



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lydia Talbot: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us as for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

Daniel Pawlus: And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Our guest today, whom you’ll meet in a moment, is Otis Moss III, Senior Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back journalist and poet, Judy Valente, with another in her series of reflections on monastic values for everyday life.

Daniel Pawlus: We begin with a profile of Maria Dimanshtein, a young woman whose search for spiritual meaning is reflected in her work as an artist and a member of the staff at Chicago’s Interfaith Youth Core. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Maria Dimanshtein: My name is Maria Dimanshtein and I am an artist. I work as a graphic designer at Interfaith Youth Core. I come from Latvia; however, I am not Latvian. By heritage I am Russian and Jewish. My mother comes from a Russian family and my father comes from a Jewish family, Jewish meaning being of a Jewish heritage and Jewish background rather than being a religious person.

I was born in Riga. That is the capital of Latvia. Latvia used to be part of the Soviet Union until 1989. I was raised as an atheist and without any big emphasis on it. I was just living my life and never really questioned faith. It probably existed out there but I didn’t have any connection to it. I started making art when I was about 10 years old. It was only later when I was in my 20s when I started to embrace the abstraction in art. When I talk about it, I like to say that it’s an abstract intuitive style. My art is inspired by the experience or the search for the mysterious. Not in a fairy tale or any fantastical setting, just the mystery in our lives everyday. I don’t think mystery is fantastical, it’s just there.

After I moved to the United States, I went to study abroad in Switzerland. There I made a new friend who introduced me to the teachings of an Indian mystic who name is Osho. It gives you a way of just being more easygoing about many things. It gives you a direction What is actually funny and I never thought about this before, but the embracing of abstract art happened at the same period of time when I was in Switzerland.

This is the mural I designed and painted for Interfaith Youth Core. Interfaith Youth Core is trying to create a movement of young people that will promote religious pluralism. So I took pictures of different mosaics and I put them into circles. The movement of the circles will also help activate the space and the young people could relate to it, dynamic but rooted in tradition.

I am more open minded than I would have been otherwise and I can see more ambiguity in life to where not everything needs to be logical. You can just maybe believe something just because...just because you can believe. You don't need a scientific proof to everything. I think this is the big...this is a very important part for me that I don't need everything to be proved. I think the spiritual search is exciting. You never know what you can find in it and it enriches your life so much. It's definitely worth it.

SPEAKER INTRO

Lydia Talbot: Our thanks to Maria Dimanshtein for sharing her spiritual journey.

Now, let me tell you about today's speaker. Otis Moss III has been Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ since 2007, a call he accepted after serving the historic Tabernacle Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia, where he led the congregation's growth from 125 members to more than 2,000.

Otis studied Religion and Philosophy at Morehouse College and earned a Master of Divinity Degree at Yale University before embarking on a career in ministry that led Belief Net name him as someone who will shape the future of the African American church, and Newsweek magazine to call him one of "God's foot soldiers" for his commitment to transforming the lives of youth. Otis Moss III is a frequent guest on "30 Good Minutes" and it is a great honor to welcome him back. Welcome, Otis.

MESSAGE

Otis Moss: Thank you. It's a delight to be back with you again.

One of the great South African writers, Olive Schreiner, tells an incredible story about locusts. She observed locusts going to the river. The first locust goes in and is swept away by the current. Another comes, makes a track to the rivers edge and is swept away by the current and is heard of no more. But eventually the insects come together and build upon each other and build a bridge to the other side. But Olive Schreiner makes this statement. She says: "But what of those who came first and were swept away by the current and left on the cutting room floor of history? They made a track to the river's edge so someone else would have the possibility of making it to the other side."

They made a track to the river's edge and made a way for someone else. There are always people in our lives and in history who make a track to the river's edge and make it possible for us to live. We love to lift up those celebrated people in history and we leave so many people on the cutting room floor.

One such person, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. we love to celebrate. He is without a doubt one of the greatest prophets of the 20th century that America ever produced. But what of the person who made a track to the river's edge for Dr. King? He's a gentleman by the name of Rev. Vernon Johns. He pastored the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church before Dr. King. He was a powerful preacher and he would preach sermons such as, for example on the marquee he would place the words: "Is Heaven Segregated?" Another message was: "Is it Legal to Lynch Negroes in Alabama?" His preaching was so powerful that the police every Saturday night would come by to see just what he was preaching on Sunday. You have to be a major preacher in order for the police to come out to your church every Saturday night just to see what you were preaching!

When we look at the Gospel of Mark and this person by the name of John—John the Baptist, John the Baptizer—we know his job specifically was to make a way for someone else. When we recognize that John's job was to make a way for someone else, we see that it was not about him but it was all about Jesus. He was not concerned about his ego. He had a ministry in the desert, in a place of low resources. People from the city and the country would come and hear John. He was concerned about the poor, those who were broken hearted. Many people may not lift up his name, but he was concerned about influencing the next generation.

As a country we reflect upon Haiti and watch with horror. They are in their desert moment but we as Americans owe a debt to Haiti. Why would I say we owe a debt to Haiti? Because it was in 1796 that Toussaint L'Ouverture led a revolution that freed Haiti. Napoleon even sent troops to Haiti to crush the revolt. But they could not handle those people in Haiti. Haiti became a free country. As a result, it ended up influencing the abolitionist movement in America. Frederick Douglas, who was the ambassador to Haiti in 1886 said that until she spoke, no one knew of a Christian nation in the West that would abolish slavery. Until she spoke, we did not understand that there was a connection between our Christianity and the idea of liberation. Until she spoke, Frederick Douglas said he would not be able to stand before Abraham Lincoln and say, "Sign the Emancipation Proclamation" until Haiti spoke. Haiti is in its desert moment and it is our job to recognize they made a way for the abolitionist movement today.

We are all here as a result of someone else. My name is Otis Moss III. My father's name is Otis Moss, Jr. I am the product of someone who made a way for me. Someone made a way for my father, Otis Moss, Jr. It was Otis Moss, Sr. Before Otis Moss, Sr., someone made a way for him: Benjamin Elijah Mays. Before Benjamin Elijah Mays, there was John Hope. Before John Hope, there was W. E. B. Du Bois. Before Du Bois, there was Frederick Douglas. Before Frederick Douglas, there was Richard Allen. Before Richard Allen, there was George Lyle. Before George Lyle, there was Roger Williams. Before Roger Williams, there was John Wesley. Before John Wesley, there was an Anabaptist movement. Before the Anabaptist movement, there was John Calvin. Before John Calvin, there was Martin Luther. Before Martin Luther, there was St. Thomas Aquinas. Before St. Thomas Aquinas, there was Augustine. Before Augustine, there was Tertullian. Before Tertullian, there was Cyprian. Before Cyprian, there was Paul. Before Paul, there was Peter. Before, Peter there was Jesus. Before Jesus, there was John. Before John, there

was Isaiah. Before Isaiah, there was Solomon. Before Solomon, there was David. Before David, there was Saul. Before Saul, there was Samuel. Before Samuel, there was Samson. Before Samson, there was Deborah. Before Deborah, there was Joshua. Before Joshua, there was Moses. Before Moses, there was Joseph. Before Joseph, there was Isaac. Before Isaac, there was Abraham. Before Abraham, there was Noah. Before Noah, there was Cain and Abel. Before there was Cain and Abel, there was Adam and Eve. And before Adam and Eve, there was God. “In the beginning was God and the word was with God.”

There is always someone who is before us who makes a way for us. We give God thanks for the possibility that people have been in our lives—some that we remember, some that we do not remember—who make a way for us.

I’ll simply say this as I close: we are all called to make a way for someone else. I heard an interesting story about a particular NFL superstar who was being interviewed by ESPN. The reporter was saying, “You know what? I have problems with the way that you enter into the end zone. You’re always pointing your finger and pointing up. You have unsportsmanlike conduct!” Well, this particular NFL star said back to the reporter, “Obviously you’ve never played football because you think that it’s all about me. What I am doing is I am turning around, looking back to see where I have come from. And I recognize the only way that I’ve made it into the end zone is because people blocked for me. They took the hit for me. They took hurts and bruises for me. So when you see me doing this, I’m saying thank you to my guard, thank you to my tackle. And after I finish thanking my guard and my tackle, there’s one other person I have to thank, that made it possible for me to be here, that being God. So I lift my finger up and say, ‘Thank you God, because you blocked for me.’”

In my tradition I would say there is someone else who blocked for us, who was bruised for our transgressions, and was hurt so that we would be where we are today. He was bruised at Calvary so that we would be set free. He made a way for us and his name is Jesus. We are all called to make a way.

CONVERSATION

Daniel Pawlus: If you’d like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Otis Moss III, we’ll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime.

Now, let’s talk with Otis Moss III. Otis, thanks again for being here. An inspiring message as always.

Otis Moss: It’s a delight to be here. Thank you very much.

Daniel Pawlus: You gave me a perfect opening to start today because we were talking about your father a little bit and I want to ask you, as someone who has been identified in the press as a leader, as a new leader of the African American church, Beliefnet we talked

about. You've got this lineage and this history of your father you laid out long before that, obviously. How do you make that all about God and not let that coverage of you and what you're trying to accomplish out there be what people glom on to?

Otis Moss: Well, I think Howard Thurman says it best. My father passed this on to me. He said, "God places a crown above our heads that we will spend the rest of our lives growing tall enough to wear." So I try to spend my life trying to just grow taller and taller. When you're around such luminaries as my father, as people such as Dr. Robert Michael Franklin who is now the president of Morehouse College and you have the opportunity to be around people that you want to be like and you see how they walk, you want to walk in their footsteps.

Lydia Talbot: Otis Moss, that litany was phenomenal!

Otis Moss: Oh. That's very kind. Thank you!

Lydia Talbot: How long did it take you to memorize that? At any rate, I was just thinking, here you are in Chicago just a few years and yet on an earlier broadcast on "30 Good Minutes" you preached a message on an African folktale, "The People Who Could Fly." You are not only flying but you're soaring since you've been here in Chicago at Trinity United Church of Christ. You're serving on the distinguished board of Christian Century Magazine.

Otis Moss: And your board also.

Lydia Talbot: The Greater Chicago Broadcast Ministries. But you are reaching into the wider community in a way that is true gift. How have your hopes and dreams changed since you've been in Chicago?

Otis Moss: Well, Chicago has embraced myself and Monica and the kids in a powerful way. And it is really opened up for us to do ministry not only at Trinity but in the wider community. We've had the opportunity to serve at the Chautauqua Institution. The Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, who is the director of religion there, allowed myself and my family and also the choir from Trinity to come to Chautauqua. It was an amazing opportunity to be in such an ecumenical environment, number one, and an environment that has not necessarily had the influence of the African American church tradition. So this has really been a unique ride to be able to connect with so many people of so many different traditions. You recently mentioned about the Chicago Interfaith Youth Core, having a connection with Eboo Patel has been just very powerful influence upon me and the work that he is doing.

Lydia Talbot: You were the featured speaker at the Greater Chicago Prayer Breakfast a couple of years ago and you got a standing ovation. This is the wider community and reaching in.

Daniel Pawlus: I would pick up on that, too. I've had the pleasure of seeing you preach at Trinity and it's an inspiring, fiery kind of experience. There are a lot of things going on this year in the society and the community. What themes have been lighting up your sermons? Is there anything that's been floating to the top consistently that you've been trying to convey to your community?

Otis Moss: We've been doing a series. I did a nine-part series entitled "Next Level Living." One of the things that you watch in televangelism is people talking about next level and it's always on the material. But I framed from the idea of going to the next level is not going higher, but going deeper. So how do we go deeper with our relationship with God and how is God calling us not only to live a life of mission but also live a life of ministry? So what we do—acts of faith, giving away our faith—in connecting to those who are impoverished, connecting to those who are in need, that's next level living. How to literally live out your faith. That is what God is calling us to do, to live at the next level.

Lydia Talbot: And you are passionate about not only hip-hop, but inter-generational ministry. The energy that you have put toward that transforming of youth in the church! Can you say a bit about that?

Otis Moss: Sure. One of the things we're so very proud of—I've got to give a major shout out to two young ladies at our church, Whitney Wilkes and Ariel Bradley, who are the lead organizers for our anti-violence campaign. The young people came to me and said, "We love all these marches that are happening but they're never led by young people. We want to do it." And we decided that we were going to support them. They brought over 500 youth from around the city to participate in an anti-violence campaign and then instructed them on how you can start a peace club at your own school so you can talk about non-violence and how to have conflict resolution that doesn't involve fisticuffs or a gun. So that is what really excites me, to see young leaders thrive and develop and to see elders love and support them. I think that's really the great piece about the faith community that you have an intergenerational group that says I'm going to pass on everything that I have: "As I was with Moses I will be with Joshua." I really think that's what our calling is.

Daniel Pawlus: And it sounds like this broadening out that's happening at Trinity—it's always been in place, but your focus especially this past year—has been getting people not only to come to church and be inspired by the message but also reach deeper into themselves and go out and get more deeply involved in the community through the programs at the church and in other ways as well.

Otis Moss: Absolutely. One of the programs we're very proud of is our Operation Share. We have a food share that happens every month where we're feeding the hungry. But during Thanksgiving we did almost 4,000 baskets of food between Illinois and Michigan. We have a satellite location in Benton Harbor, Michigan. And to see the operation, to see all these volunteers come out and not only stuff baskets but everything from bringing the

eighteen-wheeler in and then they've got these forklifts, it's just amazing to see people come and serve. And, again, acts of faith, giving away their faith.

Lydia Talbot: Transport us to the Sunday at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago when you raised, the church raised—what?—over \$90,000 for the Haitian relief.

Otis Moss: A few Sundays ago we put out a call. We knew what happened and I sent out what is called a “robo-call.” You call everybody and I said, “This is Pastor Moss. We’re going to take a special offering on Sunday.” Then we sent out on our e-newsletter saying that if you want to do something about Haiti, we want to literally put our money where our mouth is. So on Sunday I gave a history of Haiti, just talking about 1796 and Toussaint L’Ouverture. The abolitionist movement was inspired by Haiti, literally. No one had seen a country that was Christian that had abolished slavery. So it inspired so many people during the 1800s to push forth on the abolitionist movement. Haiti was punished in many ways as a result of that. People in South Carolina didn’t want people to know that there was a revolution happening. So I gave that history and people just gave! I mean, when I saw the numbers I was blown away.

Lydia Talbot: And you have a number of Haitians in your congregation.

Otis Moss: Yes, we do. We do have quite a few people who have family in Haiti, who are from Haiti. It was just a devastating thing to watch what’s happening. But then in church, bringing the Haitian families, those who are of Haitian descent, to the altar and for people to know that they have a church community really committed, compassionate and caring about what happens to their community was a powerful thing to see.

Daniel Pawlus: You’re based here in Chicago obviously, Otis. You do travel for different speaking engagements and so forth. Are you seeing these kinds of community gatherings and focuses pulled together in other places in the country? Have you seen church communities really come together to make a difference in all these different kinds of challenges we’re facing today?

Otis Moss: I’m really seeing it all across the nation. I haven’t had the opportunity to meet him but I’ve very excited about his work, a gentleman by the name of Shane Claiborne. What Shane is doing in Philadelphia, a young evangelical brother who is just committed to the idea of homelessness and poverty. It’s just really exciting to see. In Atlanta, Raphael Warnock, a classmate of mine at Morehouse, is really lifting up the mantle of Dr. King and has made a true commitment to the immediate neighborhood, to say that we’re not just going to worship here but we’re going to make an impact on this neighborhood. Gary Simpson in Brooklyn, New York, who has been working with the Kellogg Foundation doing an incredible ministry right over in what is considered Bed-Sty. It’s just all across the nation we’re seeing a new generation of people who are really committed to transforming the neighborhood, to say you have to live your faith.

Lydia Talbot: We have a minute left. You have to share some stories about Makayla and Elijah, your two beautiful children, and about how they see God and their community at Trinity.

Otis Moss: Well, one of the things that's powerful about Elijah and Makayla—Elijah is nine and Makayla is six—is they're so incredibly creative. We came home one day. My son loves to draw and he created this kind of unique comic book that was centered around faith. I said, "Who is this guy?" He had a little cross on his chest.

He said, "This is God man!"

"What does God man do?"

"He has super powers. He frees people from poverty and things like that."

I thought, now that's a great super power to have! You free people from poverty. But he received this from the community at Trinity because Trinity has such a commitment to what happens in the neighborhood. So when he is in a church that's talking about Christ, community and culture; that's talking about liberation; that's talking about social justice, that is moving into his spirit. So now he's doing comic books that reflect that message.

Daniel Pawlus: Thank you, Otis. We wish we had more time with you as always. Thanks for being with us.

REFLECTION INTRO

Daniel Pawlus: We turn now to Judy Valente with another reflection in her series of reflections this season on monastic values for everyday life.

REFLECTION

Judy Valente: If you spend any amount of time at a Benedictine monastery, you're bound to hear the word *conversatio*. It refers to a specific vow that Benedictines take: *conversatio morum*. Literally, conversion of morals. But I like the definition given to me by one of my Benedictine mentors, Sister Thomasita Homan: *conversatio* as a constant turning toward, a continuous conversation with life.

I like the idea of turning because it connotes change. And there are a lot of things about myself that need changing. Like my quick temper. There are times when I explode in anger even at the people I love the most. And then I'm angry at myself for getting angry. Once after arguing with my beautiful husband—a totally silly unnecessary argument—I called Sister Thomasita in frustration and said, 'Why can't I live *conversatio* in my daily life with the people I'm closest to?'

Her answer was simple, and a bit surprising. "You are living *conversatio*," she said. "Your struggle within yourself to do better; that's the *conversatio*. And with *conversatio*, everyday we have a chance to begin again."

CLOSING

Daniel Pawlus: Thank you, Judy. And our thanks again to Otis Moss III, Maria Dimanshtein and you for being with us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Daniel Pawlus.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Before we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org, where you’ll find an extensive collection of reflections and stories, on video and in print, to enrich your spiritual life. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may peace be with you in the week ahead.