

## **Caste -- The Origins of our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson**

Week 1 – through end of Part 1

This document includes passages and prompts for reflection and discussion. The text appearing in bold will be included in the February 12<sup>th</sup> Friday Update. Facilitators -- feel free to choose among these or come up with your own.

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 dominate 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.

- 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.
- Discuss your thoughts about this passage.
- 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?
- Do those in the scapegoated caste have the option of not seeing?
- 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.

- Reflect on how your beliefs about America have or have not changed over the past 5 years.
- Who do you think was not surprised and why not?
- 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.”

- 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.

- Discuss how you have or have not felt that racism was a problem in our country during your lifetime.
- What may have kept you unaware of the problem of racism?
- As we actively chose 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.”

- 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 dominate 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.

- 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.**

- **How do you feel about the author’s description of the hierarchy of caste?**
- **If you are white, how does it feel to be called part of the dominate 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.

- What is your reaction to this passage?
- Have you been able to create abiding connections across these divisions?
- 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”.

- What do you think prevented him from seeing himself in those terms previously?
- 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.**

- **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.

- 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.”

- **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.**