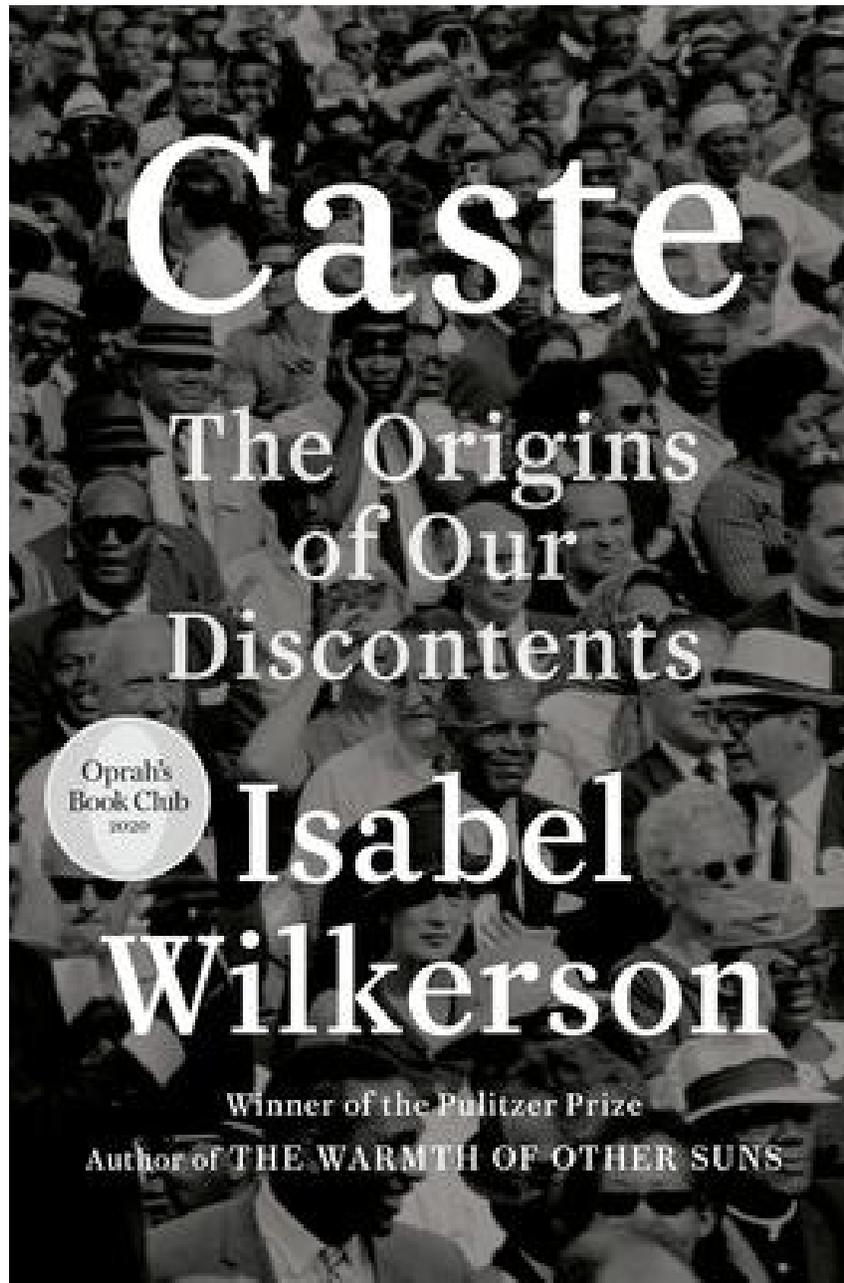


A Common Read Guide



Prepared by:

First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Palm Beaches (6/2022)

(Adapted From Study Guide Materials Developed by the Unitarian Universalist Church of
Bloomington, Indiana)

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Purpose	3
Gratitude	3
Materials	3
Author	3
Format	4
Group Agreements	4
Sample General Covenant:	4
Sample Behavioral Covenant:	4
Quick Reference Items	6
Unitarian Universalism’s Seven (Eight) Principles	6
Unitarian Universalism’s Living Tradition (ie “Six Sources”)	6
Sample Agenda	7
Agenda	7
Discussion Questions	7
Session One - “The Man in the Crowd” & Part One (Chapters 1-3)	7
Session Two - Part Two (Chapters 4-9)	10
Session Three - Part Three (“The Eight Pillars of Caste”)	14
Session Four - Part Four (Chapters 10-18)	19
Session Five - Part Five (Chapters 19-24)	21
Session Six - Part Six (Chapters 25-29)	25
Session Seven - Part 7 (Chapters 30-31 and “Epilogue”)	26
Session Eight - Wrap-Up	28

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to serve as a shared tool for common reading of the book. It is not intended to be a substitute for the book.

This guide has been created specifically from a Unitarian Universalists viewpoint.

Gratitude

The study questions and organization for them come from the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington (Indiana). The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Palm Beaches thanks them profusely for providing such valuable infrastructure for us to undertake this important work.

Materials

The book is widely available in many formats, including audio and electronic versions.

There are several editions (at least three) and bindings. You can find it just about anywhere, including the library.

The book's full title is *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, and was published by Random House Publishing Group in 2020. For the purpose of simplicity, it will be referred to herein as "Caste".

Author

Isabel Wilkerson¹ is an American journalist and the author of "Caste" as well as "The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration" (2010). She was the first woman of African-American heritage to win the Pulitzer Prize in journalism.

Wilkerson was born in Washington, D.C. in 1961 to parents who left Virginia during the Great Migration. Her father was one of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II.



¹ Pictured. Photo credit: Larry D. Moore, CC BY-SA 3.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Wilkerson was the Chicago Bureau Chief of The New York Times. She also taught at Emory, Princeton, Northwestern, and Boston University.

Format

Each meeting will focus on a different part of the book and will generally be a moderated discussion of the reading.

There is no need to cease your attendance just because you missed a session or two.

Group Agreements

As an activity based in a healthy Unitarian Universalist culture, it is important that we all agree on the basic reasons we are together and how we will behave toward each other when we are together for this activity.

As such, it is common in Unitarian Universalists culture to agree on two covenants: a general covenant and a behavioral covenant. The first activity of the group should be to come to these agreements, and each subsequent meeting should begin with a restatement and re-agreement with them.

To speed this process along, a sample set of both the general covenant and the behavioral covenants is provided below. The facilitator of the group can use these as a starting point and then the group can agree to amend them as they feel appropriate to meet their needs.

Sample General Covenant:

By our whole- and open-hearted participation in this group, I and we will live out the mission(s) of our respective congregations and of Unitarian Universalism generally as expressed by our Seven Principles.

Sample Behavioral Covenant:

When acting as a participant in this group, we agree together that we will each individually:

1. Attend as often as possible;
2. Intend to be on time and prepared for the group's meetings. However, if it turns out I'm running a little late, I will still come, but I will not expect the group to go back to any prior point in the meeting to accommodate my late arrival;

3. Assume positive intent;
4. Ask questions from the standpoint of curiosity, rather than arguing or debating another's point of view;
5. Respect and validate other people's experiences;
6. Speak civilly and constructively from my own experiences by using "I" statements when my sharing experiences, feelings, and opinions;
7. Speak civilly and constructively from my own experiences by avoiding generalizing my experience or assuming that others have had the same experiences;
8. Withhold unsolicited personal judgments of each other. We are not here to "fix" anyone, including ourselves;
9. Not speak and not ask anyone else to speak as an expert or spokesperson of any group, in particular this would include their culture, race, or ethnicity;
10. Set and hold my own boundaries for personal sharing. I will ask myself, "What parts of my life story am I comfortable sharing?";
11. Keep a high degree of awareness around how my individual communication style and how much "space" I take up in the meeting affects others. Should I talk less or more? Quieter or louder? More concisely or more detailed?;
12. Speak personal concerns directly with that person, not about them: no triangulating;
13. Recognize that the work we do together is sometimes difficult and that our overall goal is to stay "at the table" together. This will involve taking risks;
14. Honor double confidentiality. This means that I will not share personal content (other than my own stories) with people outside the group and I will not initiate a conversation with anyone in the group about any personal content brought up in the group.

Quick Reference Items

Unitarian Universalism's Seven (Eight) Principles

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part;
8. [Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.]²

Unitarian Universalism's Living Tradition (ie "Six Sources")

1. Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
2. Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
3. Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
4. Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
5. Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
6. Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

² The status of the Eighth Principle is currently "proposed" on an Association-wide basis. However, it has been adopted by a number of congregations after a process of discernment. It is included here for the convenience of those congregations or individuals who have adopted it.

Sample Agenda

Agenda

1. Opening Reading and Chalice Lighting (*5 minutes*)
2. Break into Smaller Breakout Groups
 - a. Structured Check-In (*Maximum 25 minutes, divided evenly amongst all the participants*)
 - b. Structured Group Discussion (*50 minutes*)
3. Return to Single Group
4. Any Housekeeping Items (schedule changes, etc) (*5 minutes*)
5. Closing Reading and Chalice Extinguishing (*5 minutes*)

Discussion Questions

Session One - "The Man in the Crowd" & Part One (Chapters 1-3)

1. Had you ever considered that there might be a caste system in the U.S. prior to hearing about/reading this book?
2. In the opening section (pg xvi), "The Man in the Crowd", we read:

"His personal experience and close connection to the scapegoated caste allowed him to see past the lies and stereotypes so readily embraced by susceptible members—the majority, sadly—of the dominant caste. Though Aryan himself, his openness to the humanity of the people who had been deemed beneath him gave him a stake in their well-being, their fates tied to his. He could see what his countrymen chose not to see."

- a. Consider the author's use of the phrases "allowed him to see" and "chose not to see" and notice that they are not exact opposites.
 - b. Discuss your thoughts about this passage.
 - c. What are some ways that you have been allowed to see, chosen to see, or been forced to see the racial hierarchy in our country?
 - d. Do those in the scapegoated caste have the option of not seeing?
 - e. Does anyone come to mind as "the Person in the Crowd" in the US over the past 10 years?
3. On page 4, the author says:

"... it was common to hear in certain circles the disbelieving cries, 'This is not America', or 'I don't recognize my country', or 'This is not who we are.' Except that this was and is our country and this was and is who we are, whether we have known or recognized it or not."

- a. Reflect on how your beliefs about America have or have not changed over the past 5 years.
- b. Who do you think was not surprised and why not?
- c. Have the past 5 years allowed you to see things that you did not see previously?

On page 11: "... only recently have circumstances forced us, in this current era of human rupture, to search for the unseen stirrings of the human heart, to discover the origins of our discontents."

- d. Does this passage give you hope?
4. On page 13, the author says: "Few problems have ever been solved by ignoring them."

Ignoring a problem implies that you know there is a problem but chose not to pay attention to it.

- a. Discuss how you have or have not felt that racism was a problem in our country during your lifetime.
 - b. What may have kept you unaware of the problem of racism?
 - c. As we actively choose to acknowledge and confront the problem of racism, what are your concerns and your hopes?
5. On page 14 we read, "America is an old house. We can never declare the work over."
- a. How does this make you feel as we embark on this congregational read of Caste?
6. On page 17, consider these two paragraphs:

"Like other old houses, America has an unseen skeleton, a caste system that is as central to its operation as are the studs and joists that we cannot see in the physical buildings we call home. Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions. It is the architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining, in our case, a four hundred-year-old social order. Looking at caste is like holding the country's X-ray up to the light."

"A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning in a hierarchy favoring the dominant caste whose forebears designed it. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groups apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places."

- a. Sit for a minute with these paragraphs. Share a word or two that describes your reaction to these paragraphs.
7. On pages 17-18:

"The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power—which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources—which caste is seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority, and assumptions of competence—who is accorded these and who is not."

- a. How do you feel about the author's description of the hierarchy of caste?
- b. If you are white, how does it feel to be called part of the dominant caste?

8. On page 19, the author says:

"Thus we are all born into a silent war-game, centuries old, enlisted in teams not of our own choosing. The side to which we are assigned in the American system of categorizing people is proclaimed by the team uniform that each caste wears, signaling our presumed worth and potential. That any of us manages to create abiding connections across these manufactured divisions is a testament to the beauty of the human spirit."

- a. What is your reaction to this passage?
- b. Have you been able to create abiding connections across these divisions?
- c. How might the term "Beloved Community" be viewed in the context of this passage?

9. On page 22, Martin Luther King, Jr. was surprised to be introduced in India as "a fellow untouchable from the United States of America".

- a. What do you think prevented him from seeing himself in those terms previously?
- b. If you saw yourself as an untouchable how would it change your day-to-day life?

10. On page 23:

"Just as the studs and joists and beams that form the infrastructure of a building are not visible to those who live in it, so it is with caste. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity."

- a. How does this passage make you feel?

11. On page 27 the author says:

"I wanted to understand the origins and evolution of classifying and elevating one group of people over another and the consequences of doing so to the presumed beneficiaries and to those targeted beneath them."

- a. Do you think it is possible to have a Beloved Community when human hierarchies exist?

12. On page 31, Wilkerson talks about how she began to be able to tell who was high-born and who was low-born among the Indian people "on the basis of the

universal human response to hierarchy—in the case of an upper-caste person, an inescapable certitude in bearing, demeanor, behavior, a visible expectation of centrality.”

- a. Sit with the passage for a while. Over the next week see if you can notice the characteristics she describes in interactions that you witness – first-hand, on TV, in movies, in reading, etc. Mentally change the race of the people involved and see if you can imagine the interactions taking place in the same way.

Session Two - Part Two (Chapters 4-9)

1. On page 40, we read:

“As an actor, you are to move the way you are directed to move, speak the way your character is expected to speak. You are not yourself. You are not to be yourself. Stick to the script and to the part you are cast to play, and you will be rewarded. Veer from the script, and you will face the consequences. Veer from the script and other cast members will step in to remind you where you went off script. Do it often enough or at a critical moment and you may be fired, demoted, cast out, your character conveniently killed off in the plot.”

Reflect on this passage and how it might apply to you at various times in your life.

- a. Are there times you have been the actor who was not to be yourself? The one who veered from the script? The cast member who stepped in to remind someone else they are off-script? The one who was rewarded for staying on script? The one who was punished for going off script?
 - b. What factors determined the role you were cast to play and which of these factors are readily apparent to someone who just met you?
 - c. Where did the script come from and how did you learn it?
 - d. Have laws ever been used to keep you in the role you were cast to play?
 - e. Over the next week pay attention to ways the script and casting of characters is reinforced or disrupted in things you read, hear, or see. Is it easier to notice the times of reinforcement or the times of disruption?
2. For each of the following passages taken from Chapter 4 see if any current-day equivalents come to mind:

“Few Africans were seen as significant enough to be listed in the census by name, ...” (p 41)

“ At first, religion, not race as we now know it, defined the status of people...” (p 41)

“With little further use for the original inhabitants, the colonists began to exile them from their ancestral lands...” (p 43)

“... the victims, not the enslavers, were punished, subject to whatever atrocities the enslaver could devise as a lesson to others.” (p 45)

“But the federal government withdrew for political expediency in 1877, and left

those in the subordinate caste in the hands of the very people who had enslaved them.” (p 48)

“They might have arrived as neutral innocents but would have been forced to choose sides if they were to survive...” (p. 50)

For the current-day equivalents that came to mind, notice if you framed them as things “other people” did – for example, “that political party” or “that corporation” or “that religion”.

- a. Sit with this for a while and be open to considering whether your own words, actions, or inactions might ever have indicated you valued some people more than others.
- b. Have you ever been forced to choose sides? Have you ever forced others to choose sides? What were the consequences of your choice? Of theirs?
- c. How would each of the above passages read differently if we truly had a diverse multicultural Beloved Community?

3. On page 49 we read:

“No one was white before he/she came to America,’ James Baldwin once said.”

and on page 53:

“Africans are not black,’ she said. ‘They are Igbo and Yoruba, Ewe, Akan, Ndebele. They are not black. They are just themselves. They are humans on the land. That is how they see themselves, and that is who they are.”

- a. Is this book making you think of the labels “white” and “black” in new ways?
- b. Why is it important to acknowledge that the labels “white” and “black” are an integral part of the caste system in America, even if we want to see people as “just themselves – humans on the land?”

4. On page 56, we hear Miss Hale telling us “how her father’s dreams have brushed up against caste as she moves around the world.” She says:

“I find that white people are fine with me, as long as I stay in my place. As long as I stay in ‘the container we have built for you.’ ... As soon as I get out of the container it’s a problem.”

- a. Right now, what are some of the containers that black people are expected to stay in?
- b. Who benefits from maintaining these containers? Who loses?
- c. What are some ways that these containers are maintained?

5. On page 67 we read:

“... Color is a fact. Race is a social construct.”

“We think we ‘see’ race when we encounter certain physical differences among

people such as skin color, eye shape, and hair texture,' the Smedleys wrote. 'What we actually 'see'... are the learned social meanings, the stereotypes, that have been linked to those physical features by the ideology of race and the historical legacy it has left us.'"

- a. How do these statements about color and race align with – or stand in contrast to – the understandings you had growing up?

6. On page 67, we read

"The human impulse to create hierarchies runs across societies and cultures, predates the idea of race, and thus is farther reaching, deeper, and older than raw racism and the comparatively new division of humans by skin color."

- a. Consider this statement in light of the 8th principle that calls us to "accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions." What thoughts and feelings does this raise for you? How might those thoughts and feelings change if you held a different position in the hierarchy?

7. In the section "The R Word", which begins on page 68, Wilkerson talks about racism in the current day, saying:

"... Resistance to the word often derails any discussion of the underlying behavior it is meant to describe, thus eroding it of meaning."

"Social scientists often describe racism as the combination of racial bias and systemic power, seeing racism... as primarily the action of people or systems with personal or group power over another person or group with less power..."

"... It has come to mean overt and declared hatred of a person or group because of the race ascribed to them..."

(p 69) ..." Rather than deploying *racism* as an either/or accusation against an individual, it may be more constructive to focus on derogatory actions that harm a less powerful group rather than on what is commonly seen as an easily deniable, impossible-to-measure attribute."

- a. Has your notion of *racism* changed over time? If yes, what has contributed to that change?
- b. Do you feel comfortable talking about racism? If not, do you know why not?
- c. Contrasting racism as "overt and declared hatred of a person or group" with racism as "the action of people or systems with personal or group power over another person or group with less power":
 - i. Which is easier to distance yourself from?
 - ii. Which has the biggest impact on your day-to-day life?

8. On page 70-71. We read:

"Caste is structure. Caste is ranking. Caste is the boundaries that reinforce the fixed assignments based upon what people look like. Caste is a living, breathing entity. It is like a corporation that seeks to sustain itself at all costs."

"...Caste is the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy.... Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred, it is not necessarily personal. It is the worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinking expectations, patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things."

"Casteism is the investment in keeping the hierarchy as it is in order to maintain your own ranking, advantage, privilege, or to elevate yourself above others or keep others beneath you ..."

"... many people—including those we might see as good and kind people—could be casteist, meaning invested in keeping the hierarchy as it is or content to do nothing to change it, but not racist in the classical sense, not active and openly hateful of this or that group."

"... No ethnic or racial category is immune to the messaging we all receive about the hierarchy, and thus no one escapes its consequences."

- a. As you read this section did you feel like you were gaining any new insights or frameworks for understanding events that you have experienced or witnessed?
 - b. What feelings arise when you read "patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things?"
 - c. How do you feel about continuing this Congregational Read of Caste after this section?
 - d. At this point, do you have any new ideas about what it will take to "accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions"?
9. On page 81, we read about Hitler's view of America:

"... He was pleased that the United States had 'shot down the millions of redskins to a few hundred thousand.' He saw the U.S. Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 as 'a model for his program of racial purification' ... The Nazis were impressed by the American custom of lynching its subordinate caste of African-Americans, having become aware of the ritual torture and mutilations that typically accompanied them. Hitler especially marveled at the American 'knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death.'"

- a. Did your history classes teach you that the Nazis looked to the United States as a model for the human classification system they were building?

b. As an American, how did Chapter 8 leave you feeling?

10. In Chapter 9, "The Evil of Silence," we read:

"They were covered in evil, and some were good parents and capable spouses, and yet they did nothing to stop the evil, which had now grown too big for one person to stop, and thus no one person was complicit, and yet everyone was complicit." (pg 89)

- a. How do our "scripts", our "containers", the "worn grooves of comforting routines" work to keep us silent?
- b. Who benefits from our silence?

Session Three - Part Three ("The Eight Pillars of Caste")

On page 99, we read:

"These are the historic origins, the pillars upholding a belief system... It mattered little that they were misperceptions or distortions of convenience, as long as people accepted them and gained a sense of order and a means of justification for the cruelties to which they had grown accustomed, inequalities that they took to be the laws of nature."

- a. Consider the phrases "belief system" and "laws of nature"; what does each bring to mind for you? Can you think of an example when a "law of nature" turned out to be a "belief system?"
- b. Now consider the phrases "sense of order" and "means of justification"; what does each bring to mind for you? Can you think of an example when they were related?
- c. Think of some ways that belief systems and laws of nature can bring a sense of order.
- d. Think of some ways that rules and laws of institutions and governments can bring a sense of order.
- e. Think of times when overvaluing a sense of order caused harm.

Pillar Number One: Divine Will and the Laws of Nature

On page 104, we read:

"The United States and India would become, respectively, the oldest and the largest democracies in human history, both built on caste systems undergirded by their reading of the sacred texts of their respective cultures."

"These tenets, as interpreted by those who put themselves on high, would become the divine and spiritual foundation for the belief in a human

pyramid willed by God, a Great Chain of Being, that the founders would further sculpt in the centuries to follow, as circumstances required.”

- a. Were you surprised to read that the “oldest and the largest democracies in human history” are “both built on caste systems”? What are your thoughts on why this may be the case?
- b. Consider the words “who put themselves on high” and “as circumstances required” and see if you notice any examples of this behavior and justification in the world this week.

Pillar Number Two: Heritability

On page 105, the author says:

“To work, each caste society relied on clear lines of demarcation in which everyone was ascribed a rank at birth...”

On page 106:

“It is the fixed nature of caste that distinguishes it from class, a term to which it is often compared. Class is an altogether separate measure of one’s standing in society. If you can act your way out of it, then it is class, not caste.”

- a. According to the author, both caste and class impose rankings on people. Have you previously thought of caste and class as separate rankings? What contributed to your perception?
- b. As you think about dismantling racism and other oppressions, what will need to change to dismantle caste rankings? class rankings?

Pillar Number Three: Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating

On page 112:

“...endogamy laws had the effect of controlled breeding, of curating the population of the United States. This form of social engineering served to maintain the superficial differences upon which the hierarchy was based, “race” ultimately becoming the result of who was officially allowed to procreate with whom. Endogamy ensures the very difference that a caste system relies on to justify inequality.”

“...The protocol was strictly enforced against lower-caste men and upper-caste women, while upper-caste men, the people who wrote the laws, kept full and flagrant access to lower-caste women, whatever their age or

marital status. In this way, the dominant gender of the dominant caste, in addition to controlling the livelihood and life chances of everyone beneath them, eliminated the competition for its own women and in fact for all women."

- a. From these excerpts, and from the section as a whole, how does the legacy of endogamy laws remain with us today?
- b. Can you think of any more recent laws or practices that continue to keep the castes separate in terms of marriage and mating?

Pillar Number Four: Purity versus Pollution

On page 125:

"By extending the dream of domination over the land and all others in it to anyone who could meet the definition of white, the American caste system became an all-or-nothing gambit for the top rung."

On page 127:

"No matter which route a borderline applicant took to gain acceptance, the caste system shape-shifted to keep the upper caste pure by its own terms. What a thin, frayed thread held the illusions together."

On page 129:

"The burden fell on those in the lowest caste to adjust themselves for the convenience of the dominant caste whenever in contact with white people."

On page 130:

"And the daughter's tears brought the mother to tears over the manufactured terror she had allowed to consume her and over the box that she realized in that moment had imprisoned her for all of her life."

- a. What are some ways that the "dream of domination" and the "route to gain acceptance" are promoted today?
- b. Were any of your feelings about laws and justice through the courts affected as you read about the various rulings regarding whiteness and citizenship in this section?
- c. How did it make you feel to read "the caste system shape-shifted to keep the upper caste pure by its own terms"?
- d. Sit with the 8th principle words "journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved

Community” and the phrases in this section “the burden fell on those in the lowest caste”, “for the convenience of the dominate caste”, “manufactured terror”, “box ... that had imprisoned”, and “frayed thread that held the illusions together.” What comes to mind for you?

Pillar Number Five: Occupational Hierarchy: The Jatis and the Mudsill

On page 132:

“... he defined the fifth pillar of caste, the division of labor based on one’s place in the hierarchy. Therein, he identified the economic purpose of a hierarchy to begin with, that is, to ensure that the tasks necessary for a society to function get handled whether or not people wish to do them...”

On page 135:

“The historic association between menial labor and blackness served to further entrap black people in a circle of subservience in the American mind. They were punished for being in the condition that they were forced to endure. And the image of servitude shadowed them into freedom.”

On page 136:

“Making enslaved people perform on command also reinforced their subjugation. They were made to sing despite their exhaustion or the agonies from a recent flogging or risk further punishment. Forced good cheer became a weapon of submission to assuage the guilt of the dominant caste and further humiliate the enslaved. If they were in chains and happy, how could anyone say that they were being mistreated?”

- a. This section provides some historical context for the ways in which Blacks in the US were forced into certain occupations by the dominant caste. In today’s society, who handles the necessary tasks that no one wants to do and why might that be the case?
- b. Consider the description of “forced good cheer” and whether you had considered it in the terms presented in this section before.
 - i. After reading the description, does it cause you to view any movies/books/advertising differently?
 - ii. Does it cause you to consider the societal expectation that Black people not get angry in a different light?

Pillar Number Six: Dehumanization and Stigma

On pages 141-142:

“Dehumanization is a standard component in the manufacture of an out-group against which to pit an in-group, and it is a monumental task. It is a war against truth, against what the eye can see and what the heart could feel if allowed to do so on its own.”

“Dehumanize the group, and you have completed the work of dehumanizing any single person within it. ... Dehumanization distances not only the out-group from the in-group, but those in the in-group from their own humanity. A caste system relies on dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as reasonable.”

“... Individuality, after all, is a luxury afforded the dominant caste. Individuality is the first distinction lost to the stigmatized.”

On page 144:

“...Whatever was considered a natural human reaction was disallowed for the subordinate caste. During the era of enslavement, they were forbidden to cry as their children were carried off, forced to sing as a wife or husband was sold away...”

“... They were punished for being the humans that they could not help but be.”

On page 146:

“In Virginia, there were seventy-one offenses that carried the death penalty for the enslaved people but only imprisonment when committed by whites... A black father in Georgia could ‘be flogged for teaching his own child’ to read.”

- a. While many events in this section occurred prior to our birth, what are some examples of dehumanization of groups that occur today?
- b. What are some examples of natural human reactions that are disallowed today? Why are they disallowed?
- c. What inequities can black people face today in terms of laws and access to education?

Pillar Number Seven: Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control

On page 151:

“The only way to keep an entire group of sentient beings in an artificially fixed place, beneath all others and beneath their own talents, is with violence and terror, psychological and physical, to preempt resistance before it can be imagined. Evil asks little of the dominant caste other than to sit back and do nothing. All that is needed from bystanders is their silent complicity in the evil committed on their behalf, though a caste system will protect, and perhaps even reward, those who deign to join in the terror.”

- a. While most of the US examples in this section are from the days of slavery and Jim Crow, can you draw any parallels to the violence and terror of those times with events in your own lifetime?
- b. What choices do you have access to that give you the option of remaining silent?
- c. What might you lose by speaking up?

Pillar Number Eight: Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority

On page 164:

“The human meaning of caste for those who live it is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honor and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety,” wrote the preeminent American scholar of caste, Gerald Berreman. ‘A description of caste which fails to convey this is a travesty.’”

- a. Reflect on the UU 1st principle “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” and pillar number eight’s dichotomy of “inherent superiority versus inherent inferiority”. Which message comes across the strongest in our daily lives?

Session Four - Part Four (Chapters 10-18)

1. On p, 175, Wilkerson tells us about her encounter with a man who had emigrated from India to the UK. He asks, if the US has a caste system, which caste is she?

She writes: “That is the question that many Indians ask, in one form or another, upon meeting a fellow Indian. It is a line of inquiry that those in the lowest caste know is coming and that they dread.”

And: “I had not expected this question. Nobody had ever asked me before. How could he not know? Was he merely being polite?”

- a. Wilkerson assumes that caste is obvious to all Americans. Do you agree?
 - b. In what ways might having unspoken caste assumptions make it harder or easier to shift public attitudes than it would be if caste were something we spoke about more readily, in the way Wilkerson suggests that one does in India?
2. In Chapter 11, Wilkerson discusses the recent and well-publicized increase in death rates for middle-aged white Americans. Many of these “deaths of despair” have been attributed to the opioid crisis.
 - a. What would media coverage of the crack and opioid epidemics have looked like in a truly equitable society?
 - b. How might our systems of criminal justice and mental health have evolved differently without caste?
3. In Chapter 11, Wilkerson quotes the mid-20th century sociologist Gunnar Myrdal as claiming that working class whites need caste more than the upper white classes.
 - a. Is this a fair assessment?
 - b. Wilkerson has been criticized for implicit (or maybe explicit!) classism in this book. Is this a fair assessment? If so, how would you re-shape her argument? You may wish to consider the story of the West Highland terrier (Chapter 13) in your response.
4. In Chapter 12, Wilkerson is critical of Western response to the 2013-2014 Ebola outbreak in Europe. In the current pandemic, African nations are generally faring much better than Western nations. How might caste play a role in the poor response of the US and most of Europe to the global pandemic?
5. On Page 221, the author states, “When you are raised and born to a subordinated caste ...and African-American...you are keenly aware of the burden you carry and you know that working twice as hard is a given. But most important, you know there will be no latitude for a misstep, so you must try to be virtually perfect at all times”
 - a. How did this statement sound to you?
 - b. Can you think of times when you have made assumptions about other human beings based upon what they look like?
 - c. What happened as a result of your assumptions?
6. On Page 234 “...the requirements of a hierarchy is that the lowest caste must remain the scapegoat, on the bottom, the culture works to keep it that way by playing up the stereotypes that affirm their lowliness and minimizing indications to the contrary.”

- a. How has your perception of America's inner cities been formed and in what ways can you see how the news media is portraying African-Americans today who live in the inner cities? Cite some examples.
7. On page 243 "...Caught in a system that grants them little true power or authority, they may bend to the will of caste and put down their own if they wish to rise or to be accepted or merely survive in the hierarchy. ... of the few officers who have been prosecuted for police brutality in recent high-profile cases, a notable number of them were men of color..."
 - a. What type of understanding, if any, have you gained from the concepts that the author is conveying in this chapter as it pertains to individuals who are caught in the caste system?
 8. On Page 251 "...Davis and Gardners determined that caste was 'the fundamental division' in the Jim Crow Town they studied, built on economic interdependence, in which 'caste system and the economic system reinforce each other.'"
 - a. What ways today do the caste system and economic system reinforce each other?
 - b. What is the role that our political system plays in this?
 9. On Page 260 the author states, "Under the spell of caste, the majors, like society itself, were willing to forgo their own advancement and glory, and resulting profits, if these came at the hands of someone seen as subordinate."
 - a. When you read this statement what meaning do you gain from it?
 - b. What other examples can you name where the caste system has not permitted advancement?

Session Five - Part Five (Chapters 19-24)

In Chapter 19, "The Euphoria of Hate," Wilkerson recounts the parade upon Hitler's return to Berlin after the Germans seized Paris and wonders if the German people knew the carnage they were celebrating. Yes, they had seen the news reels, had seen their Jewish friends and neighbors taken away, and were still smiling and happy. On page 266 we read:

"Everything that happened to the Jews in Europe, to African-Americans during the lynching terrors of Jim Crow, to Native Americans as their land was plundered and their numbers decimated, to Dalites considered so low that their very shadow polluted those deemed above them—happened because a big enough majority had been persuaded and had been open to being persuaded, centuries ago or in the recent past, that these groups were ordained by God as beneath them, subhuman,

deserving of their fate. Those gathered on that day in Berlin were neither good nor bad. They were human, insecure and susceptible to the propaganda that gave them an identity to believe in, to feel chosen and important.”

1. Consider the different times in history highlighted in this excerpt and imagine yourself in various roles during those periods.
 - a. What are some factors that may have positioned you in one role or another?
 - b. As you imagine yourself in the various roles, how does it make you feel?
 - c. What might cause you to break from your expected role?
 - d. What price might you pay for breaking from your expected role?
 - e. Thinking of the caste system and what we have read so far, how does it inhibit people from freely choosing their roles?
2. In the excerpt above, the author talks about the message accepted by a big enough majority that some groups “were ordained by God as beneath them... deserving of their fate”. What are some secular messages in today’s society that justify the elevation of some groups above others?

On page 207, Wilkerson ends Chapter 19 saying:

“... the enemy, the threat, is not one man, it is us, all of us, lurking in humanity itself.”

Through the UU 1st principle we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. In her Reflection³ on the First Principle, Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker, says:

“Reverence and respect for human nature is at the core of Unitarian Universalist (UU) faith. We believe that all the dimensions of our being carry the potential to do good. We celebrate the gifts of being human: our intelligence and capacity for observation and reason, our senses and ability to appreciate beauty, our creativity, our feelings and emotions. We cherish our bodies as well as our souls. We can use our gifts to offer love, to work for justice, to heal injury, to create pleasure for ourselves and others.”

3. Consider the statements from Wilkerson and Parker quoted above and notice your reactions to them. Reflect on the idea of “both/and” rather than “either/or” as you think about these statements.
 - a. What are some ways the 1st Principle can guide us in our response to inequities perpetuated by systems of hierarchy?
 - b. What are some ways that our UU culture can lead us to create our own systems of hierarchy?

³ www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/1st

4. Reflect on and discuss some of the tensions between aspirational values and the desire to feel secure, chosen, and important.
 - a. What factors increase or decrease these tensions?

Chapter 20 begins:

“Through no fault of any individual born to it, a caste system centers the dominant caste as the sun around which all other castes revolve and defines it as the default-setting standard of normalcy, ...”

and on page 275 we read:

“It evoked a convention of the American caste system that often places the word of the dominant-caste person above the word of a subordinate-caste person even in matters that the subordinated person would be more likely to know about.”

5. Think of an article, TV show, or news item that involved people from different castes.
 - a. Whose perspective was presented as central?
 - b. Whose perspective was presented as knowledgeable?
 - c. Imagine re-casting the story so that another perspective was presented as central / knowledgeable. Discuss how this would change your reaction to the story.
6. Consider and discuss instances where you have noticed an upper-caste person interrupting or questioning the perspective of a lower-caste person.
 - a. What societal factors might consciously or unconsciously influence the intent and the impact of such interactions?
 - b. What might you do if you notice yourself in one of these caste roles?
 - c. What might you do if you notice others in these caste roles?
7. After reading this chapter, reflect on whether you have any new insights into why Blacks may seek Black-only spaces, such as Black Lives of UU.

In Chapter 22, “The Stockholm Syndrome and the Survival of the Subordinate Caste,” we read on page 283:

“Though the syndrome has no universally accepted definition or diagnosis, it is generally seen as a phenomenon of people bonding with those who abuse or hold them hostage. ... It is regarded as a survival mechanism in which people must become attuned to the people with power over them and learn to adjust themselves to their expectations to please them.”

Wilkerson writes about the case of a dominant-caste judge who sentenced a black man to 10 days in jail for being late to jury duty, attributing the judge's action to "the one-way expectation of empathy from the powerless toward the empowered." On page 285 we read:

"This expectation feels fueled by a perverse need to see harmed people demonstrate nobility,' the poet Hanif Abdurraqib wrote in Pacific Standard, 'because that's how we can believe the myths that political suffering builds character, and that righteousness rather than power will inevitably triumph.'"

On page 290, we read:

"Caste is more than a rank, it is a state of mind that holds everyone captive, the dominant imprisoned in an illusion of their own entitlement, the subordinate trapped in the purgatory of someone else's definition of who they are and who they should be."

Examples throughout this chapter show how certain behaviors and roles are expected based on caste. These expectations can hide truths, as in the case of the white women who adopted, abused, and eventually killed six black children and themselves. These expectations can prompt forgiveness in exchange for survival. These expectations can make people feel unworthy of taking up peoples' time.

8. Reflect on times in your own life when you have felt the need to be attuned to – and deferential toward – people with more power than you. How did this make you feel?
9. What were some cases over the past few years when harmed people demonstrated exceptional nobility? How did you feel about them?
10. What were some cases of the past few years when harmed people stood up and spoke out against the harm? How did you feel about them?
11. Reflect on what in your own life story may have influenced your feelings in these cases. Has reading and discussing "Caste" given you any new insights regarding what you notice and how you feel?

In Chapter 23, "Shock Troops on the Borders of Hierarchy," Wilkerson says (p. 292)

"... historically, caste trumps class" and (p. 293) "... people who were lowest caste but who had managed somehow to rise above their station have been the shock troops on the front lines of hierarchy." She shares stories – most from recent history and many from her own life – of the indignities that upper-class Blacks have been subjected to.

12. Which, if any, of these stories surprised you?

13. If you had been present when any of these incidents took place, do you think you would have noticed the mistreatment as it took place?
14. Discuss different ways you might respond if you witness similar transgressions in the future. Discuss how some responses may maintain or reinforce traditional caste hierarchies. Discuss how some well-intentioned responses might have negative consequences.

In Chapter 24, "Cortisol, Telomeres, and the Lethality of Caste," we learn about the effects of the caste hierarchy on a variety of health indicators.

15. Were you surprised by any of the findings presented in this chapter?
16. What are some of the changes – in ourselves and our institutions – that will need to occur to address the health disparities highlighted in this chapter?

Session Six - Part Six (Chapters 25-29)

1. At the beginning of Chapter 26, Wilkerson describes a conversation she had with journalist Gwen Ifill in late 2015 about the real possibility that Donald Trump would win the 2016 presidential election. Most political commentators and most of us initially dismissed this notion.
 - a. Knowing what you know now, what do you think Ifill and Wilkerson saw that so many others failed to see?
 - b. Provide examples of ways in which our political commentary underestimates the role of racism and caste in the rise and persistence of Trumpism.
2. On p. 326, Wilkerson writes,

"The Republican reverence for its base of white evangelicals stands in stark contrast to the indifference often shown the Democratic base of African-Americans, who are devalued for a host of reasons, among them their suppressed state at the bottom of the social hierarchy."

 - a. Sit with that description for a moment.
 - b. Provide examples of Democratic failure to take the agenda of African-Americans seriously, from both moderate Democrats and the Left.
 - c. What would it look like to take that agenda seriously, both locally and nationally?
3. In Chapter 27, Wilkerson observes that, although the Confederacy lost the Civil War, it "would win the all-important peace" in the succeeding decades.

- a. In what way have Lost Cause tropes and mythology become pervasive in our culture, not just within the South, but more generally in American culture?
 - b. How do the successes of the Lost Cause myth perpetuate white supremacy?
 - c. What can we do to counter these effects?
4. At the end of Chapter 27, Wilkerson quotes German students explaining whether or not they felt guilt for the Holocaust:

“Yes, we are Germans and Germans perpetrated this... it wasn’t just Germans, it is the older Germans who were here and who should feel guilt. We were not here. But we do feel that, as the younger generation, we should acknowledge and accept the responsibility. And for the generations to come, we should be the guardians of the truth.”

- a. What would it look like to have a cultural commitment by Americans of all generations, to be the guardians of the truth about slavery and Jim Crow?
5. What kinds of monuments do we need to reckon with our history of slavery and racial injustice? Where should they be?
6. At the end of Chapter 29, Wilkerson recounts a conversation in 2018 with Taylor Branch. At the end, Branch said,

“So the real question would be if people were given the chance to vote between democracy and whiteness, how many would choose whiteness?”

- a. How would you answer this question?
 - b. What steps can or should every-day citizens take to tip the balance toward democracy?

Session Seven - Part 7 (Chapters 30-31 and “Epilogue”)

1. On page 362 Wilkerson writes,

“The caste system had a way of policing the behavior of everyone in its wake to keep everyone in their assigned place.”

 - a. After reading this book how has your understanding changed in regards to the comparison that the author points out between the caste system in India and our system of oppression in this country?
2. Chapter 31 describes an experience that the author had in relation to having to be vulnerable to someone else and dependent upon them for their expertise. The author eased the difficult situation by connecting with the plumber on an experience that they both could relate to.

- a. How important is relationship building as we begin to dismantle systems of oppression and racism?
 - b. What ways have you thought about how to build relationships with someone who doesn't look like you?
3. "The Radicalization of the Dominant Caste": The author describes a situation where racism was apparent.

"Part of me resented that she could go ballistic and get away with it when I might not even be believed. It was a caste privilege to go off in the restaurant the way she did."

- a. What thoughts, ideas or feelings arose when you read this statement on page 368?
4. On page 379 we read,

"The separation of the races is not a disease of the colored people, but a disease of the white people."

- a. How has the understanding of this phase increased because of your reading of "Caste"?
5. On page 380 we read

"A caste system persists in part because we, each and every one of us, allow it to exist—in large and small ways, in our everyday actions, in how we elevate or demean, embrace or exclude, on the basis of the meaning attached to people's physical traits".

- a. As you ponder this, what thoughts, feelings, and reactions come up for you?
6. Also on page 380:

"Once awakened, we then have a choice. We can be born to the dominant caste but choose not to dominate. We can be born to a subordinated caste but resist the box others force upon us. And all of us can sharpen our powers of discernment to see past the external and to value the character of a person rather than demean those who are already marginalized or worship those born to false pedestals."

- a. Now that you have read this book, what have you learned about the history of racism in this country?
 - b. What type of actions can you see yourself taking as you now have been awakened?

- c. What type of actions or responses can we take as a religious community to begin to dismantle systems of oppression and racism in the community(ies) in which you live?

Session Eight - Wrap-Up

As our shared reading of *Caste* draws to a close, you are invited to respond to the following prompts. Consider writing your responses to share anonymously with others in the group, or to return to for your own reflection.

1. Summarize your experience reading “*Caste*” and the one or two take-aways that you believe are most critical for you in terms of your perspective and what you do moving forward.
2. Name some of your multiple identities, personal stories, and societal influences and reflect on how they affected your reactions to this book.
3. In the “Acknowledgements,” Isabel Wilkerson says “This is a book that I did not seek to write but had to write, in the era in which we find ourselves.” Consider what you know of Wilkerson’s lived experience and reflect on how that experience shaped this book she says she had to write.
4. In public appearances (including one in Bloomington, Indiana) Wilkerson has made the following statements:

“caste is a matter of life and death” and

“radical empathy can save lives while we work toward true structural change.”

In her book, Wilkerson writes “The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power—which groups have it and which do not.” (pg 17)

and “Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in place.” (pg 19)

Supplement the insights you gained through reading “*Caste*” with this piece⁴ on white supremacy culture.

- a. Reflect on how you and institutions you are part of create and maintain hierarchies that give some groups more power than others.
 - b. What might true structural change look like in these institutions?
5. Reflect on whether you have, consciously or unconsciously, considered Wilkerson to be the definitive voice for the Black perspective at this time in our country.

⁴ https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf

- a. Is there someone you consider to be the definitive voice for the white perspective at this time in our country?
- b. Are you surprised by these prompts or your responses to them?

In Pillar Number Six: Dehumanization and Stigma, Wilkerson writes:

“Individuality, after all, is a luxury afforded to the dominant caste. Individuality is the first distinction lost to the stigmatized.”

The video “Race, Caste, and Inequality - A Student-Focused Discussion”⁵ offers one opportunity to hear different Black perspectives as participants bring their own lived experience and reflect on Wilkerson’s book.

Watch this entire video and notice points in the video when you find yourself wanting to stop watching.

- c. Can you identify what was said / what you were feeling at those points?
- d. Reflect on how your reaction to the student discussion was shaped by your own lived experience, including your reading of “Caste”.

⁵ https://iu.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/t/1_1ycscvnc