

# Justice and Faith: Catherine Coleman Flowers and Justin J. Pearson

<https://www.climateone.org/audio/justice-and-faith-catherine-coleman-flowers-and-justin-j-pearson>

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**Greg Dalton:** I'm Greg Dalton.

**Ariana Brocious:** And I'm Ariana Brocious.

**Greg Dalton:** And this is Climate One.

[music change]

**Greg Dalton:** The last few weeks have been a doozy. The Trump administration has been working hard to dramatically cut the size of the federal workforce and repeal all kinds of Biden climate policies in favor of his “drill baby drill” agenda. And that’s not all.

**Lee Zeldin:** Today I’m pleased to make the largest deregulatory announcement in U.S. history.

**Ariana Brocious:** Environmental Protection Agency head Lee Zeldin posted a video on X touting his overhaul of the agency and his plans to “reconsider” many existing rules.

**Lee Zeldin:** Our actions include the Biden administration’s deeply flawed Clean Power Plan 2.0, mercury and air toxic standards, Quado VC, particulate matter 2.5, light medium and heavy car and truck rules, niche apps and the so-called social cost of carbon.

**Ariana Brocious:** That may sound like a lot of jargon. But these actions will have REAL impacts for real people. He wants to get rid of rules that limit how much mercury, soot and other toxic substances that power plants and cars can put into the air we all breathe. And we know the harm from that – air pollution contributes to **millions** of premature deaths every year.

**Greg Dalton:** These rollbacks target a lot of the improvements to air quality and public health we’ve made in the last several decades. When President Richard Nixon created the EPA it was at the height of national concern about environmental pollution. And the idea of protecting public health

and cleaning up the environment was not really controversial. That's sure has changed.

**Ariana Brocious:** And what struck me was he framed all of his remarks in terms of unleashing energy dominance and getting rid of rules that <quote> "restrict nearly every sector of our economy." It would be one thing if that were coming from the Secretary of Commerce, but he's the head of the Environmental Protection Agency! – and not one word about protecting the environment!

**Greg Dalton:** Yeah. They're repeating this false dichotomy... And the Trump Administration is not the first to step into this area.

**Ariana Brocious:** I know. And getting rid of protections outright will have immediate and long-term consequences for all of us. It will make our lives more unhealthy. And not all communities will feel these impacts equally.

**Greg Dalton:** That's Right.

Today we're featuring two leaders in the environmental justice movement – those who have been working to highlight and fight against the unjust pollution and public health impacts experienced predominately by low-income communities of color.

**Ariana Brocious:** Catherine Coleman Flowers is an internationally recognized environmental activist who's dedicated her life to fighting for the most vulnerable communities – people who have been deprived of the basic civil right to a clean, safe and sustainable environment.

**Greg Dalton:** I first had the pleasure of talking with her on Climate One several years ago. In that conversation, Flowers talked about growing up in Lowndes County, Alabama and working to stem the raw sewage contaminating homes and drinking water in her county and beyond. In recognition of this work she was granted a MacArthur "Genius Award."

**Ariana Brocious:** She's founder of the Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice. In 2021, she was appointed Vice Chair of the Biden Administration's inaugural White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council.

**Greg Dalton:** She's just published a new collection of personal and political essays called "Holy Ground: On Activism, Environmental Justice and Finding Hope." She shares her own deeply personal experience with reproductive justice, and stories about her mother, a civil rights activist who lost her life to gun violence. Flowers also writes about racialized disinvestment in the South, and the impact of unfettered fossil fuel production nationwide. I invited her back to explore these stories – and her current work.

**Cathrine Coleman Flowers:** When I was a kid, we would walk through the woods, my brothers liked to fish, and they would go fishing, and one of my brothers, he fishes to this day. My parents went fishing. I would pick berries off the trees. We would have plums. Plums grew wild. Blackberries grew wild. And it was a good time. My reason I love corn today, because I would walk through corn fields, and I would open, you know, a stalk of corn. We would call it shucking it. And then I could sink my teeth into it and taste, you know, the milk from the corn.

**Greg Dalton:** Not like that store bought corn.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Yeah, it's not the same.

**Greg Dalton:** You write that when you grew up, you knew you were poor, but you knew there was a

way out and that now there's no way out for folks in these same communities. What changed?

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** I think that unfortunately the poverty now is more structural than it's ever been before. In other words, I think it's by design. Unfortunately, there are people that make money off poverty. So they don't have an interest in ending it. And we have to come up with ways in which, for an example, a poor person has to buy the worst type of product, oftentimes because they can't afford a product of more quality that could potentially last long. Like a lot of people even today still live in mobile homes and the mobile homes are unsafe. It keeps them impoverished because they do not appreciate it in value. When you pull them off the lot, they're like a car. So, people are, in some cases, land rich. They have a lot of land, but there's no infrastructure on the land. And some of them do not have the proper housing. The other problem there is the lack of internet access. Some cases your GPS won't even work.

**Greg Dalton:** Or, junk food. Where a burger and fries is cheaper than fresh produce at the store.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Yes, it is. So It is so structural. Or, schools in poor communities don't get the kind of funding, so they can't attract the same type of teachers. When I grew up, my school didn't have books. So, it was just because I was interested in learning, and my parents invested in Child Craft, World Book, and Encyclopedia Britannica. And that supplemented for what I didn't have at school. And of course, I think now, we spend too much time in front of television and on social media. We didn't do that when I was growing up. So we had a chance to learn. We had a chance to read, you know. And then there was information that was shared by our parents or by our family members that were in the military and went to other countries and they came back and shared those stories with us. So the difference, I think, between poverty then and poverty now is that it is very structural and it's very hard for people to break out of it.

**Greg Dalton:** You hold up Jackson, Mississippi as an example of what disinvestment looks like. Not just underinvestment, but intentional disinvestment. Tell me about Jackson, Mississippi.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Well, I had the opportunity to visit Jackson so I can learn firsthand about the water problem, because I knew about the water crisis. And when I arrived at Jackson, I didn't know that the mayor of Jackson was on the plane with me. And I happened to see him at, where we were getting our luggage at baggage claim. And I told him what I had planned to do, that a local activist was going to take me around. He said, just remember, when you look at Jackson, that Jackson is what disinvestment looks like. So through that lens, I start looking around. I saw empty buildings. I mean, some of those buildings are very elegant. I saw empty homes. I saw empty churches, empty schools. And as I talked to people in the community and they started telling me their story around the water, what was happening there. Now Jackson itself is interesting. The Pearl River is there and it overflows, yet they don't have drinking water. And after I left Jackson, I went to Dubai. So I really had an opportunity to look at Jackson not only through the lens of being in the streets of Jackson and seeing the problems and listening to people tell me their stories about what they had encountered, but I went to a place that has to use desalinization to get water. It's pretty much a desert.

**Greg Dalton:** Right.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** But yet the water was there because they chose to invest in it.

**Greg Dalton:** Well, and they have fossil fuel money to invest in it.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** But they chose to invest in it. Mississippi has money too, gets a lot of it from the federal government, but chose not to invest in Jackson. And I think that that was a

decision that has diminished the state, but certainly diminished the state's capital. It just kind of resounded in my mind what the mayor said, that the mayor was right, that Jackson is what disinvestment looks like.

**Greg Dalton:** You also write that Jackson is the embodiment of how environmental inequity and climate change inevitably occupy the same place.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** They do.

**Greg Dalton:** How so?

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** They do because in the case of Jackson when they get lots of rain, the system tends to, to overflow or back up. One of the stories they told me was that Deion Sanders was the, the, the coach at Jackson State University and a lot of people were coming to Jackson to the games and this was homecoming weekend. And the mayor was warning people not to use a lot of water because they were going to lose pressure. Now, just imagine going to Tuscaloosa to see Alabama play or going to LA to see UCLA play. And the mayor warns the people that they can't use the water to residents because of all the people that are coming to town. I mean, most people can't even imagine that. So the inequities that exist in Jackson have existed for a very, very long time, and climate change has made it worse.

**Greg Dalton:** Because there's more, more stronger storms.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** There's more and more stronger storms. Even when they had the big freeze, the time when it got really, really cold and pipes were bursting, even in Texas, from Texas all the way through Mississippi, they had problems then. So, but the, the people that got a lot of the press were in Texas. They didn't get a lot of press in Mississippi.

**Greg Dalton:** Yeah, right, right. You say that Jackson is being punished for having black leadership in a red state. What is this portend for the rest of the country when we have national leaders who seem intent on punishing their opponents?

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** It started on the local level first. We're just starting to see some hints of it on a national level.

**Greg Dalton:** It's nothing, nothing new.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** It's nothing new, but I would just hope that this whole idea of neglecting a community or punishing a community and not giving them what they need is not American. It is not about democracy. And at that point, when we get to that point, maybe they can look to Jackson and say, if you continue to do this, this is what the rest of the United States is going to look like.

**Greg Dalton:** At a conference in Mississippi you said "We've replaced a slave economy with a fossil fuel based economy. Both of them are inhumane and we have to find a way out."

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** We do. We have to find a way out if we're going to live in a world that is sustainable and resilient. Because first of all, we can't build infrastructure the way we've been building infrastructure. It's failing. We cannot continue to build things that'll break down so you can go and buy another one. We can't continue to fill the oceans with plastic and think that it's not going to rebel. We can't continue to live the way we live and think that our children are going to have a future. So that is the reason why I think we have to change the economy. We have to diversify. I still believe in a just transition. There are other ways in which we can generate energy. In

some cases, fossil fuels are not going to go away tomorrow. I know that that's not going to happen. But at the same time, we should not say that we should have fossil fuels only, and not coexist with renewable energy, and let people have access to it.

**Greg Dalton:** You've worked extensively on the American South, a region experiencing climate impacts and a lot of heat, severe storms. What are you seeing in communities like Lowndes County from climate disruption caused by burning fossil fuels?

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Well, of course, we're seeing more storms. We're seeing more tornadoes, and they're more powerful. Whenever there are lots of, uh, powerful storms, we have power outages. You know, it's really interesting. We rely on fossil fuels, but our grids are not up to par either. And even in places that are not Lowndes County, I'm seeing where the grid can't withstand, when everybody is turning on their heat at the same time or everybody is turning on their air conditioner at the same time, there are power outages. I mean, the community that I live in sometimes institute rolling power outages. And in the communities that are poor, they're experiencing that on a more regular basis as well. And not only that, they're getting higher power bills. Just imagine trying to heat or cool a trailer. They're not built to, to regular building standards. So, people, they have less money. Then it gets to the point where the money that they do have, they have to choose which bill they're going to pay this month. And sooner or later, that will catch up with them. And sooner or later, they are more susceptible to getting sick. I've seen a lot of asthma. That's one of the things that seems to have increased because you have more pollen. We'll probably see more tropical parasites in these communities, especially where you have climate change. And then you also have raw sewage on the ground. The sewage infrastructure is failing and raw sewage is actually going into our drinking water sources. We have to find ways to deal with that. And right now we're, we're not on a good trajectory. We were, but we're not on a good trajectory to continue that progress.

**Greg Dalton:** And you've been a leading voice in exposing connections between inadequate wastewater infrastructure and public health. You talk about sewage and things that people rather not think about or talk about. So what are the most shocking health consequences you've witnessed in communities with poor sanitation?

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Oh, where I've actually gone outside homes and seen the contents of their toilets in their backyards. Or, a goal post where children are playing basketball right near a pool of raw sewage. In some cases, we've actually seen toys in the sewage. It's just the proximity and how close it is to where people live and the, the, the possibility that an outbreak of disease that we tend to want to blame on people from other countries could potentially happen here because, You know, when you have poverty and access to sewage that close, it doesn't even have to be in an impoverished community. It could be in a big community, a large city that's dumping the sewage into the drinking water source. The possibility of diseases are great and, you know, one simple way in which I help people to understand it is, do you want to go to a restaurant? And eat food where the bathrooms aren't working and people can't wash their hands.

**Greg Dalton:** Ew no, no one wants that. In your long struggle to get government to recognize the sanitation problems rampant in rural communities, things that many people listening take for granted in this country, you met Republican Senator Tommy Tuberville and you went up to him at an event. Share that moment and how you later collaborated with him.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Well, actually, I was invited to Washington to testify at a hearing on rural sanitation, and this was part of the farm bill process. Senator Cory Booker had invited me to come, and Senator Booker was on that committee, and Tommy Tuberville was also on that committee. So when I saw Senator Tuberville, I walked up to him and I said, Do you think that it is

fair that when a rural homeowner buys an on site septic system and it goes into the ground, that the liability is transferred to the homeowner and there's no warranty, no long term warranty. Do you think that's right? And he said, no, I don't think that's right. And out of that was a collaboration between him and Senator Booker to try to increase the funding for money going to rural communities to pay for rural on-site sanitation. And that was a collaboration that I couldn't have dreamed that would have happened before we actually went there, but I think the fact that I was brave enough to have a conversation with someone that I didn't know whether or not we could have a conversation But we agreed on that. And I think the lesson is is that we should at least try.

**Greg Dalton:** And of course he, you know, as a football coach, he's accustomed to talking to all sorts of people and recruiting Black athletes to come -

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** And that's what I thought, that's one of the reasons I approached him because I knew that despite the things I had heard and the things I had been told, I gave him the benefit of the doubt because I knew he had been in the homes of many of Black women to talk to them about their sons coming to play ball for him.

**Greg Dalton:** And some people will remember that Sen. Tuberville was blocking military advancements for a long time because of a right to abortion. So Tuberville was kind of an outcast in the Senate for a while. A lot of people on the left were very upset with him. Did people on the left get upset with you for collaborating with Tommy Tuberville?

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** If they did, they didn't say it to me. But one of the things that people that know about me is that I'm an independent thinker. You know, at the end of the day, my mission is about trying to help my community. And I'm going to do what is necessary to help my community and not let politics get in the way. Because the issue is sanitation. And every American is entitled to having access to sanitation. And I also understood that, the rural communities oftentimes vote red. And they're the ones that are suffering the most. And their representatives can't say they don't know about this problem if I don't have a conversation with them.

**Greg Dalton:** I'm impressed how you're able to speak with so many different kinds of people, partly because of your wide travels and maybe your Southern style, but you also tell a story of bonding with a white country boy who was your driver for a day. The two of you bonded over talking about the foods your mother and his grandmother used to make. I'm curious what that story and the story of working with Tommy Tuberville tell us about how you work to find common ground.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Well, first of all, you know, part of what I talk about in the book is my faith. And, if you've ever gone to a Baptist church, at least Black Baptist Church, you know, everybody has to hug each other, everybody has to greet each other. The pastor may stand at the door at the end of the service and shake hands with people when they leave. So you learn how to talk to folk. And I've learned how to talk to people and make overtures to people that I don't know. I also was in the military. In the military you make fast friends. You have to, because you may not be around each other for long periods of time. So, it was just easy for me. And on this particular ride, this driver, who had come to pick me up, to take me to an event at Auburn University, where Tuberville had coached at one time, we were in the conversation as time went on. We were talking about food. And he joined in the conversation. And I was talking about how when I grew up, that, you know, I, I love going home and smelling the food my mother was cooking, or when we would go outside, we can tell who was cooking what, because we could smell the, the fragrance of the food coming from the house, and one of the places that I always want to stop to get food when I'm in Montgomery is David's Cafe, which is a soul food restaurant that's still run by the family. It's been in the family for years. And I was talking about that and he started talking about the food that he liked and the food that his grandmother cooked and, And, I mean, we were almost, like, savoring the taste

of these foods by describing our experiences and sharing them with each other. We bonded over food. And I never asked him, how did he vote? I never asked him anything political at all, we're just bonding over something that all humans share in common, and that's our desire to eat and having some good food.

**Greg Dalton:** I'll continue my conversation with Catherine Coleman Flowers after the break. She explains how she finds common ground with people of all stripes:

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Living in a red state it's like going to different churches. People worship differently. But just because they may pray or call their God something different than the way I pray or call my God doesn't mean that we don't believe in God. We just do it differently.

**Greg Dalton:** That's up next, when Climate One continues.

**Ariana Brocious:** Help others find our show by leaving us a review or rating. Thanks for your support!

**Greg Dalton:** This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. In 2021, the Biden administration created the first-ever White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. The committee was charged with giving recommendations to address current and historical environmental justice issues across the nation. My guest today, Catherine Coleman Flowers, was named vice-chair. I asked her what those working at the local level see that the federal government misses.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** I think at the national level, a lot of people meant well, but, you know, people have their own interests. If they haven't been in my community and seen what I've seen, that's not what they're interested in. So you have to find ways in which to help to educate people about issues and places that they may not have been to. We also have to figure out how the policies that have been in place, some of them need to change so that they can encompass rural communities. If one were to get federal funds, it usually had to come through an incorporated entity. And there are areas, in the colonias from Texas to California that are unincorporated, rural communities, that have thousands of people that live there. But because they're unincorporated, they can't get access to those funds. And they're living with sewage on the ground, inadequate infrastructure, inadequate housing. All of this, all of the above, and when we went to visit those communities, what they talked about is how they're getting more rain, how they're seeing more effects of climate change.

**Greg Dalton:** Upon taking office, President Trump signed an executive order disbanding the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin has directed his staff to eliminate environmental justice offices around the country. The first of these was established by President George H. W. Bush in 1992. I asked Catherine Coleman Flowers what she thinks now that the work of this Council is being undone.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Well, I don't think it's been undone. Those communities that did get money, hopefully that money will still be used for what it was intended for. That remains to be seen. And hopefully, you know, the data that didn't exist on the federal level that talked about not only the inequities but just how communities health wise are impacted by some of the decisions that are being made or that have been made, that information still exists. And there's also a camaraderie of people from across the nation who did know each other before they were on the WHEJAC together. That still exists. That's not going away.

**Greg Dalton:** WHEJAC is the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. So some relationships were formed, possibly some data collected for things that data needs to be collected to make decisions and identify problems.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** And I learned about environmental issues that are existing. For an example, people that still live in New Mexico, where they were testing for the A bomb. A lot of those people are still having problems with exposure to radiation.

**Greg Dalton:** Yeah, long term consequences. How can climate activists and environmental justice people better collaborate to address systemic inequities in infrastructure and climate resilience? Seems like the rich neighborhoods get all the resources.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Well, there should be more collaboration between big greens and small organizations. For an example, our organization, the Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice, we've been working on collaborations with NRDC. We also work with the Climate Reality Project, and we work with the Rocky Mountain Institute.

**Greg Dalton:** So these are, those are the big greens, you're saying, the big environmental groups that have big budgets, lots of resources.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** They can also help us realize some of the things that we need because we don't have the capacity. We don't have lawyers on our staff. We don't have that type of money. But what they bring to the table could be very helpful to smaller organizations trying to bring about the changes necessary in their communities and also to be heard.

**Greg Dalton:** And some of that's been politicized these days, but you're good at finding common ground with people who have a lot, see things different from you.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** I don't think that all Republicans are bad. First of all, I'm not a Democrat or a Republican. I'm an independent. That's number one. Number two, living in a red state it's like going to different churches. People worship differently. But just because they may pray or call their God something different than the way I pray or call my God doesn't mean that we don't believe in God. We just do it differently.

**Greg Dalton:** So how do we ensure that rural and poor communities are not left behind in all this? Because they're the ones who don't have as much insurance for, say, after a wildfire or a hurricane.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** I think we're going to have to do what those farmers did last week when they went to Washington to talk about the concerns that they had for the cuts and how it was impacting them. I think that we're going to have to lift the voices and join hands with people that are being impacted so they can tell their stories. And as people tell their stories and other people see it, oh, this is happening in my community. It's a problem. We need to find solutions and work together on that. I think that's how we get there.

**Greg Dalton:** Catherine Coleman Flowers, thank you so much for sharing your story with me. I really appreciate it.

**Catherine Coleman Flowers:** Thank you. Thank you for having me.

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**Ariana Brocious:** Greg, when I hear that interview, I'm struck most by how difficult this work is, of addressing environmental justice and how much work it takes over the long term to get things



changed. It's inspiring to hear about the work she and others are doing because it really takes sustained effort to make a difference.

**Greg Dalton:** And I'm humbled hearing about her talk about things you and I take for granted like sanitation and sewage. I think about Robert F. Kennedy going to Appalachia and being horrified by the poverty that existed in the country. That was 50 years ago and well that poverty still exists today.

Now we'll hear from another inspiring environmental justice advocate: Justin J. Pearson. He represents Tennessee's 86th district, which includes parts of Memphis.

**Ariana Brocious:** Before he was a state representative, he co-founded the group Memphis Community Against the Pipeline to challenge the Byhalia pipeline which would have gone through predominantly Black communities.

**Greg Dalton:** Right, and then he vaulted into the national spotlight as a vocal advocate for a ban on assault weapons. The day he was sworn into the Tennessee Legislature was the same day as a mass shooting at a Nashville primary school – the deadliest in the state's history. Three days later, Pearson and another representative led a protest for gun safety reform on the house floor – and they were expelled by Republicans. (Both were quickly reinstated.) I talked with him last fall in front of a live audience at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco.

**Justin J. Pearson:** I got engaged in the environmental and climate justice movement, not as a person who's been doing this 30 or 40 years. It was one article. It was written by MLK50, Justice Through Journalism, about this crude oil pipeline that they were planning to run through a neighborhood where my family has been for 100 years, in southwest Memphis in Boxtown and Westwood. And they said, we chose this neighborhood because it's basically the path of least resistance.

**Greg Dalton:** They said it out loud.

**Justin J. Pearson:** They said it out loud. Which is rare right for them to say it out loud. We know what they're thinking. That land agent got fired, believe it or not, who said that, but he told the truth about what they believed. They looked at political disinvestment, economic disinvestment, they looked at the lack of opportunity that the community had been given for so long. And they said here's a place that we can exploit. They didn't understand the resilience that was there, the culture, the history, that was there. And a classmate many years before me had posted this onto Metro High School's Facebook page. And I read that article. I saw the comments that were made. I saw that many of the political leaders weren't engaging at all with the community that was being impacted. On October 17, 2020, at the height of the pandemic, 50 people all masked up, seven of them my family members, went to this meeting, heard from the pipeline company, how good this project was going to be, how necessary it was if you were going to have toothbrushes, and products that rely on crude oil. And then we heard from Protect Our Aquifer. An organization who said, look, this will actually run through our a well field and could destroy our drinking water. And then we had another group come, Caesar and they said, well, we're the most seismically active place, on this side of the Mississippi River. And so, if an earthquake were to happen, it would rupture and it would destroy our drinking water. And just a quick note about Memphis, Memphis has some of the best drinking water in the world because our drinking water is 2000 years old. It's been filtered through, uh, to this aquifer. So they're going to threaten that. and so on October 17, 2020 Memphis Community Against the Pipeline is born. And from that day until July 2nd, myself, my family, our community is organizing neighborhood associations, is calling every single politician is starting to do marches down city hall. My first march, believe it or not, had four people one of them was named Pearson. So it really had three, my oldest brother. And ultimately we get the attention of former vice president

and Nobel Peace Prize winner Al Gore. We get thousands of people, uh, white, black, in North Memphis, South Memphis, East Memphis organized and galvanized, and we ultimately defeat this project with people power, with a community that showed we're the path of resilience, not the least resistance.

**Greg Dalton:** And that leads to you running for office and being elected to the Tennessee state legislature. In March of 2023, a former student walked into the convent school in Nashville with two assault style rifles. Killed three students three staff members. Shortly later, you and a fellow legislator, Justin Jones, were expelled from office by republicans for personally protesting in the well of the legislature and joining demonstrators in the public areas of the capitol building. The day after your expulsion, Vice President Harris takes a detour, makes a surprise visit to Tennessee to affirm President Biden's support for a ban on assault weapons. A couple weeks later, you're in the Oval Office with the President and Vice President. That's like, you know, a mind boggling ascent into the national scene. Suddenly, you know, your face is kind of, you know, national news. What is that like for you? How'd that change your life?

**Justin J. Pearson:** Let me start with this. On March, 27th, I get sworn in to office. It's the same day of the Covenant School shooting, and two days later, we don't have session that day. We gavel in and gavel out. 7,000 people show up that Thursday. Mostly young people under the age of 18, some teachers, some parents, and they're screaming, do something, ban assault weapons, pass a red flag law. They're just making all these requests. 7,000 is the largest gathering and protest that we've seen in Tennessee history, in modern history. And instead of legislators listening to the students or listening to the parents or engaging in any way, they laughed at them. Or they pointed at them and snickered, or they took pictures of them, or they just look down at them, and walk by. And there's something that happens when the people who are angelic dissenters, who are of good moral courage show up inside the institution, it forces the people who are within it already to stand up with more courage. And so we went to the well of the house floor, not in and of ourselves, but with the spirit of ancestors and those who are devastated by the impacts of the epidemic of gun violence, who want us to do something and want us to have transformation. And it all happened, during holy week. So that Friday that Vice President Harris came to Nashville, Tennessee was Good Friday. And when we think about democracy, when we think about the sacrifices, when you think about these things in the spiritual context, it is a lot about the persecution the government has against people who stand up and speak up and fight back, but it's also so important that we always remember the resurrection and that for a lot of people who are no longer with us, including the six lives, They were lost at the Covenant School, my classmate Larry Thorne, my cousin CJ, my mentor Dr. Yvonne Nelson. There's so many people who are not able to speak up and protest and stand up. We have a responsibility to do so and so even in the Oval Office, it was asking President Biden Vice President Harris, What more can you do? And so, months later, we got the first ever Office of Gun Violence Prevention open at the White House. And we were able to be there and sit front row as that happened. We are still advocating for laws to be passed at the state level. But in between time, the Memphis City Council just won a lawsuit for us to put referendums on our ballot, to ban assault weapons, to have extreme risk protection orders, and also to make it so that people have to have a permit to carry a firearm in our city. Like we're fighting back in all the ways that we can, and that's what people power does. That's what I think the attention that the Republicans thought they were putting on myself and Representative Jones to shame us, really put the spotlight on them, for the harm they were doing to democracy and the need that we have to do everything we can to end this epidemic.

**Greg Dalton:** So you had worked in environmental justice, you were kind of thrust into the gun issue, partly because of what happened on the day you were inaugurated, you're newly in power. Often people would see gun safety and violence and energy and climate change as like very different issues. Are there common threads? How do you, are there connected?

**Justin J. Pearson:** Absolutely, absolutely they're common threads. I mean, one way is, you look at it is this. What are the communities that are most impacted by pollution? The same communities that are impacted by pollution are the ones that are being devastated economically with opportunity, being educationally deprived, and are also the most polluted. There's intersection

**Greg Dalton:** So pollution and guns are concentrated in the same places.

**Justin J. Pearson:** In the same places and it's no coincidence that places that have more lead pipes and less infrastructure positive good infrastructure are also places where you have incidences of more of the effects of crime or violence. The intersection is really about where is our society not caring for people? You And where is, as Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali is saying, there being places that are sacrifice zones. And those places, overwhelmingly, overlap. And so, when I think about our environmental and climate justice struggle, the same community that I was knocking doors for to defeat this pipeline and that we were organizing and rallying for at Alonzo Weaver Park, are the exact same community. Communities that I knocked doors for to run for office and are the same people who marched to reinstate me to continue to serve as their state representative and elect me. It's like we can't separate the harms that are happening to our communities the extraction that's happening from corporations and the attitudes and the actions of people in power that perpetuate not just pollution but perpetuate poverty, perpetuate inequality and injustices that have long-term ramifications.

**Greg Dalton:** I've heard you talk about people who see this status quo and think like, well, that's just how it is. Or that's like, the way it always will be. And you mentioned angelic dissenters who people who are comfortable with the status quo and ought to say, like, oh, it doesn't have to be that way. So let's say a little more about angelic dissenters.

**Justin J. Pearson:** Yeah, the realities that we are experiencing, that our children, our nieces and our nephews are experiencing, are not isolated, but rather they are part of a lot of systems interplaying and interlocking in ways that are interlinked, oftentimes is creating harm. I think the reality that I learned post George Floyd's lynching and Breonna Taylor's lynching and Ahmaud Arbery's lynching is that we have social structures and systems set up that are leading to these different outcomes for people.

In all of our communities and the reality that there's not going to be one singular fix. There's not going to be one singular way there's going to have to be a way that we think about injustice and think about changing it and the way that we have to do that is by being angelic dissenters and that's in two ways: One is that what we are talking about right here is pure. Everybody deserves clean air, clean water, clean soil. I want that for everybody, right? Like what we are talking about is a pure reality. Everybody deserves access to the opportunity to be who God has called for them to be, to be beloved. Right? This is pure. And we have to dissent to a status quo that is saying different. a status quo of economic exploitation, a status quo of educational deprivation, a status quo that says you all deserve to have plants and deserve to have pollution and deserve to have politicians who don't care about you. And then these folks over here, they deserve all the good things. We have to dissent to that. We dissent to unjust policies, unjust practices, unjust people, and positions of power. We have to dissent. And I believe that it is a movement of angelic dissenters and this movement for justice rooted in love that say there has to be a subversion to this status quo. That's not just going to save our planet, but save the people who are here. Save lives of people like my grandmothers, God rest their souls, who died from cancer because of 17 toxic release inventory facilities being around our community. We have to dissent to this. And we have to do it in a way that is pure, that is love centered, and that is people centric.

**Greg Dalton:** We're going to take a quick break. When we come back, Justin J. Pearson and I talk

about overcoming identity politics:

**Justin J. Pearson:** If the racism, and white supremacy, and patriarchy, and homophobia, and transphobia, and xenophobia become the divisionist tools other colleagues continue to use, we will never build a more perfect union. We'll never build a more perfect country.

**Greg Dalton:** That's up next, when Climate One continues.

This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. During the height of the Black Lives Matter protests a few years ago, I did a lot of reflecting and reading and learning. I learned from Ibram X. Kendi, that people can do racist and antiracist things in the same day, the same paragraph. I asked Justin J. Pearson how he finds common ground with Republican colleagues who may put forward bills he considers racist.

**Justin J. Pearson:** Lots of prayer. right? Like no person is all one thing, or all another. That's, that's just true. And if we dehumanize people into things, right, and not recognizing the individuality and their humanity, right, that's actually how we create and cause more harm. And I see this a lot where, folks, humanity gets reduced to the way that they came here. Folks' humanity gets reduced to just the person that they love and then people dehumanize them because of those things. Right? Like, instead of --

**Greg Dalton:** On both, on both sides, there's a lot of righteous judgment on the left of like, the, the purity test on the left, if you do, if you own a gun, like, oh, you know, like, I don't trust you, you're --

**Justin J. Pearson:** Absolutely. But, and this is what I mean when I talk about there being, the harm is that you refuse to see the complexity of people's identity, which means that you lose the ability to see the places where you can find common ground. And that's the thing. There's a guy right now in the legislature, if the legislature was open today in Tennessee, he would be advocating against the illegal invasion of immigrants into this country. That's one of his big linch points, right? And I would get up on the house floor and I would say, that's racist. And xenophobic and wrong, right? I think that's immoral. This same person and I have had conversations where he says, you know, I care about clean air, clean water, and clean soil. And I look at him and I say, hey, that we can agree on, that we can work on. And so when I put legislation forward in the general assembly in a subcommittee, actually agricultural subcommittee, focused on getting more information about toxic release inventory facilities on our website, Tennessee Department of Environment Conservation's website. He was one of the people who supported my legislation, right? This xenophobic person who I will call a xenophobe and fight against his bad bills is the same person who I also recognize. He and I have a similar shared interest, a common concern about protecting clean air, clean water, and clean soil.

**Greg Dalton:** And he still listens to you after you call him a xenophobe?

**Justin J. Pearson:** He, he does, he does. Because people are complicated and complex, right? But what, what would be a disservice to my community? Right? What be disservice to, to the calls of the movement for environmental and climate justice would be to say, well, because you do that bad thing. I won't talk to you. If I did that for all the people who expelled me, I'd be like a monk, you know, in, in the statehouse, because I wouldn't talk to anybody.

**Greg Dalton:** The Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, found last year that Black voters are more concerned about climate change than the national average and more likely to take action to support climate policy. It found that for Black voters, climate change is a higher political concern than abortion and democracy. So what does that mean for this political moment?

**Justin J. Pearson:** It means that we have to pay attention to this issue. When people think about climate change, and I was myself in this bucket, I would think about, you know, young white people hugging trees. But, but the better image for climate change and environmental injustice, right? It's a young black kid on a CPAP machine. Because they can't breathe. A better image is taking your grandmothers to the graveyard because they've died of cancer in their early sixties. That's the consequence of environmental and climate change. And I think the, the image of climate change is changing because these fights are becoming more proximate. It seemed for so long that this was fights way out there, but then cop city comes into Atlanta and then Byhalia pipeline comes into Southwest Memphis. We got more proximate to it. It started to realize that something was happening to us that as I learned those Valero pipes, those weren't cloud makers. Right as I thought when they were a child and I was a child and we drive by them. That was pollution coming out of there, right? Those are flare offs and we were breathing that in. I think what's happening in Black communities and communities across our country that are experiencing these and are more proximate to them is the resistance and honestly, if people have paid more attention to where these things were being placed 30, 40, 50 years ago we wouldn't have a climate crisis, but it was because the Black communities, the brown communities, the indigenous communities, the poor communities weren't being cared for, then that we're suffering with the consequences now.

**Greg Dalton:** And you're a Democrat who says that Democrats are ignoring much of the country. Explain why that is and what impact it has.

**Justin J. Pearson:** I mean, you know, 97 percent of the country roughly is rural. It's like the majority of the country.

**Greg Dalton:** By land, not by people.

**Justin J. Pearson:** And so for Democrats, and I am a proud Democrat, I know, I know people, people wonder. Um, I'm not switching over. We have, we have to be more proximate to people who are suffering. And I love California. I lived in Massachusetts. But our party and our politics cannot be segregated to just two parts of our country.

**Greg Dalton:** The coastal elites who've been kind of running, the Chardonnay Democrats.

**Justin J. Pearson:** Right. The bi coastal elites as it were, are not all of the party. We have to go to Nebraska and Iowa, and Tennessee, in Mississippi, in Alabama, we have to go to these places, and particularly in the South, not just because the South has something to say, but if I could tell you this, the litmus test for America's progress, the litmus test for American democracy in our future, is actually the South. Why? Because you go to the places where the people are most oppressed to see how good you're doing as a nation with breaking down oppression. If you want to go to see how good San Francisco is, don't go to the fancy rich area. Go to the place that's been most deprived historically of opportunity, and I'll tell you how good San Francisco is doing. And do that in all the places across this country, and you will see that we have a deep desire and need for a movement for justice to rise up, a movement for justice rooted in love, to rise up in the places that have been overlooked, the places that have not gotten enough attention, the places that have been deprived for too long, and to put power and our voice and our resources and our money in those places to create the transformative change that we need. And so for Democrats, that is talking to white, that's talking to Black, that's talking to Asian, that's talking to Latino, that's talking to rural, that's talking to urban, that's talking to the farmers, that's talking to the cattle ranchers, that's talking to everybody. Because what I know to be true about the policies that I advocate for and that I believe in is that these are policies that are beneficial to everybody. And if the racism, and white supremacy, and patriarchy, and homophobia, and transphobia, and xenophobia become the divisionist tools that other colleagues continue to use, we will never build a more perfect union. We'll never build a more

perfect society. San Francisco, a more perfect California, a more perfect country, we have to be sure that we talk to everybody because the coalition that we need to save our climate, to fix this planet, to fix these problems has to be a diverse one, has to be an intergenerational one.

**Greg Dalton:** Right, but some of your friends in the Republican legislature in Tennessee would say, identity politics on the left, all these labels, that is divisive. You talk inclusion, but the way the left uses identity politics divides us. Well, how do you respond to that?

**Justin J. Pearson:** The way the right uses identity politics divides us, right? You're saying, you're saying things like white power, right? Right, like you're saying things like immigrants are bad and are evil or there's an invasion. Those are the things that divides, divide us. You're saying things like white lives matter in response to people saying Black lives matter. These are the things that divide us. And we have to be honest, Republicans and conservatives use identity politics, right? They talk, the first thing they said, the first thing they said after Vice President Harris got to the top of the ticket was that she was a DEI hire. They use identity politics all the time.

**Greg Dalton:** That message is out there. It's not everyone who is saying that. That message was one of the talking points, for sure.

**Justin J. Pearson:** That message was one of the talking points, it was said by a Congressman from Tennessee, Congressman Burchert. And it got so bad that the Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson, told his caucus, stop talking about her race. Right? Like this is, this is what we have to, we have to contend with is a reality that people don't want to talk about identity politics when it comes to inclusion, but they're okay talking about identity politics when it comes to self-preservation of whiteness and self-preservation of separation of othering people. When we talk about identity, when I talk about identity, we have to talk about it in a way that's celebratory. I don't want anybody to look at me as I have had leaders in my own party do and say, I'm colorblind. I said, you're what? I said, so what color am I? Well, I don't see color and they say this as though this is something that's good. That's something that's beneficial and not erasure.

**Greg Dalton:** Yeah, that's, it's a very privileged thing to say that, you know, I, I learned a lot by watch reading *White Fragility* and, and learn in there from the book that I highly recommend to my white friends who like, um, 'cause it's like the fish that doesn't see the water, the how whiteness is constructed as a norm. As like, well this is just what I'm color blind. That that didn't, I didn't hurt.

**Justin J. Pearson:** Exactly. It's like, I didn't see that. I didn't see that. But then you pass laws that have consequences that we know are disproportionate. And I don't know if y'all know this, but there's no line in the sky where it says, I have now left the poor Black community or the poor brown community or the poor white community. There's no line in the sky that says those things. We might experience it worse, but we all are sharing the same planet.

**Greg Dalton:** Justin J. Pearson, thank you so much for coming here to Climate One.

**Justin J. Pearson:** Thank you.

**Ariana Brocious:** And that's our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting -- AND it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

**Greg Dalton:** Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Brad

Marshland, Jenny Park, Ariana Brocious, Austin Colón, Kousha Navidar, Megan Bisciegia, Kevin Lemons and Ben Testani. Our theme music is by George Young. I'm Greg Dalton.