » "Have you ever been in jail or prison?"
 - » "Are you 'saved?'"
- Put directions and one index card in an envelope – one for each participant. Seal them and place envelopes in a basket.
- Make copies of the directions for the "Hot Seat" activity – one for each participant, excluding the person designated to be on the "Hot Seat."
- Arrange seating in a semi-circle in the room; place one seat –preferably a backless stool— at the top of the semi-circle

THE STUDY SESSION

Get Started [5 minutes]

If you have not done so in advance, recruit one person from the session to sit on the stool, to sit on the “Hot Seat.” (NOTE: We strongly suggest you choose a person in advance of the class, and explain the purpose of the exercise; suggest that the person may say, “I’m not comfortable answering that,” or “That question feels inappropriate.”)

Welcome everyone to the session and take care of housekeeping matters. Read the statement of purpose (or recruit a volunteer to do so): “The General Commission on Religion and Race presents Vital Conversations to help start the dialogue on subjects that may sometimes be difficult to approach. We are all part of the beloved community, and we welcome perspectives that bring enlightenment and understanding.”

In the “Hot Seat” [10 minutes]

Pass the basket around and ask everyone to take envelope. Give people time to review the materials that are in the envelope. Set the stage for the activity by welcoming the person who is new/on the hot seat and say that the class will have an opportunity to get to know this person by asking just a few ‘of interest’ questions. Tell them you will give a signal and they are to begin asking the questions of the person sitting on the stool and that they may either wait for a reply or just keep asking questions.

After three to five minutes of questions, stop the activity and ask everyone to take a deep breath. Thank the person sitting on the hot seat and ask her or him to share what it felt like being asked so many questions all at once. Also, ask if any of the questions stood out as being really bothersome – and to say which ones. Finally, ask the class who were asking the questions how they felt about participating in the exercise.

Hear the Scriptures [10 minutes]

Direct the group’s attention to the Scriptures and ask for volunteers to select a Scripture and read it aloud. Be sure to pause for a five to ten seconds between each reading. After all Scriptures have been read aloud, point out that all of these Scriptures have one thing in common, namely someone is asking someone a question: Who are you? What are you doing here? What do you think you are doing? Who do you belong to?

Distribute the Listening & Looking Guide. Explain that this is a resource to help them capture thoughts and ideas from the video presentation as well as a place to make note of visions they have for ministry. Direct the group to the first question and ask them to answer it.

Invite the group to watch the video by sharing this introduction: Brittney Jackson Brown is a theology student at Vanderbilt Divinity School where she is serving as the vice president of the LatinX seminarians. She has a unique experience, one that rarely shares with even her spouse and friends. People keep asking her “Where are you from?” and, even when she tells them, they often ask her again. Therefore, she wants church people to consider how framing and asking questions can disrupt conversation and community building in God’s church.

Play the Video [10 minutes]

Ask group members to jot down short notes on their guide as needed, but to pay careful attention to Ms. Jackson Brown’s presentation. At the conclusion of the video, allow five to ten minutes for the group to add more information and answer additional questions on their Listening & Looking Guides. Also, say that there will be opportunities to add more information to the sheet and to reflect upon their notes. (If time permits and group members ask, you may show the video a second time.)

Pair ‘n Share [10 minutes]

Divide the group into pairs and ask teams to exchange thoughts about the video. Ask them to share with each any “rude” experiences they have had. Ask them to discuss Brittney Jackson Brown’s statement about the world not being colorblind and identify how that is truth for them (or someone they know).

Reflection [5-10 minutes]

Bring the group back together and invite members to share their thoughts about the video or the stories that emerged from their own lives as a result of bearing witness to Ms. Jackson Brown’s life experiences. Ask, “Has anyone here ever limited your movements or stopped going places because of an affront to their dignity?” You might offer examples, such as people who get divorced and do not go to church or other places for fear they will see an ex-spouse.

Closing Meditation [10 minutes]

In the 2002 movie Antwone Fisher the title character reads a poem called, “Who Will Cry for the Little Boy?” Ask group members who will lament for Brittany Jackson Brown and others like her who are questioned in some form about their right to “be” anywhere they want in this world. Read the Scripture James 5:13-16. Remind the group how important prayer is to the wellbeing of our spiritual and physical selves.

Ask everyone to sit in a semi-circle, facing the “hot seat” and say, “Let’s take the opportunity to transform this seat of division and interrogation to one of wholeness and support.” Then invite anyone who wishes, one at a time, to sit on that seat and receive an anointing of oil.

(Note: The person anointing may draw a cross with or place a dot of oil on the recipient’s wrist, palms, back of the hand, or forehead.)

As the oil is applied, give a prayer or blessing (use this one or one shared spontaneously by the person leading the service of anointing): May you ___(person’s name) ___ know that you are a child of God and are welcome any place in the world. Be blessed. Go and share a blessing.”

After everyone who wants to be has been anointed, say a closing prayer:

Holy and Gracious God, we ask that you infuse us with a spirit of love and welcoming. Help us to open wide our hearts and that we see color, that we see individuals, that we see all of those who belong to you and simply say, “My sister, my brother – it is good to be with you.” In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Listening and Looking Guide: Brittney Jackson Brown

Where are you from? To answer this question, use five or six key phrases to describe where you are from (region, family, culture, etc.):

How rude! Think about Ms. Jackson Brown's description of her experience with the artist on the panel in Nashville. Recall an experience when you felt smacked in the face with someone's rudeness:

Think about her statement, "Society isn't colorblind." Describe a time you have been aware that you could not pinpoint someone's racial-ethnic identity. Who was the person and what were the circumstances?

Describe a place you no longer visit or an activity you may be avoiding because you do not want to face probing questions or stares from other people:

Cultivate a new vision: Brittney Jackson Brown says that the church's job is to start conversations only if it plans to continue them. What are the engaging comments and questions to get to know someone?

Make a commitment: _____

Tweet This/Post on your social media: _____

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