



## PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

**Program #5205**

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### WELCOME

**Lydia Talbot:** Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

**Daniel Pawlus:** And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Our guest today is Mike Ivers, President of GoodCity Chicago. Mike is a proud Irish Catholic from Chicago’s south side who has spent the majority of his life working and living in the black community. He’s going to share that experience and help us to see the issue of race through the lens of faith and the teachings of Jesus.

**Lydia Talbot:** We also welcome back our friend, Christine Chakoian, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest, Illinois. She’ll continue our series on the “fruits of the spirit,” looking today at “goodness.”

**Daniel Pawlus:** But let’s begin with the story of a pastor in Chicago who created a program called “Prodigal Sons” that gives kids an alternative to life on the streets. Let’s meet Ruben Robinson.

### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

**Ruben Robinson:** I grew up as a youth in Cabrini-Green. I went to Schiller School and when I was in Schiller School that’s where I had a relationship with Jesse White. He was my coach. He was a good mentor in my life, showing me the right way to go and the right things to do and the right moves to make. I didn’t have a mentor when I moved on the west side of Chicago, around Avers and Chicago Avenue. There were no organized sports, no organized anything. So I made a lot of foolish moves that cost me a lot.

I was driving down the street one day and I saw some kids flipping on mattresses and I said, “Wow, that’s interesting!” But in the back of my mind I knew that I didn’t have to jump on mattresses. I...excuse me, I kind of get sensitive. Because of the fact that when I look back at my past, I knew there was somebody who took the time out to help me, I could do something about it. I went home and told my wife. I said, “We need to start up a tumbling program.” She said, “Well, how will we do it?” I said, “Well, I’m going to call Jesse White.” I saw him at a baseball game. I walked up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and he said, “Ruben Robinson. 630 West Evergreen, apartment 603.” So he knew me. Really knew me! And so when he did that I said, “Well, look, I want to do what you do.” I said, “I’ve got some kids

and I want to keep them off the street.” He said, “Call me.” So I called him and the rest was history. He gave some mats, so we worked from there. I just knew that it was something that we had to do and I knew that everything else would fall in place. You know, in the faith walk you have to start walking.

The name of the organization is Prodigal Sons. We have Inner-city Tumblers and Inner-city Jumpers, the Double Dutch team. I have kids come from 98<sup>th</sup> street. Some from the south side. The majority of them are off the west side of Chicago. So we don’t have any type of boundary lines. They come, we help. Prodigal Sons. Even in the Bible it talks about a young man who drifted away and went in the wrong direction. It says that when he came to himself, he did something different. And so there was a time when I drifted, but when I came to myself I pulled the best from myself. I figure if I’m going to preach the Gospel, I just need to show up and they can see my life. The Bible talks about “let your light so shine before me.” So I figure that’s the best way to preach the Gospel: show up. If I say I’m going to do it, do it.

### SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

**Lydia Talbot:** Ruben Robinson’s organization, “Prodigal Sons,” is one of many of the non-profits mentored by Good City Chicago, the organization led by today’s speaker, Mike Ivers. For more information, you can go to our web site at [www.30goodminutes.org](http://www.30goodminutes.org).

Now, let me tell you about our speaker. A native of Chicago, Mike Ivers was ordained a Catholic priest in 1974 and spent most of his active ministry in Chicago’s African American community. For twelve years he was Pastor of St. Agatha Church in the North Lawndale neighborhood, where he worked to build a sense of community among the residents. Mike left the priesthood a few years ago and for the past seven years has been president of Good City Chicago, an organization that builds relationships among people, churches, non-profits and Chicago’s civic community. Mike was appointed by Mayor Daley to serve on the board of the Chicago Housing Authority and is a board member of the Chicago Communities in School. It’s so good to welcome him back to “30 Good Minutes.” Welcome, Mike.

### MESSAGE

**Mike Ivers:** Thank you, Lydia. Thanks, Dan. Happy to be here!

If you want to create some tension in a room or conversation, start talking about race. In fact, look what I found and I’m gonna play it. The race card!

In a recent poll in response to race, the question, “Are race relations in the United States generally good or bad?” was asked. 55% of whites said “generally good” and 34% percent said “generally bad.” 29% of Blacks said “generally good” and 59% said “generally bad.”

I grew up in a neighborhood on the Southside of Chicago—Longwood Manor, 97th & Throop—that was all white and became all black. Emotions of loss, anger, fear, frustration and even hatred made the situation even more precarious. I grew up hearing people spew hatred towards people that they had never even met. At high school, I learned that all the stereotypes and generalizations I heard in the neighborhood wouldn’t even standup in a grammatical court.

I remember standing on the second hole of the Beverly Country Club on the Westside of Western—it was all white—and then looking east to the Dan Ryan’s woods on the eastside of Western—it was all black. I didn’t think this is how God wanted our world to be, separated and divided.

John Logan, in “Separated and Unequal: The Neighborhood Gap for Blacks and Hispanics in Metropolitan America,” writes how white Americans live in communities that are, on average, more than 80% white and no more than 7% black, while the average black or Hispanic person lives in a neighborhood that is about two-thirds non white. We think we are a mainland in this country, but we are not. We are a collection of at least forty million islands, and as citizens, and especially if we dare call ourselves believers, we have a responsibility to build bridges to one another.

I don’t have any answers to this race issue but I do wish to spend these next minutes with you hoping that you might be energized to confront this issue in a new way. I invite you to imagine yourself as a sponge. If race is going to be dealt with in a positive way, then I think we need to become like this sponge: soaking up, absorbing, taking in all those that are different races than us whether white, brown, black, yellow, red and any other color or distinction. The only time the word sponge is used in scripture is right before Jesus died, John 19:28-30: “After this when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said, in order to fulfill the scripture, ‘I am thirsty.’ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” Our Lord is thirsty today: thirsty for racial reconciliation, thirsty for racial justice, thirsty for racial harmony, thirsty for racial togetherness.

Each of us has the opportunity to be that sponge that quenches his thirst. The challenge is to soak up each other; by listening more intently when a person of another race speaks, by immersing ourselves in different racial cultures, by being open to others of different races, and by refraining from judging other races quickly and with a broad stroke. I recall someone once stating “you know this race thing Mike? I just want everyone to be like me.” What a boring world that would be! If two things are different from one another, one doesn’t have to be better than the other. Too often, once we get soaked up with another culture or race, we are tempted to act like we know everything about people of that complexion. Racial reconciliation is not an event to be completed but a lifelong road to be traveled.

I have spent the majority of my sixty-one years in the black community in Chicago and I still consider myself a person of prejudice. I am proud of my Irish heritage on my father’s side and my German heritage on my mother’s side. And I am also proud of the over forty-five years of nurturing I have received from the black community. A sponge can become dried up and must be willing to get submerged and immersed over and over again in life giving waters.

One of those places for me was Xavier University in New Orleans at the Institute of Black Catholic Studies. Sr. Thea Bowman soaked me up real good, even to the point of uncomfortability. One day we were conversing at lunch and in response to her asking me what I did, I said “I’m in charge of...,” as she exclaimed, “White people have been in charge of black

people for too long in this country. Now get that that terminology out of your vocabulary!” “Yes, Sister.”

The next day as we were walking across the courtyard, she inquired about a mutual acquaintance and I commented, “Oh, he’s in charge of…” As she reached for my neck, “I just talked to you about that less than 24 hours ago!”

“I know, Sister, it’s hard to change. Please give me another chance!”

It’s important to confront the racism we encounter and equally important to give each other a break. The only time Jesus talks about the judgment day is in Matthew 25, verse 35. He says, “I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink.” Every single one of us is called to be a sponge to quench each others thirst by moving beyond racial categorizing and stereotyping ourselves, but to have the courage to challenge others when they are engaged in a negative, race baiting behavior.

A sponge doesn’t just soak up water, but it takes it and uses it to clean up, to purify, cleanse, and dust off. Now when that happens, it could be our own image we see but I’m sure it will include others. Speaking out about racial injustice or taking a stand against prejudicial behavior is not easy. We will get dirty and have to get out of our comfort zones. It will be risky and may come at a cost. But it is unhealthy for us to live in isolated silos. I get irritated when I hear people comment after violent acts occur, “Well, that kind of thing shouldn’t happen in our neighborhood!” It shouldn’t happen in any neighborhood and until we wake up and realize that there’s no antiseptic safe bubble zone for us to escape to, we’ll still be in trouble as a society. Jesus is saying to each of us right now, “I am thirsty.”

A recent study predicts that minorities will become the majority in 2042. The race card is not going to disappear. The race issue is not a problem. It is an opportunity for us to break down barriers that divide us, to crush walls that separate us and to cleanup those things that blur our vision. Matthew 5, verse 6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. And verse 10 says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the cause of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

### CONVERSATION

**Daniel Pawlus:** If you’d like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Mike Ivers, we’ll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org) to watch the video or read the text anytime.

Now, let’s talk with Mike. Mike, thanks for being here again and offering that challenging message for us.

**Mike Ivers:** Thank you. Happy to be here!

**Daniel Pawlus:** It brought to mind, for me, when you talked about your own experience of being sixty-one and still a person of prejudice, that song from South Pacific, “You’ve Got to be Carefully Taught.” I wonder if we can dig into that a little bit because, you of all people have spent a great deal of time in the black community and have a unique experience of it.

**Mike Ivers:** I remember a bishop coming to me once when I was on the west side and he said, “You know, I don’t like coming to see you because I have to be careful about what I say, because I might end up being called a racist.” And I said, “Bishop, that’s not a bad thing, being careful about what we say.” I have to be careful about what I say everyday of our lives and it would be a whole lot better world if more people were careful about what they say.

**Lydia Talbot:** It’s important to confess racism, isn’t it?

**Mike Ivers:** That’s right. Deacon Warren on the west side used to say, “You know what? I know there’s racism,”—and he was African American—“but I’ve never met a racist!” You’re right, Lydia.

**Lydia Talbot:** Mike Ivers, you are a community organizer. You walk the streets, you talk the talk, you visit people in need in their homes, and you build a sense of community, following the example of Christ.

**Mike Ivers:** That’s right. I try.

**Lydia Talbot:** Authentic discipleship. What have you seen over all these years working in the black community in ways of moments of healing, racial healing? Resurrection moments, if you will.

**Mike Ivers:** I’ve seen tremendous human beings reaching out, forgiving people, healing. I’ve felt so welcomed. I was talking to a friend of mine the other day who was an intern at St. Agatha. His name is James Walsh. He went to the University of Notre Dame and he came to visit use at St. Agatha’s. At the end of the time I said, “Well, how did you feel?” He said, “It was a wonderful experience. I was so welcomed. But you know, Mike, I’m from Ladd, Illinois, LaSalle-Peru, and I couldn’t help thinking what would a person of color be treated like when they came to my hometown? And unfortunately, I think I know the answer.” I just talked to him last night to ask him if I could share this story. And he said, “Yeah, go ahead.” He said, “We need to tell the truth more and to confess up, as it were.” But now he’s an attorney for the Justice Department and he’s in the Civil Rights division. So I see human beings...I haven’t done anything, Lydia and Dan. People have done things to me and transformed my life with their love and their witness.

**Lydia Talbot:** God is using you in a special way, though, Mike. Talk about GoodCity Chicago. How are you seeking to combat racism through all the linkage of underemployment, housing, hunger, poor health care.

**Mike Ivers:** Well, we bring people together and racial reconciliation is one of the core values of GoodCity and of who we are, through volunteers, through our board members, through churches, through bringing the programs together. We have a series of workshops and I always tell them it’s not just the information gathered, it’s the networking that takes place. And people listen and they try to make a difference. We say whenever you can, you have to be intentional in making a difference and bridging the racial divide. I was just talking with one of our programs, Rob

Castaneda's "Beyond the Ball." He works in Little Village in North Lawndale bringing Latino young men from Little Village together with young African American men. He said, "Mike, you know what? It's really ironic because really there are more things similar. They have the same tastes, the same music, the same interests and different skin." But he says, "You have to try to bring them together."

He told the story of his wife who was a kindergarten teacher and took her class in a Latino public school to the zoo last year. There was a bus loaded with Asian students that came off, kindergarteners. Then a bus, black students came off. Then a bus, white students came off. And then her bus, the Latino students came off. One of the kindergarteners pointed to the other kids and said, "What are they doing here?" And she turned to him and said, "What are you doing here?" "I'm going to the zoo!" "So are they." That motivated her to create a pen-pal program with students from her Latino school with students from an African American school and they don't even know that they are of a different race. But those are examples of the kind of things that need to take place to interact with people.

**Lydia Talbot:** And at the heart of it all is a Christian sense of calling and ministry, Mike.

**Mike Ivers:** That's right.

**Daniel Pawlus:** That's what I was going to say. It's a special opportunity for faith communities to step into this community organizing to certain extent in a real proactive way.

**Mike Ivers:** I mean, as Dr. King said, the most segregated time is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.

**Daniel Pawlus:** Which is fascinating in this conversation when you think about it.

**Lydia Talbot:** The Kerner Commission said that.

**Mike Ivers:** That's right and what a community organizer he was, by the way. But I think we, the churches, really need to get up there. I wrote a poem once called, "If it's all white, It's not all right." I think in our churches we have to see if we're missing diversity in our congregation. We have an opportunity to go ahead and reach out. We have a responsibility and a mandate by the Gospel message of Jesus Christ to go out and to become more diverse. What did Jesus do? He went everywhere they told him not to go. He went out to the Samaritan woman. That's what we have to do. If we see that there is a disparity or disconnect as churches, they can come and get involved in the lives of others.

**Lydia Talbot:** How has racism changed over all these years you've been working?

**Mike Ivers:** Oh, I don't know.

**Lydia Talbot:** I mean, how does it rear it's ugly head these days in ways that you can see it?

**Mike Ivers:** Well, I think it's very subtle but it's stronger than ever. Just recently the American Medical Association apologized for not allowing blacks into the American Medical Association which was devastating because if you were not there at that time, you couldn't get privileges at hospitals and other ramifications. They closed medical schools until there was only Meharry and Howard left. In 1910, 2.5 percent of the doctors in this country were African American. In 2008, 2.2 percent of doctors are African American, so it's worse.

**Lydia Talbot:** A lot of work for systemic problems.

**Mike Ivers:** Oh yes. Systemic problems.

Lydia Talbot: I've got to ask how you and your wonderful wife, Dr. Greta Ivers, face the challenges of being an inter-racial couple.

**Mike Ivers:** Well, it's interesting. People say, "Mike, you're always talking about race! How often really to you have to deal with it?" I say, "Well, since I'm married to a very strong black woman, 24 hours a day!" It's still a process. We laugh, we joke, and sometimes we get angry when we experience things. We went to see a play on Broadway called "Caroline or Change," about racial issues. We were walking outside of the play afterwards down Broadway and three white kids came out of subway and said, "Hey, what are you, you blankity-blank, doing with that blankity-blank." And my wife still gives me a hard time for my response. I ran after them and said, "What are you doing with that ignorant face?" She said, "Couldn't you have thought up a better line?" And I said no. People will see us together sometimes and they'll see us walking and talking. And then they'll say, "Can I help you?" and they'll turn to me and say, "Can I help you?" and pretend like we're not together. Some people are just not approving. There are a lot of people who disapprove of the races mingling and it's a shame because this is the way that the Lord wants us to be. To come together as a society. But it's important to know that we can come together and still maintain our own identity and strength.

**Daniel Pawlus:** I was going to say that study that you called out about how America's population is really shifting is going to be a fascinating time for us, isn't it?

**Mike Ivers:** Absolutely.

**Daniel Pawlus:** When the minorities become the majority in many cases.

**Mike Ivers:** Well, I encourage people to just be more intentional. For pastors where their community is all white, get a partnership with a church that's all black. When I tell people in both congregations in all the different areas, the Latino community, the black community, the white community, the Asian community, "You know what? When we get to heaven we're going to be surprised at who else is there! Oh, my goodness, I didn't think they'd get to heaven." I always tell people we have to remember at that judgment time, whatever we do to the least, that we do it to him.

**Lydia Talbot:** In our final moment, young people. That terrific piece at the top of the show with Ruben Robinson and Prodigal Sons. Where are young people? What are their attitudes about race?

**Mike Ivers:** Well, I think they are very open. Probably a lot more open and that's why the idea of getting kindergarteners involved is important. Rev. Robinson's young people gave a presentation on the north side that I was facilitating. Five elderly white ladies were sitting in the front row and it was wonderful to see the smiles and the tears that came to their eyes and how they reached out to them and embraced them. That's what I'm talking about: taking advantage of those experiences to improve our racial situation in this country.

**Daniel Pawlus:** Well, Mike, we so appreciate you joining with us and the messages that you deliver are always inspiring and full of energy. So thanks for being here and come back again.

**Mike Ivers:** I appreciate the opportunity. Thank you very much, Dan.

#### REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

**Daniel Pawlus:** And now we turn to another in our series this season on the nine "Fruits of the Spirit." Today, Christine Chakoian, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest, reflects on "goodness."

#### REFLECTION

**Christine Chakoian:** Most of us want to be thought of as "good people," but what exactly does that mean? When the Apostle Paul talks about "goodness" as a fruit of the Spirit, the word he uses means doing kindness or mercy. So being a good person isn't about being following the rules or being fair; being good means being kind-hearted and merciful. When I think about the people who have been good to me, invariably they are the ones who've gone the extra mile: forgiving me when I didn't deserve it, reaching out to me when I was short-tempered and lonely, encouraging me when I felt like a failure. Goodness like that is contagious. I want to give what I have received because goodness has been the balm of God for me.

#### CLOSING

**Daniel Pawlus:** Thank you, Chris, and our thanks again to Mike Ivers, Ruben Robinson, and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Daniel Pawlus.

**Lydia Talbot:** And I'm Lydia Talbot. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at [30GoodMinutes.org](http://30GoodMinutes.org) for more information about today's program and an extensive collection of other messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.