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WITH  
KRISTA TIPPETT

*September 15, 2016*

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**TRANSCRIPT FOR RUBY SALES — WHERE DOES IT HURT?**

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**KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST:** “Where does it hurt?” That’s a question the civil rights legend Ruby Sales learned to ask during the days of that movement — a question she found to have a power to drive to the heart of the matter. It’s a question we scarcely know how to ask in public life now. But it gets at human dynamics we will be living and reckoning with, whoever our next president might be. Ruby Sales says we must be as clear about what we love as about what we hate if we want to make change. And even as she unsettles some of what we think we know about the force of religion in civil

rights history, Ruby Sales names a “spiritual crisis of white America” as a calling of this time. I interviewed her at a convening of 20 theologians seeking to reimagine the public good of theology for this century.

**MS. RUBY SALES:** What is it that public theology can say to the white person in Massachusetts who’s heroin addicted? That’s why Donald Trump is essential. People think he’s speaking to that pain that they’re feeling. I don’t hear anyone speaking to the 45-year-old person in Appalachia who feels like they’ve been eradicated — because whiteness is so much smaller today than it was yesterday, because there’s nothing wrong with being European American. That’s not the problem. It’s almost like white people don’t believe that other white people are worthy of being redeemed.

**MS. TIPPETT:** I’m Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*.

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoe Keating]

**MS. TIPPETT:** Ruby Sales is one of just 50 people spotlighted in the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. She lives in Atlanta, where she runs the non-profit Spirit House Project.

**MS. TIPPETT:** Ruby, when I was getting ready to interview you, there are two sources that I found that were wonderful for me for preparing. And one was a series of conversations you did with Vincent Harding, who we miss.

**MS. SALES:** Definitely.

**MS. TIPPETT:** Yeah — and who was such a great person. And also, a panel that you did at the American Academy of Religion meeting last year. And Serene Jones told me about this after it happened and said it was just so astonishing. And I’ve been quoting from this panel ever since, including in a conversation I had with Patrisse Cullors of Black Lives Matter a few months ago. And that also motivated me to want to have you here with us. So I want to start where I always start my conversations by just asking how you would start to talk about — what was the spiritual background of your childhood?

**MS. SALES:** I grew up in the South. I’m from three generations of Southern Baptist preachers. My father was a Southern Baptist preacher and a chaplain in the Army. And I was bred on black folk religion. It was a religion that combined the ideals of American democracy with a theological sense of justice. It was a religion that said that people who were considered property and disposable were essential in the eyes of God and even essential in a democracy, although we were enslaved. And it was a religion where the language and the symbols were accessible, that the God talk was accessible, to even 7-year-olds. As a 7-year-old, I could sing 50 songs without missing a line. And everybody in the community had access to the theological microphone. So as a little black girl growing up in the South, I was deeply influenced by this black folk religion.

**MS. TIPPETT:** You said something to Vincent Harding — you said, “Religion, for me, growing up in Columbus, Georgia, was the ground that I stood on that positioned us to stand against the wind.”

**MS. SALES:** The winds — yes — to stand against the winds of Southern apartheid, to stand against the winds — how do I describe — I grew up in the heart of Southern apartheid, and I'm not saying that I didn't realize that it existed, but our parents were spiritual geniuses who created a world and a language where the notion that I was inadequate or inferior or less than never touched my consciousness.

I grew up believing that I was a first class human being and a first class person. And our parents were spiritual geniuses who were able to shape a counterculture of black folk religion that raised us from disposability to being essential players in society. And it also taught us something serene about love. "I love everybody. I love everybody. I love everybody in my heart." And so hate was not anything in our vocabulary.

**MS. TIPPETT:** I love that — hate was not in your vocabulary.

**MS. SALES:** Absolutely not.

**MS. TIPPETT:** But you do make this really important distinction between black folk religion, which is what nourished you, which is what formed you, and the black church and black preachers, which are in the picture, but which is mostly what we've seen as the picture. And you say in one place that the heart of the Southern Freedom Movement, it wasn't as much black preachers as it was black congregations, ordinary people, who participated in extraordinary things on this foundation that you're describing.

**MS. SALES:** Well, first of all, black folk religion grew up in the bush harbors on plantations. There were no buildings. There was not an institutionalized church.

**MS. TIPPETT:** It was like outdoors in a sanctuary, trees, secret meetings. Right.

**MS. SALES:** Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. It was a gathering spot for the community. And it was in this setting that black people began to talk about God in this society where they were enslaved. And everybody participated. The spirituals came up out of this environment. And everyone had a voice in the conversation, so it was not as if the preacher's voice was the most primary and most essential voice. It was participatory.

It was black folk religion. It was ordinary black people and not black preachers. Most black preachers stood over and against the movement. But it was really ordinary black people in the South who really forced the church to allow mass meetings and other places to meet there. And Martin Luther King should not be seen as the black church. He came out of black folk religion and was part of the Southern Freedom Movement.

**MS. TIPPETT:** And one of the things I start to understand as I listen to you and read you is that a lot of the themes that when I talk to somebody like John Lewis, when I hear about how — or Vincent Harding, how the philosophy of nonviolence was developed — and they were studying Gandhi and Thoreau and Jesus and practicing and doing role-playing. But what I understand from you is that a lot of the elements of that actually were in black folk religion.

**MS. SALES:** In black folk — yes.

**MS. TIPPETT:** So when you say you learned to love...

**MS. SALES:** “I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside, down by the riverside and study war no more.”

**MS. TIPPETT:** Yeah.

**MS. SALES:** Nonviolence. When you look at black spirituals, you hear a theology and a philosophy of nonviolence, and so that this was an essential part of black folk religion. It was not a retaliatory religion. It was a religion predicated on right relations and love and nonviolence.

**MS. TIPPETT:** And I also hear you saying things like, “you learned agape,” right? You lived agape.

**MS. SALES:** Yes, absolutely.

**MS. TIPPETT:** And it wasn’t just that hate wasn’t in your vocabulary. You’ve said it this way. You also learned, “I can’t control the world, but I can control myself. And you are not going to coerce me into hating.”

**MS. SALES:** Yes. That’s the meaning of the song “I love everybody. I love everybody in my heart. And you can’t make me hate you. And you can’t make me hate you in my heart.” Now, that’s very powerful because you have to understand that this spiritual — it was an acknowledgement not only that we control our internal lives, but also it contested the notion of the omnipotent power of the white enslaver. That was very revolutionary and very profound.

**MS. TIPPETT:** And one thing you’ve said — and you’ve likened yourself to the Black Lives Matter, a lot of the kids who are involved in that today, that you were not especially religious, right? That you had this grounding in church, but you said a lot of you used to complain when there had to be these obligatory prayers before everything started.

**MS. SALES:** It was downright embarrassing.

[laughter]

**MS. SALES:** I mean, you couldn’t go to a mass meeting without these people always praying. And it was like, “My God, do we have to do this?” But when I first went on my first demonstration, I was really kind of naïve, unsophisticated, a peasant who had been bred on black folk religion and really believed — I was a part of the Pepsi generation who really believed that right was right and it would win out.

So I went on my first demonstration — and I’m embarrassed to say this — but we were surrounded by horses and state troopers who wouldn’t let us go to the bathroom, and I kept looking up at the sky, waiting for the Exodus story to happen to me.

**MS. TIPPETT:** [laughs]

**MS. SALES:** And it didn’t happen. I expected God to appear on some chariot to open up in the sky, because I couldn’t imagine that we were so right and God would be so wrong in my 17-year-old mind. I couldn’t imagine that. I mean my 16-year-old mind. And so I lost religion that day, and I

slowly became a Marxist. I became a materialist. If it wasn't economics, if it wasn't race, then it didn't exist. I had no space in my life for — and I thought black folks were religious fanatics. [laughs]

**MS. TIPPETT:** Well, so tell us how did you eventually circle back to the place — maybe it's not back — where you went to Divinity School, where you started to be a public theologian? And what did that mean?

**MS. SALES:** Well, I think the paradox is that even when we think we've left home, we never really go anywhere. And so I think that although I thought that I was not religious, the truth of the matter is I was. And I went to church all the time and that was the Sweet Honey Concerts, and Bernice Johnson Reagon kept us in church. And all of the songs that she sang and all of the music and the God talk that she would do from the stage, she became the preacher for the generation of African American young people.

She, herself, was the daughter of a preacher, who thought that we had left the church. But black folk religion was so deeply ingrained in us that we never really left it. So I carried with me the songs. I carried with me the testimonies. I carried with me the whole notion of right relations. That was the cornerstone of how I imagined justice as basic...

**MS. TIPPETT:** Even when you didn't feel religious.

**MS. SALES:** Right. I really never left. But a defining moment for me happened when I was getting my locks washed, and my locker's daughter came in one morning, and she had been hustling all night. And she had sores on her body, and she was just in a state, drugs. So something said to me, "Ask her, 'Where does it hurt?'" And I said, "Shelly, where does it hurt?" And just that simple question unleashed territory in her that she had never shared with her mother.

And she talked about having been incested. She talked about all of the things that had happened to her as a child, and she literally shared the source of her pain. And I realized, in that moment, listening to her and talking with her, that I needed a larger way to do this work, rather than a Marxist, materialist analysis of the human condition.

And also, I was riding down the road one day in Washington D.C. after having been at a demonstration against the war in Iraq. And suddenly, out of nowhere, I started crying, and I realize that God had been with me even when I hadn't been with myself. And those moments made me really begin to seek, to go back to really think deeply about black folk religion and to really want to develop, in a very intentional way, an inner life that had to do with how I lived in the world.

[music: "Give Your Hands to Struggle" by Bernice Johnson Reagon]

**MS. TIPPETT:** I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*. Today, a conversation with civil rights veteran and public theologian, Ruby Sales. I interviewed her in our studio on Loring Park, as part of a convening about reimagining public theology for our time.

[music: "Give Your Hands to Struggle" by Bernice Johnson Reagon]

**MS. TIPPETT:** You have said that you are aware of a question alive in the world today of young people, young black people, I think. "How could black adults have thrown us into a den of people who don't love us?" What's that? What are you describing there?

**MS. SALES:** Oh, that's very deep and very complicated. Let me just say something about Black Lives Matter. Although we are familiar with it within a contemporary context, that has always been the cry of African Americans from the point of its captivity, through enslavement, through Southern apartheid. And Northern migration and de facto segregation was the assertion that black lives matter in a society that said that black people were property, in a society that said that black lives did not matter.

And part of what happened after post-Civil Rights Southern Freedom Movement is that people thought that what the movement had been about was jobs, position, status. When, in fact, it had not been about that at all. It had been about — when King talked about the mountain top, he was talking about a higher level of consciousness. He was talking about a movement where we harmonized the “I” with the “we” and the “we” with the “I.”

He was talking about a Pentecost moment. And so with that misunderstanding where the movement became materialized, the things that had really united black people and held us together in terms of being a part of a community where we were well-guarded and well-protected, that many of us, many young people like myself, that we all left our homes, never to look back.

And in doing that, we left the black community unguarded. And the mission was no longer a beloved community, but the mission became integration. And what that meant was that generations of young African American children were pushed to achieve this mission, and we sent them into places that were unsafe, where they were humiliated and their egos were decimated in structures. As Toni Morrison said, “Out there, they don't love our children.”

And these generations of African American children have felt abandoned, and there's a chasm that has grown up between younger and older African Americans based on this sense of younger people of having felt that they were abandoned. And they don't understand why did we send them, young children, into places like that without any protection.

**MS. TIPPETT:** So I want to open this up. Let's hear what is on your mind.

**DR. DAVID KIM:** This is David Kim. I just want to say, Ruby, thank you. I wanted to start with that note of gratitude and indebtedness. Amongst the things that struck me in all the things you were talking about just now was this idea of the abandonment of children, and our abandonment of our responsibility to children.

**MS. SALES:** Yes.

**DR. KIM:** How do we regain their faith in us? How do we regain their trust? 'Cause those communities that you grew up in, the black folk religions, there was deep and abiding trust that was a part of that deep and abiding love. How are those young folks going to hear that we love them? How are they going to trust that we love them?

**MS. SALES:** I think that there's another side to that question. It is not only how do we let young people know that we love them, but how do young people show their love for older people? So I think that relationship is very important. And I think that's a very challenging, David, and important

question in a world where we do not — where community does not exist as it has once existed, where all over the world, you have fragmentation. In the United States, you have gentrification, you have the devastation of public spaces that once unified people together in relationship to one another.

So it's very hard — that's going to be the role of public theologies for the 21st century is a redefinition of community and our relationship to each other. And so I think we are called upon. In many ways, it's both challenging, but it also is a very exciting moment in theology because we can expand our understanding — not only our understanding, but the reality of a global beloved community.

**MS. TIPPETT:** Yeah. I just want to say — just to affirm that — so one thing we know about our media space is that young people are flooding in. And one of the things they like about what we do is that we give them the voices of elders. There's this hunger for cross-generational relationship.

**MS. SALES:** There's a hunger. I was in a group three weeks ago with John Lewis that Black Lives Matter Atlanta had convened, and we were dealing with the intergenerational divide. And somewhere in that conversation, I just simply said — I offered an apology for the ways in which they had been abandoned. And that shifted the whole mood in the room. And there was a very clear understanding that there is a hunger that young people have to be claimed, to be a part of an intergenerational — a transgenerational experience, to know people. Because without knowing another generation, they feel incomplete, just like I feel incomplete without knowing younger people.

And so we are incomplete without knowing each other. So that intimacy, which has been one of the greatest trigger-fingers of the empire, is to destroy intimacy, to destroy how we know each other. And that the black community has been under this assault ever since enslavement where black people's families were sold away from each other. We've had to constantly fight to maintain that intimacy. And we were doing a good job of it, except, paradoxically, since integration, the intimacy has been further shattered.

**MS. TIPPETT:** And to your point about theology needing history, how is history transmitted but by a cross-generational — I mean, that's one important way, I think.

**MS. SALES:** Let me just say something about that. I think that one of the things that theologies must have is hindsight, insight, and foresight. That is complete sight. And I think that fragmentation really shatters that sight, and it says that it's not an "I" sight, it's a "we" sight. And so that I think one of the things — I don't like aging a whole lot. The ankles, the knees hurt, et cetera. But one of the things I do like is that from where I sit on my front porch, I have hindsight, insight, and foresight. And that's a beautiful gift of aging.

[laughter]

**MS. SALES:** Let me just say something before we have a question. I really think that one of the things that we've got to deal with is that how is it that we develop a theology or theologies in a 21st-century capitalist technocracy where only a few lives matter? How do we raise people up from disposability to essentiality? And this goes beyond the question of race. What is it that public theology can say to the white person in Massachusetts who's heroin-addicted because they feel that their lives have no meaning, because of the trickle-down impact of whiteness in the world today?

What do you say to someone who has been told that their whole essence is whiteness and power and domination? And when that no longer exists, then they feel as if they are dying or they get caught up in the throes of death, whether it's heroin addiction.

I don't hear any theologies speaking to the vast amount — that's why Donald Trump is essential, because although we don't agree with him, people think he's speaking to that pain that they're feeling. So what is the theologies? I don't hear anyone speaking to the 45-year-old person in Appalachia, who is dying of a young age, who feels like they've been eradicated because whiteness is so much smaller today than it was yesterday. Where is the theology that redefines to them what it means to be fully human? I don't hear any of that coming out of anyplace today.

And we've got a spirit — there's a spiritual crisis in white America. It's a crisis of meaning, and I don't hear — we talk a lot about black theologies, but I want a liberating white theology. I want a theology that speaks to Appalachia. I want a theology that begins to deepen people's understanding about their capacity to live fully human lives and to touch the goodness inside of them rather than call upon the part of themselves that's not relational. Because there's nothing wrong with being European American. That's not the problem. It's how you actualize that history and how you actualize that reality. It's almost like white people don't believe that other white people are worthy of being redeemed.

And I don't quite understand that. It must be more sexy to deal with black folk than it is to deal with white folk if you're a white person. So as a black person, I want a theology that gives hope and meaning to people who are struggling to have meaning in a world where they no longer are as essential to whiteness as they once were.

[music: "Black Feather Wishes Rise" by Brightblack Morning Light]

**MS. TIPPETT:** You can listen again and share this conversation with Ruby Sales through our website, [onbeing.org](http://onbeing.org).

I'm Krista Tippett. *On Being* continues in a moment.

[music: "Black Feather Wishes Rise" by Brightblack Morning Light]

**MS. TIPPETT:** I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*. Today, in a conversation with Civil Rights veteran and public theologian Ruby Sales. I've been quoting her in other conversations across this past year of so much tumult, including in a conversation I had at the California Endowment with its president Dr. Robert Ross and Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors.

**MS. TIPPETT:** I heard something that I hadn't been able to stop thinking about at the American Academy of Religion meeting this year, which is like 12,000 theologians. Ruby Sales, one of these women whose name we don't remember, talked about how — she said none of us considered ourselves to be religious in the way our parents or grandparents were. And there was a lot of religion, but we were rejecting so much of what we'd grown up with. We didn't think that defined us.

And we only realized later that, even though that was true, we were steeped in that tradition, in the hope, in the sense of love, in the songs, in the community. We had our armor on. And she said, and then we became involved in policy, and we sent our children out into the empire without their

armor on. And I'd love to know how you hear that and think about it.

**Ms. Cullors:** I love that. I love that she said that. I think we think about it differently. I mean, to be honest with you, so many of us in the Black Lives Matter movement have either been pushed out of the church, because many of us are queer and out, many of us — the church has become very patriarchal for us as women, and so that's not necessarily where we have found our solace. And I think we have had to contend with that during this movement. How do we relate to the black church? And how do we understand ourselves in relationship to the black church inside of this movement?

But that hasn't stopped us from being deeply spiritual in this work. And I think, for us, that looks like healing justice work, the role of healing justice, which is a term that was created probably about seven or eight years ago and was really looking at how, as organizers, but also as people that are marginalized, that are impacted by racism and patriarchy, that are impacted by white supremacy, how do we show up in this work as our whole selves? How do we be in it as our best selves? And how do we look at the work of healing?

I'm really appreciative that Dr. Ross calls himself a healer because I believe that this work of Black Lives Matter is actually healing work. It's not just about policy. It's why, I think, some people get so confused by us. They're like, "Where's the policy?" I'm like, "You can't policy your racism away." We no longer have Jim Crow laws, but we still have Jim Crow hate.

[*music: "Open" by Margins*]

**MS. TIPPETT:** I finally sat down with Ruby Sales at our studio on Loring Park in Minneapolis, as part of a conversational convening with 20 theologians about reimagining the public good of theology for our time.

**MS. TIPPETT:** Omid.

**DR. OMID SAFI:** Well, let me also just thank you for what you've shared with us. Even if some of us have heard a couple of these stories before, it's something entirely different to hear it come in the voice of and from the experience of someone that has lived with them and lived through them.

And when you speak about this love that has been in your bones, this love that you've been raised with of the black folk tradition in the hymns, I'm all with you. And all of us want to see love at the center of the beloved community. At the very same time, when I sit with and I listen to black folks in the country right now, to Palestinians, to queer folk, to undocumented folk, there's also a rage and an outrage. How do you walk simultaneously with...

**MS. SALES:** I'm glad you said simultaneously.

**DR. SAFI:** Simultaneously, not at the expense of one another, but how do we, with one breath and in one heart that is trying to be whole, acknowledge this rage and outrage and suffering, which is real, among so many people out on the margins of the power structures and this desire for a healing and transformative love that can lead to a beloved community?

**MS. SALES:** Well, first of all, as you just pointed out, love is not antithetical to being outraged. Let's be very clear about that. And love is not antithetical to anger. There are two kinds of anger. There's redemptive anger, and there's non-redemptive anger. And so redemptive anger is the anger that says that — that moves you to transformation and human up-building. Non-redemptive anger is the anger that white supremacy roots itself in. So we have to make a distinction. So people think that anger, in itself, is a bad emotion, and it's where you begin your conversation.

I became involved in the Southern Freedom Movement, not merely because I was angry about injustice, but because I love the idea of justice. So it's where you begin your conversation. So most people begin their conversation with "I hate this" — but they never talk about what it is they love. And so I think that we have to begin to have a conversation that incorporates a vision of love with a vision of outrage.

And I don't see those things as being over and against each other. I actually see them — you can't talk about injustice without talking about suffering. But the reason why I want to have justice is because I love everybody in my heart. And if I didn't have that feeling, that sense, then there would be no struggle.

**MS. TIPPETT:** One more question.

**REV. BRODERICK GREER:** I have a question about how you — you've alluded to this, difference between black folk religion and the black church. I'm a son of the black church, not currently a part of the black church. I'm an Episcopal priest, which is basically the opposite. It's a 91 percent white church.

**MS. SALES:** Right.

**REV. GREER:** And I'm doing theology differently as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement. And I've heard within myself, hearing my grandparents, hearing my parents, hearing people like yourself who have firsthand experience of that era in American history — and you were able to name something that I've heard for a couple of years but haven't been able to articulate, and that's the difference between black folk religion and black church. Can you say more about that, and really name that for me?

**MS. SALES:** Well, first of all, it's very obvious when I say black folk religion, I'm talking about a religion that came out of ordinary folk. And I'm also talking about a religion that began during enslavement in the fields of America. It was a religion that offered an alternative view of God from the view of God that empire gave us. It was that kind of beloved community vision.

It was a vision of justice, and it was also a vision that predicated itself on a very strong sense of agape, that even was able, as Martin Luther King would say, was able to find the humanity in people who were slave owners. And it was also a theology of resistance, a theology of reaffirmation. I might be a slave, but I'm somebody. It was a theology of hope.

When you really want to understand black folk theology, let me give you an example. Black prayers that our ancestors forged. "I want to thank you for waking me up in the morning," which contested the power of the slave master, acknowledging the power of someone greater, that the slave master — I don't like the word "master" — that the enslaver was not the alpha and omega of black life.

“I want to thank you for the use of my limbs and the multiplication of my tongue.” Can you imagine what beautiful language — “for the use of my limbs and the multiplication of my tongue. And I want to say, thank you, sir.” Calling God “sir” was not patriarchal, but it was a way of slapping the enslaver in the face and saying, “You’re not my ‘sir,’ you’re not my master.” Instead, it bowed down to the altar of God, of something greater than human existence.

It was also — contained all of the sorrow and all of the expectations. I’m going to tell God how you treat me. “I’ve got a right. You’ve got a right. I’ve got a right to the Tree of Life.” These were people who were in chains, who were enslaved, asserting their right to the fruit of democracy, to the Tree of Life. That’s black folk religion. Always, there is a tension between liberation and oppression, between justice and injustice, between love and hate.

And I would go on further to say that black folk religion, the kind of resistance movements that came out of black folk religion, have saved America from tilting over into the abyss of fascism. It has been the salvation of a country. It has been the balance to talk about that kind of justice, and god talk, and reaffirmation, and love, and right relations. To talk about that in the heat of empire, to talk about God as a liberating God, has really been an important stopgap to save America from itself.

[music: “We Move Lightly” by Dustin O’Halloran]

**MS. TIPPETT:** I’m Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*. Today, in a conversation with Ruby Sales, the Civil Rights veteran and public theologian. Her name first entered history on August 20, 1965. On that day, in Lowndes County, Alabama, a young white seminarian, Jonathan Daniels, threw his body in the way of a bullet directed at the then 17-year-old Ruby Sales, and he died instantly. She later created a non-profit, which she still runs, called the Spirit House Project, in honor of Jonathan Daniels’ legacy.

**MS. TIPPETT:** I feel like everything I thought I might ask you in closing is inadequate. And I’m going to bring in Twitter, which — I was tweeting lines from something I wrote, and the tweet that happened to go up the other night when Orlando happened was from John Lewis. And it was a line about — you always have to “insist on seeing the goodness in everyone. You don’t give up on anyone.”

**MS. SALES:** Yes.

**MS. TIPPETT:** And that lands in some of these most fraught moments in America awkwardly, right? And I think, on the one hand, I really do believe that most — well, I believe so many of us experience the truth in that kind of statement, and yet, how do you reconcile that? Now, you remind us of the violence that you lived with, that so many people lived with, on a daily, hourly, minute by minute basis. And you actually are somebody — somebody took a bullet for you, right?

But how do you think about how to make real and reasonable that kind of elemental truth, insistence, of the Civil Rights Movement? And I think of the black folk church in our world right now in the midst of these hard, hard places.

**MS. SALES:** Well, let me just start, and I’m probably going to get pelted with rocks, but let me just be a little brave.

**MS. TIPPETT:** I promise you won’t.

**MS. SALES:** This whole business of demonization, I've been deeply concerned about it because it does not locate the good in people. It gives up on people. And you see that most especially in the right and the left. I have been very concerned about the demonization that comes out of right wing communities and also the demonization that I've heard on the left. And it comes from the same source of displaced whiteness.

So I think that there is, at the heart of this business, of finding something good in people and not giving up on anyone and not writing anyone's obituary until they no longer have breath in their bodies is very problematic today. And I have had deep problems with the anger, the vitriolic rage that has come out of the right and the left. And I never thought I would say this, and the only safe landing space seems to be in the middle. *[laughs]*

**MS. TIPPETT:** *[laughs]*

**MS. SALES:** And I think we should really think about that. I do believe that we're witnessing something that we need to pay real attention to.

**MS. TIPPETT:** So, last question. If we said, as we did at the beginning, as you did, that theology, that the public voice of theology addresses the human condition — and clearly it's the human condition that has to be addressed, and not just the political system or the candidates — tell us just how you would start to talk about how you think about what it means to be human, how your sense of that has evolved through this life you've lived, these passions you've had.

**MS. SALES:** What it means to be humans. We live in a very diverse world, and to talk about what it means to be humans, is to talk with a simultaneous tongue of universality and particularities. So as a black person to talk about what it means is to talk about my experience as an African American person, but also to talk about my experience that transcends being an African American to the universal experience.

So I think it — we've got to stop speaking about humanity as if it's monolithic. We've got to wrap our consciousness around a world where people bring to the world vastly different histories and experiences, but at the same time, a world where we experience grief and love in some of the same ways. So how do we develop theologies that weave together the "I" with the "We" and the "We" with the "I?"

**MS. TIPPETT:** Ruby Sales, thank you so much.

*[applause]*

*[music: "You and I Change Like Seasons" by Codes In the Clouds]*

**MS. TIPPETT:** Ruby Sales is the founder and director of the Spirit House Project in Atlanta. She is one of 50 people spotlighted in the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C.

*[music: "You and I Change Like Seasons" by Codes In the Clouds]*

*[Announcements]*

**MS. TIPPETT:** At [onbeing.org](http://onbeing.org), you can also, as always, listen and share this entire conversation with Ruby Sales — and you'll find it on iTunes and wherever podcasts are found.

**STAFF:** *On Being* is Trent Gilliss, Chris Heagle, Lily Percy, Mariah Helgeson, Maia Tarrell, Marie Sambily, Bethanie Kloecker, and Selena Carlson.

[*music: "Fragments" by Thievery Corporation*]

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