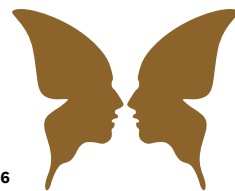


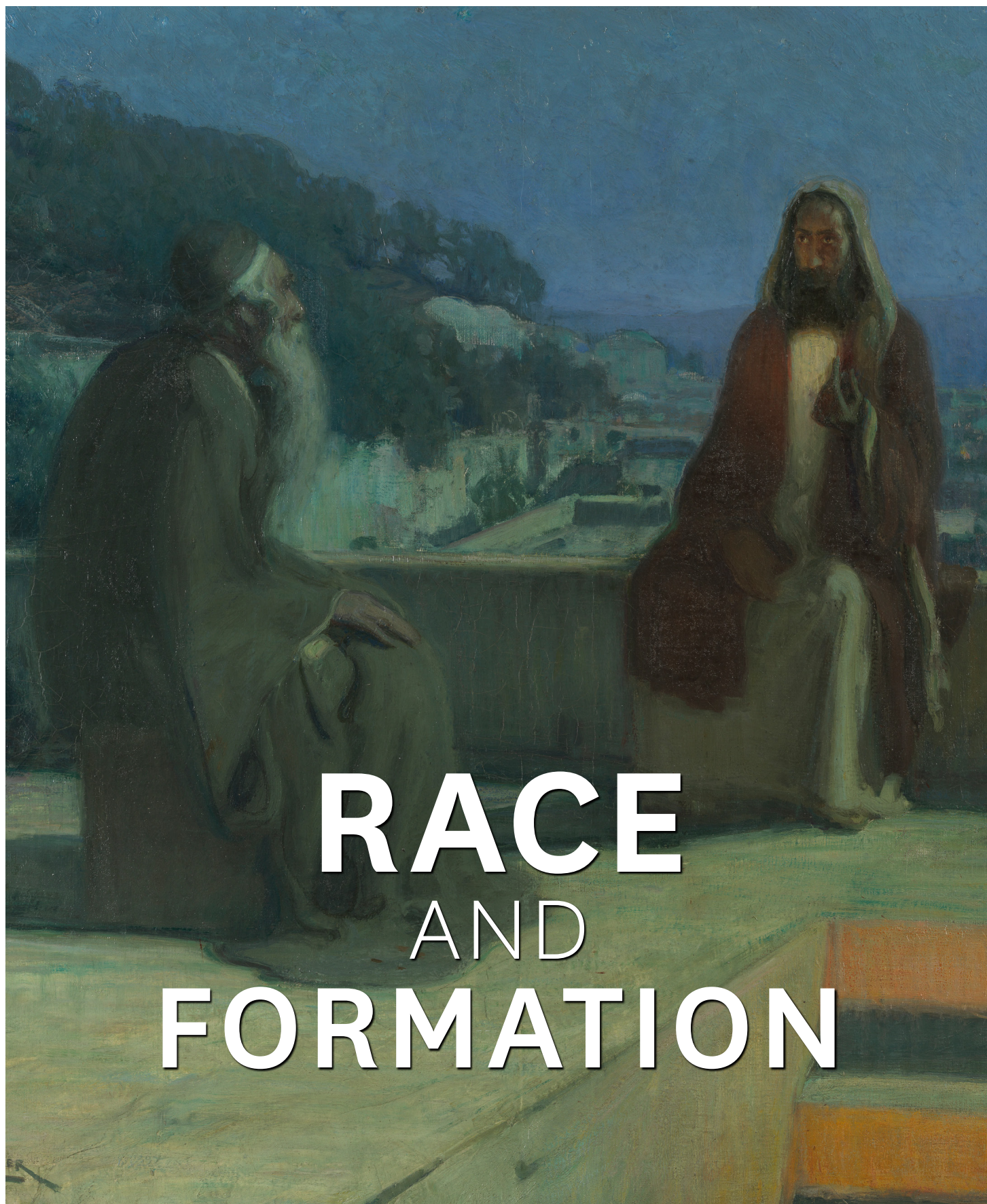
CONVERSations

A FORUM FOR *Authentic* TRANSFORMATION SPRING | SUMMER 2016



volume

14.1



RACE AND FORMATION

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Nicodemus Visiting Jesus, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1899). Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Joseph E. Temple Fund.

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PG 4

FRONT PAGE

RISKING

CONVERSATIONS

ABOUT RACE

BY KATHY KHANG

PG 6

JOIN THE
CONVERSATION

WHY YOU

NEED FRIENDS

WHO ARE

DIFFERENT

FROM YOU

BY AMENA BROWN

PG 7

DEFINING
OUR TERMS

PRAYER OF

LAMENT

BY ADELE

AHLBERG CALHOUN

TRANSFORMATIONAL
THEOLOGY
FORMING THE SOUL

10

THAT CRAZY
LI'L THING
CALLED LOVE

BY PATRICIA RAYBON



16

THE POWER
OF GOD'S
GRACE IN
RELATIONSHIPS

BY FELIX GILBERT

HONESTY
ABOUT THE JOURNEY
DARK NIGHTS AND BRIGHT MORNINGS

24

CAUGHT
BETWEEN
TWO WORLDS

AN INTERVIEW WITH
ANAMARIE GUARDADO DWYER
BY MARIAN FLANDRICK

30

RACE,
POVERTY, AND
SPIRITUAL
FORMATION

BY MARLENA GRAVES

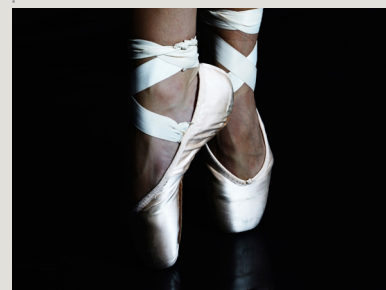


LIFE
TOGETHER
FRIENDSHIP AND DIRECTION

36

THE WORK OF
RECONCILIATION
WITHIN

BY AUSTIN CHANNING BROWN



42

A WHITE
PASTOR'S ROLE
IN A
MULTICULTURAL
WORLD

PURSUING THE GOSPEL
BY EMPOWERING OTHERS
BY PAGE BROOKS





PG 88

BACK PAGE

AT THEIR WORD
BY LAURA TURNER



S

features

60

O TASTE AND SEE

**A Meditation on Henry
Ossawa Tanner's
*Nicodemus Visiting Jesus***

BY DEIDRA RIGGS

64

POETRY

**To My Future Son:
With Thoughts Of Ferguson**

BY AMENA BROWN

66

AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE

**Talking to Our Kids
about Race and the
Kingdom of God**

JOANNAH SADLER IN CONVERSATION
WITH JEFF AND LISA LIU

83

Conversations Guide

BY ROBERT RIFE

**INTENTIONALITY
OF THE HEART
WILLING TO CHANGE**

50

**SAEBYUKGHIDO
ANYONE?**

**THE GIFTS AND CHALLENGES OF
FORMATION IN KOREAN COMMUNITY**
BY SUSAN OH CHA

54

**AN AMERICAN
DIRGE**

**THE SPIRITUAL
PRACTICE OF LAMENT**
BY SOONG-CHAN RAH

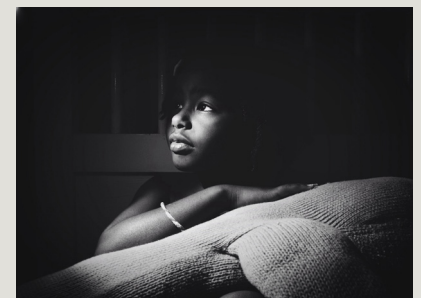


**CLASSICAL
SPIRITUAL EXERCISES
HABITS THAT TRANSFORM**

72

**EMBRACING
BLACK LIVES TO
BE MADE WHOLE**

BY JOSHUA DUBOIS



76

**THE PRACTICES
OF FACING
THE STORM**

BY OSHETA MOORE

online

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AND MORE, VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT CONVERSATIONSJOURNAL.COM.



AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE

TALKING TO OUR KIDS ABOUT RACE AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

JOANNAH SADLER IN CONVERSATION WITH JEFF AND LISA LIOU



➤➤ **EDITOR'S NOTE:** In this column that appears in every issue of *Conversations*, we take a look at the issue topic through the lens of family. We explore ways our families are spiritually formed and share practical suggestions for teaching (and learning from!) our children. Several years ago when we did the issue “Be Not Afraid” we invited a child psychologist to help start the conversation with our children on fear. This time, we invited parents Jeff and Lisa Liou to give us a glimpse at how their cultural backgrounds shape the conversations on race in their own home. While having honest and open dialogue at home with their children, Jeff also happens to be writing his dissertation on race and theology.

JOANNAH SADLER: *Tell our readers a bit about yourselves (as a couple and family) How does the topic of race impact you personally/or as a family?*

LISA LIOU: Jeff is Taiwanese American. His dad came to the United States for medical residency and then went back to Taiwan to marry Jeff's mom and bring her to the US to start a family. Jeff was born and raised in small town Oklahoma where the Liou's were the only Asian family. I'm Caucasian and came from a large extended family in the metro Detroit suburbs, which are predominantly white. All four of my grandparents practiced Catholicism and have western European heritage. Our two children currently attend an “immersion” school in Pasadena, CA where they spend over half their day learning Mandarin Chinese, which is a native language for Jeff's parents. The kids consider themselves to be half Taiwanese and half “Swe-talian, Germ-ish” (our creative way of explaining all of Lisa's side of the family). Since almost all of their friends speak Mandarin, but the school is diverse, they are attuned to the differences between speaking a language and sharing the heritage that the language represents.

JEFF LIOU: It has been important to us to do what we can to form our own children (ages ten and six) so that they can understand their parents' very different family backgrounds. We know that this could help them understand who they are and the beautiful work that God has done to bring people together across boundaries that can otherwise divide us. Perhaps most importantly, we desire for our children to become confident in the rightness of loving across racial differences, and all the skills that go along with the ministry of reconciliation. It's a tall order, but we start small....

JOANNAH: *How should parents begin the dialogue with their children on such a significant topic as race?*

JEFF: Kids become aware of race quite early—think single digits. Like so many things, they may not be able to articulate it, but strong ingroup bias can be measured in children as young as ages seven to eleven. Let's be clear: This is rarely hatred, and rarely bigotry. But it can easily lead to the kinds of divisions many people

Perhaps most importantly, we desire for our children to become confident in the rightness of loving across racial differences, and all the skills that go along with the ministry of reconciliation. It's a tall order, but we start small...



experience in our adolescent and adult life. The fear of teaching kids the wrong thing has led many parents to skip conversations about race completely. In *loco parentis*, children are bombarded with messages about race that may or may not be helpful to them.

LISA: I think the biggest thing we do is talk to our kids about issues of race and difference and because we know that the power of exclusion and prejudice has more momentum than our best intentions. For example, I heard a second-grade African American friend tell her mom that a fellow classmate said, "I don't like your skin." In the colorblind rhetoric of the 1980s, the best response would be to say, "How ridiculous! We love our friend." But that does little to address the well-documented bias and skin-color preference that children intuit from the systems at place in our country. Instead, I always follow up at home and reference back to the experience when helpful. Jeff and I tend to take opportunities like that to talk about specific instance as well as related instances of racism and prejudice, but we don't just talk about it. We ask our kids how they can respond if they witness racism. We ask them how they think instances of racism toward others groups might relate to their ethnic heritage as Taiwanese-Americans.

We might say something to our daughter, who was also in second grade, something like, "Emma, did you hear what your friend said about someone telling her they didn't like her skin? What do you think about that?"

Of course, all kids will say, "That's bad."

"Doesn't it make you sad that people think white skin is better than brown skin?"

And because we've been talking about this since she could reason, she'll say, "Yeah, God loves all skin colors."

"What's hard, Emma, is that all people have been tricked into believing that mommy's skin color is the very best and people have used skin color for a long time to decide who gets to have the most stuff and who doesn't. Remember how Ruby Bridges couldn't even go to school with everyone else because of her skin until they changed the rules? Then when they did change the rules and she went to that school, everyone else stayed home. What do you think you would do if you heard someone at school tell your friend that her skin color is ugly or no good?"

Then Emma gives us some ideas at her level of reasoning. Usually, she would say, "I would tell them they are wrong" or "I would tell my friend, don't believe him."

JOANNAH: *I love that you mentioned opening the dialogue with our children while they are still at a very young age. I think this is true for just about every "hard" topic in parenthood—the earlier it is brought into the light, so to speak, the more naturally the conversations occur. You said, "Perhaps most importantly, we desire for our children to become confident in the rightness of loving across racial differences, and all the skills that go along with the ministry of reconciliation. It's a tall order, but we start small...." It may seem obvious, but share more about how parents can help their children become confident in living out the gospel. Share with us how you are raising children who are attuned to the skills of the ministry of reconciliation.*

LISA: One of my favorite concepts from my seminary ethics class was the concept of moral imagination, the ability to imagine what is possible based on your set of moral values. Race relations are realities that our children need to be helped to navigate. Moral imagination is what we cultivate together as we let our imaginations be shaped by our theological conviction that all people and their well-being matter to God. By having these conversations, we affirm to our children that they have a place and a role in these social dynamics and that they can do the work of God by acting against the harmful things in the world toward a restorative posture attuned to issues of justice.

JEFF: This probably comes from my nerdy background in high school debate, but I'm convinced that you don't really understand someone else's views unless you can articulate them fairly. So, when we talk about world religions, other ethical systems, or cultures, we don't denigrate them by making them sound foolish. Quite the opposite! We do our best to represent someone else's rationale fairly. In our diverse setting, we get the opportunity to have these conversations over and over. I'm encouraged when I can hear our kids anticipate the questions we are going to ask (for the nth time) and

supply the cultural reasoning that helps them empathize with others. For example, it's important to us that our kids can articulate the circumstances that give rise to the protests and uprisings in black and brown communities that our country has seen in the past year. Crying, "political correctness!" is a way of dismissing real people and foreclosing the possibility of reconciliation.

JOANNAH: *One of the things we hope to provide our readers in this column is spiritual formation resources and practices that can be blended into family life. Are there any spiritual disciplines that we can practice with our families that help us talk about race in an open and redemptive way?*

JEFF: One-half of our attention right now is focused on ways to retool our current disciplines:

When studying the Bible with family, remember that your children may already be experiencing racial difference. Passages about ethnic and group difference are opportunities to talk about your child's experience, Jesus' response, and the possibility of your family's participation with God's work in other people groups. Pointing out the differences in Scripture isn't begging the question—kids are deeply aware of the dynamics going on around them and in material being presented to them.

Occasionally, our children will tell us about sad, unequal treatment of their classmates from other racial backgrounds. This can become serious prayer business at bedtime. This way, kids learn how to pray not only for their peers and immediate concerns, but the larger issues of justice and reconciliation. This work of prayer continues when we take the time to learn about the stories of cities we've visited on vacation or other travel, so the kids to join us in prayer for God's work in that place.

We know that kids learn new languages fast. We also know that encouraging lifelong learning correlates to some positive outcomes later in life. At this stage, much of worship requires children to learn what is happening, why it's happening, and how we are supposed to conduct ourselves. Though social forces will tell them to just stick with what's comfortable or acceptable, children can be encouraged to continue learning if they see you learning new forms of worship. These new forms of worship, or languages if you will, can be as simple as helping them be aware that different traditions express worship to God differently or as complex as helping them think through how different cultures and languages impact how we understand the gospel.

LISA: **It is just as important to celebrate with our children as it is to talk about the hard realities.** We talk a lot about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. all year and

observe his holiday. We talk about the practical ramifications of his leadership such as having diverse friendships at school and even the fact I could marry their dad. When we can, we take them to MLK day celebrations. We listen to his recorded speeches. The kids have even been to a few marches. We also teach them about our living heroes like Pastor Mayra Macedo-Nolan who does community outreach and advocacy in the city of Pasadena, Lisa Johanon the founder of Central Detroit Christian Community Development, and Dr. John Perkins, Christian minister and civil rights activist.

JEFF: The other half of our attention is focused on less common or unconventional disciplines:

Lament is in vogue, but for good reason. Many parents shy away from difficult topics with their children. All of us worry about robbing our children of their innocence, or exposing them to topics for which they are not ready. And yet, none of us want our children to wear naïve, rose colored glasses and be unprepared for a world gripped by brokenness. Gradually and carefully inviting children into lament over the world's great problems, first from "cruising altitude," but with increasing specificity can augment the ways in which children place their hope in God.

Children can get excited about the discipline of giving at an early age. We were surprised when our ten-year-old daughter decided to put her sculpting skills to work to make and sell clay nativity scenes to our Facebook friends so she could raise money for her World Vision sibling. When we talk about where our family's money goes when we give at church, we are hoping that this opens up ever more conversations about our family's participation in other sites of racial and economic inequality. We are stewards of the resources of the kingdom, and helping our kids understand that we are called to not only help by giving financially, but walking alongside the poor.

We take advantage of the time we're given to engage in spiritual conversations. Some churches have catechism classes. Our family has a twenty-five-minute, morning commute to school. Hoping that they don't *feel* belted down, I ask our kids question after question. The goal is to take the seeds of understanding that they get at church and have the kids water them. I ask, "But what does it *mean* that God loves everyone?" "So what is our family supposed to *do* to love everyone?" "*Why* did God make us differently?" The point isn't to download answers into their brains. The point is to show them the outer limits of their own understanding so they can push upon those limits if and when they chose to do so. I know they've chosen to do so when *they* ask me what I think. And if I don't know the answer, I show them the outer

limits of my own understanding when I say, “I wonder about that, too.”

“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” The Sabbath isn’t simply a day off. It’s a different kind of day. Marva Dawn writes that “[W]e will embrace the world on Sabbath days by refraining from trying to fix it.” Most days of the week, our routines involve work and school during which, I trust, we are following Jesus and making the world a better place to live in some way. **The Sabbath is a disruption of our focused labor during which our concentrated effort gives way to ease and rest in God’s lavish leadership.** However, is your Sabbath keeping closed off to the world? Or is it still world embracing? Will your family ever find itself engaged in joyful healing on the Sabbath? These are questions we ask as we seek to embrace the Sabbath as a family.

JOANNAH: *Jeff and Lisa, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedules to talk with us about this important topic. You’ve given us insight into how these conversations about race can take place in our own homes.*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Lisa Liou works for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship as area codirector for graduate & faculty ministries in Southern California. She holds an MA in Theology with an emphasis in biblical studies from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Outside the office she can be found coordinating schedules and transportation for her two children or volunteering at their school.



Jeff Liou serves as a mission and outreach pastor in a local church in Pasadena. He is currently writing his PhD dissertation on race and theology, and has taught as an adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and Azusa Pacific University. As a Taiwanese American raised in rural Oklahoma and now living in California, race and ethnicity fascinate him.



Married for 13 years, they consider themselves Midwesterners at heart, but Southern California has wooed them with culture, cuisine, and the fact that you never need to check the forecast. The kids (daughter, ten, and son, six) attend a Mandarin, dual-language immersion school and love playing in the sand and the snow.



Joannah M. Sadler, managing editor of *Conversations*, lives in Atlanta with her family. She is a licensed marriage and family therapist and has a small counseling practice at Richmond Graduate University. You can continue the conversation with her at contact@conversationsjournal.com.

MORE RESOURCES FOR HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT RACE AND FORMATION:

- Since children start making meaning out of racial differences early on, we have the opportunity to guide the conclusions they engage about the experiences they have. Especially if you’re in a homogenous context, bringing the issue “closer” can be helpful. Let me explain. Let’s say you read books on the Coretta Scott King Book Award list to your children. Unless these stories already capture your personal experience of race and racism in the world, they can be exotic, implausible, or irrelevant to children who are far away from experiences of racism in the United States. Our family has tried to bring such stories “closer” by observing the differences between these stories and our family’s experience. It frequently becomes an opportunity to tell the truth about the history of race in the United States.
- For those in more diverse contexts, understanding how racially diverse groups behave in proximity to one another can be important. Beverly Daniel Tatum’s book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria: And Other Conversations about Race* addresses racial identity development in different racial groups. She also includes a great list of resources for those interested in learning more.
- The Cultural Intelligence Center based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, offers a unique, research-based assessment for adults and youth. The assessment measures intercultural capabilities. In other words, it measures your ability to succeed in a diverse setting. Licensed facilitators can offer assessments, interpret results, and provide action plans to help develop greater intercultural effectiveness. (Full disclosure, I am one.)
- The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan fact tank, frequently publishes fascinating and perspective-expanding research on race and ethnicity (among many other interesting things). Possessing accurate information can help us and our children steer clear of stereotypes that are built on limited, biased experiences of racial difference. Their research also frequently gives readers a glimpse of ways to be meaningfully engaged for positive social change.
- Many of us could really do with an update to our theology and biblical studies when it comes to race. How diverse are the theological and biblical perspectives that influence you? We appreciate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for his sacrifice during the civil rights movement, but if you read or listen to his sermons carefully, you will see how he approaches theology and biblical studies in ways you might not be accustomed to. In fact, we would do well to listen to entire speeches and sermons rather than soundbites that get shared during MLK weekend.